

**Why Scripture?:
The Story of a Stick
Numbers 20:1-13
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Today we begin a five-week exploration of scripture. That may sound odd since we center every Sunday service in the proclamation of the Word, but we tend to concentrate on how a particular text resonates in a particular week. During this series, we will ask more basic questions: What is scripture for? Why is it the center of worship? Why is it important for each of us to spend time reading and learning about scripture? Why are Presbyterians called "people of the book?" We'll look at all of that in some way over this next month, turning to scripture itself for guidance and inspiration.

We aren't doing this just because it's something Jessica and I think is important. Northminster recently received a substantial anonymous grant to help fund programs to deepen our study and learning about scripture. Over the course of this month, we'll also be talking about some of our plans for those programs and we solicit your feedback,

We start with a contemplation of one of the great modern problems with scripture in the church. We turn first to one of the foundational narratives of the Exodus: The time after Moses and Yahweh worked together to free the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and before they re-entered the land God had promised to Abraham and Sarah and their descendants.

From the 20th chapter of the Book of Numbers, starting at verse one: (Scripture was read.)

It was grey and dried up, a relic. There was no sign of life in it. It was really little more than a cluster of splinters waiting to happen. But it did the job. We don't know if Moses found it himself or if his father-in-law, Jethro, gave it to him. All we're told back in Exodus is on that special day, that day of the burning bush back in Midian, Moses was holding it in his hand and with one Divine word it became the staff of God. With it Moses returned to Egypt.

Eventually the staff was passed to his brother Aaron who wielded it on Moses' behalf. In his hands, it became a snake; one touch of it and the Nile turned to blood; another wave and frogs invaded the land; the dust became gnats. Pharaoh's magicians called it the "Finger of God."

And then Moses took it back and, when he raised it in his hands, fire and hail rained from the heavens. One more time and a great wind blew across the desert, bringing with it a swarm of locusts that decimated the land. But this staff is not just about plagues and punishment.

The next time we see it is perhaps its most famous appearance – at the Red Sea. I can still see Charlton Heston raising it in his arms as God's greatest special effect (dramatically enhanced from the Biblical version) insures the deliverance of God's people from Pharaoh's army. And then later, against the Amalekites, it is the staff that Moses raises over

his head for hours as the battle rages below. When the staff is raised high, Israel prevails, when it dips, they falter; when with help it is raised again, Israel is victorious. In the scripture today, with two touches, water springs from the rock.

Were Pharaoh's magicians right? Had this stick become some sort of magic wand? God's finger magically bringing forth plagues, parting seas, bringing water from rocks? Surely not. This stick had no real power, but it was a herald of God's power, a sign of God's presence among them. It was a beacon of truth, the Truth that was God's intent for all. When this symbol of power and truth was used, it was dependable; it was life-giving.

And that, I think, is why God reacts so violently in this version of the story. For you see, this isn't the only time the Meribah story is told. The first time, back in Exodus, it only gets five verses: the people rebel, Moses strikes the rock, water gushes forth, and everyone is happy. But in this telling, we get the details. Moses is told to call the water forth in the name of God and instead of raising that staff as he had done so many times in the past, he twists it in his hands and strikes the rock. He turns what should have been a display of God's power and truth, an act of love to provide for God's children, into a way for Moses and Aaron to reestablish their authority in the congregation. God calls it a lack of faith; I want to call it an abuse of power, a false use of truth. Either way, this singular act causes God to ban these two great leaders from the Promised Land. This is a staff of power used to bring new life, but now it is a staff of truth misused to lift up the one who wields it, instead of the God who gives it as a gift. This is misusing the truth of God.

By now, maybe you've guessed where I'm going. It seems to me that in religious circles these past – oh, I don't know, 35 years or so? – there seems to be a lot of that going around. A whole lot of people, from a whole lot of faith traditions, seem to be tossing "their particular version" of the truth at everyone else and calling it THE TRUTH.

Let's think for a minute about those people who say things like:

- Those enemies of mine who do not want me to rule over them – bring them here and kill them in front of me.
- Or how about: You foreign one, blessed and happy is the one who repays you for what you have done to us – the one who seizes your infants and dashes their brains against the rocks.
- Or how about: And as for your enemies, kill every man and boy, and kill every woman. Only the (young women) shall live...and you shall take them for yourselves.

Whose truth is that? Aren't we more comfortable with these words from scripture??? These words of truth:

- If your enemy lets you be, and does not make war on you, and offers you peace, God does not allow you to harm them.
- Do not turn away a poor one, even if all you can give is a small morsel of food. If you love the poor and bring them near you, God will bring you near Him on the Day of Resurrection.
- It is better for a leader to make a mistake in forgiving than to make a mistake in punishing.
- A believer may defend against those who attack, but you shall not be the aggressor. God does not love those who oppress or make war on others.

Oh, did I mention? Those first quotes are from in here (indicating Bible). The one about killing those who don't want to be ruled over, according to Luke (chapter 19, verse 27), Jesus said it. The bashing the heads of our enemies' babies against the rocks, that's Psalm 137. As for the killing all the men and boys and mothers and taking the virgins as booty, that's 11 chapters further on from today's passage in Numbers. And all those other quotes, the ones I'm certain we were more comfortable with, those were all from the Koran.

These days, truth, particularly their view of Biblical truth, is something far too many folks are wielding like a stick. Not lifting up the totality of the truth they (and we) have been given, but just breaking off the splinters they (we) like and attacking one another – from political leaders to religious leaders and from this faction to that faction – we whittle away this library of truth we have been given until the staff is a spear. And we fight it out, assuming if we win it means our truth wins. And the first victim is that very truth – where what was to be a guide, a narrative of God's loving sojourn with humanity becomes instead a weapon.

God gave Moses great power. God gave Moses the greatest calling I can imagine – to be a deliverer of oppressed people and the proclaimer of God's liberating truth. And when he began to fear that his place in the community was at risk, he wielded the truth-giver of God as a weapon. He raised the staff of life to his own glory and not to the glory of God.

What is our relationship with truth? With the truth of God's grace? With the truth of our callings as servants? It's an uncomfortable passage for us ministers. That's to be sure. 'When you make all of this about you and not about me,' God seems to be saying to Moses, 'there is no promised land for you.' THAT is harsh, but necessary.

If you search through the Bible, and the Koran, and the writings of Buddha, and the Hindu scriptures, and the holy writings – the Truth claims of almost every religious tradition – there will be two universal claims you will find. First, a call to hospitality and compassion (love for the stranger and neighbor and the Divine at least as much as self); and second, a call to humility (a call to avoid arrogant use of our truth).

When we kill one another, or label one another, or marginalize one another in the name of our truth, when we refuse to see or try to understand the truths held up by others, we never do the will of God. When we feed the poor and make a big show of it; when we draw pride-filled attention to our piety or charity or justice, making instead of giving God the credit as our inspiration and guide, we do not do the will of God.

Moses had to learn that the hard way and be banished from the Promised Land. That's where we are left today, though there is one grace-filled part of the story we must never forget. Even Moses couldn't totally screw up the life-giving truth of God, for the water still flowed and the people still drank. The only difference was with Moses and Aaron and their relationship with God.

That is a word of hope for all of us and a call to humility – a reminder that it is not me, not Jessica, not Alex, not Meredith, not the ASP team who are accomplishing what we are all experiencing as a fresh movement of the Spirit in our worship, Christian Education and youth program. We are all but agents of a greater story, a greater Spirit; we are agents who will accomplish God's gracing hope for this community no matter who leads.

Sisters and brothers, the healing love of God, the delivering love of God, the feeding love of God, the welcoming love of God – we hold those truths in our hands. Will we join in the fruitless battle, taking up our progressive interpretations of God’s transforming, grace-filled library of love, and wield them like a sword or a club? And maybe we could ultimately win the scripture wars, but at what cost? Or will we seek to deepen our understanding of the gifts we have been given – the gifts of listening, learning, discernment, compassion, hospitality – and the challenges of living those gifts even when it’s uncomfortable or requires us to be vulnerable?

What if that’s our first order of business in this “Why Scripture” conversation, a calling and a challenge, one we share with Christians of every stripe and all of those whose traditions lay claim to divine inspiration? Can all of us – Christian, Muslim, Jew, Hindu, Right wing, left wing, young, old – all of us, can we not wield our truth like warriors but boldly, humbly, lovingly lift up the truths we have come to know and seek to live them as much, if not more than we speak them?

If we can, then the flip side of this text perhaps makes a promise to us. If we can, then the Promised Land awaits us all. May God make it so.

Note: This sermon is based on a very different sermon with a similar theme originally preached by Rev. Kirby at Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church in the fall of 2006.