“Divine Warrior”

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Joshua 1:6-9

October 19, 2014
At the Monday Night Men’s group recently I referenced a quote from Gilbert Higlet, a former humanities professor at Columbia University: “Anyone who reads the Bible and isn’t puzzled half the time doesn’t have his mind on what he is doing.” The Bible can be confusing to its readers. God’s ways are not our ways. The biblical message is often counter-intuitive. It offends our modern sensibilities.

I struggled with chapter 7 of The Story this week. God’s people are poised to take possession of the Promised Land but formidable people are already living there. God calls Joshua and his army to exterminate everyone living in the Promised Land. “They destroyed by the sword both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep and donkeys” (Joshua 6:21). Some of you were hoping on this lovely fall day that I might choose a more agreeable passage and preach a nice sermon.

The Bibles we gave our third graders a few moments ago includes this genocide story. Not that anyone is going to teach a Sunday school lesson on it anytime soon. Just the same, such stories are in there.

Some weeks ago, I invited third graders to read our morning lesson from their new Bibles. Can you imagine the outcry had I chosen for them to read this lesson? No doubt the rumor would circulate that Pastor Pete is getting old and crotchety.

The new atheists are all over such holy war verses. Noted atheist Richard Dawkins cites passages like this one to argue that the Old Testament God is egomaniacal, genocidal and abusive. He goes so far as to claim that the God of the Old Testament is the most unpleasant character in all fiction.

A second century leader in the church named Marcion, resolved the controversy by stating categorically that the teachings of Jesus were incompatible with the wrathful Old Testament God. He regarded the Old Testament God to be a demiurge or lesser god to the New Testament God of grace. He took a scissors to the Bible, a la Thomas Jefferson style, and excised portions of Scripture that didn’t agree with him. Marcion’s Bible
consisted of 11 books: 10 letters of Paul and edited portions of Luke’s gospel. The Old Testament was eliminated entirely.

As one who regards Scripture to be authentic and reliable, I know there is a better way. How can we resolve the biblical tension between the wrath and love of God?

For starters, let’s establish that holy war is not an option for Christians today. So-called holy war passages are never intended to be prescriptive for our time. Holy war is a particular kind of war reserved for a unique period in Israel’s history. Its purpose is to secure land for God’s people so that the divine plan of redemption can go forward.

Christians are not at liberty to use such biblical texts to justify killing. The Crusades of the middle ages misapplied such passages as justification for taking up arms to further the church’s mission. We have been paying for this atrocity ever since!

Holy war has two primary objectives. It’s a way for God to punish unrestrained evil and to preserve people for their intended God-given mission.

First, holy war was used to punish unrestrained evil. The seven nations living in the Promised Land are mean, nasty people. They have violently and steadfastly opposed God’s purposes for a long time. The point can be made in any number of ways, but one example will suffice. They practiced child sacrifice. Need I say more?

There is a verse in Genesis that sheds light on this situation: “The sin of the Amorites has not reached its full measure” (15:16). Amorite is a catch-all term for these seven nations living in the Promised Land. By the time of Joshua, the sins of the Amorites have reached full measure. God has seen enough. They have violently and steadfastly opposed God for a long time. It’s time to take these people out.

Second, holy war was used to preserve God’s people. The Promised Land was a virtual paradise, filled with proverbial milk and honey yet it wasn’t large; about the size of Vermont. The land was highly coveted and
has been fought over for generations. Drastic action was needed to preserve the people of God and keep them afloat.

God’s people, called Israel in the Old Testament, are given a mandate from God: “If you obey me fully and keep my commandments, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole world is mine, you will be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6). God’s people are called to be a light to the nations. God wants His purposes for the world to be known through Israel.

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? I have two applications to this sermon. I spoke earlier of Marcion whose Bible was comprised exclusively of the New Testament. Marcionism is alive and well in the church today. We’ve adopted the notion that the Old Testament God is vindictive and judgmental while the New Testament God is gracious and compassionate.

Tertullian was a second century church bishop who opposed Marcion. He wrote a treatise called Against Heresies, in which he countered Marcion with biting irony: “A better god has been discovered, one who is neither offended nor angry, nor inflicts punishment. He is merely kind. Of course he forbids you to sin but only in writing.”

“God is love” is often the way we summarize God’s nature. Most assuredly, God is love as the epistle of John clearly communicates (1 John 4:8). Yet, some-times when we reference God’s love, we mean only that God is love. What about God’s judgment and wrath? Many in the church today believe in a God who, in Tertullian’s words, “never takes offense, is never angry and never inflicts punishment.”

Miroslav Volf is a Christian professor at Yale Divinity School and is one of the most celebrated theologians of our day. Miroslav used to think the idea of God’s wrath to be barbaric and unworthy of a God of love. He watched his home-land become decimated by war. His father endured unspeakable torture in a concentration camp.
He writes, in his book, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*, “I used to think that wrath was unworthy of God. Isn’t God love? Shouldn’t divine love be beyond wrath? God is love and God loves every person and creature. That’s why God is wrathful against some of them. My last resistance to the idea of God’s wrath was a casualty of war in the former Yugoslavia, the region from which I come. Two hundred thousand people were killed and three million displaced. My villages and cities were destroyed. My people were shelled day in and day out, some brutalized beyond imagination and I could not imagine God was not angry….Though I used to complain about the idea of God’s wrath, I came to think that I would have to rebel against a God who isn’t wrathful at the sight of the world’s evil. God isn’t wrathful in spite of being love. God is wrathful because God is love.”

God’s character is wonderfully the same in both testaments. God exercises wrath for sin while at the same time demonstrates love for sinners. This point is brought home to us in the cross. Jesus demonstrates God’s wrath for sin while showing God’s love for sinners.

My second so-what application harkens back to the portion of Joshua’s speech that was read by a third grader: “Be strong and courageous.” This speech sets the whole tone for the book of Joshua. Three times in a span of four verses Joshua urges his people to be strong and courageous (1:6, 8, 9). It’s the identical counsel Moses gives the people in his farewell speech at the end of Deuteronomy (31:6).

This admonition by Moses and Joshua is not merely a military summons. It’s a spiritual mandate to meditate on God’s word day and night so that we will do what the Word says. Joshua revisits this same theme at the end of his book when he says, “As for me and my house we will serve the Lord” (24:15).

“Be strong” is written in present passive imperative. I don’t mean to go heavy on you at the end, but this point is critical. First, be strong is written in imperative mood meaning it’s a command. Second, it’s given in present tense meaning it is relevant to us right now and into the future. Third, it appears in passive voice meaning that the subject of the verb is being
acted upon from other source. In other words, the subject of the sentence (namely us) is being acted upon by an outside source (namely God).

These verses are not a summons to be strong in our own strength. God is both the one who gives the command and supplies the strength. God is our source of strength and courage.

You may be facing stiff challenges at the moment. It may be a job uncertainty, a questionable medical diagnosis, relationship or family problems, a recurring temptation or struggle with someone or something in your life. You need courage to say something difficult to someone. You need strength to face a big challenge. The summons to be strong is pervasive in Scripture—at least 300 references. Paul writes, “Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power” (Ephesians 6:10). Be strong and courageous!

Let me bring you back to our central mission in our church, that of “Becoming Like Christ Together for the World.” Our single, overarching mission is to make Christ known to the people of DC. It’s an audacious goal and, like Joshua, we face formidable odds. Yet, we serve a powerful God. “Be strong and courageous. Don’t be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:9).