

## ***A Nonviolent God***

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Columbus, Ohio  
April 28, 2024

*We see in and through Jesus glimpses of a God who is incapable of imposing justice, whose power is invitational rather than coercive, non-violent rather than violent, a God whose very essence and character is compassion. A compassionate God desires justice, calls us to justice and inspires resistance to injustice, but God cannot and will not impose justice. It is time to leave apocalyptic and messianic promises behind and throw images of a powerful, violent, punishing God who is capable of imposing justice into the dumpster. —Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, *Jesus Against Christianity**

**Ancient Witness:** Matthew 11:28-30

One of my favorite teachers, Richard Rohr, has this great line: “Your image of God creates you.” This is a good way to think about a God who has created and is creating, inspiring change and transformation by example.

And so a compassionate, gentle god creates loving people. While a fearsome, violent god produces killers.

Now both of these images of God have existed side by side in our sacred texts and in our tradition. And this morning I’m saying that we need to choose—as Jesus, himself chose—which image will create us. We’ve always had to choose.

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During the Great Awakening, in the early 1700’s in the colonies that were to become the United States, one of the great theologians and preachers was a man named Jonathan Edwards. I want you to listen to some of his famous sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”:

*The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one hold a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire...*

*It would be dreadful to suffer this fierceness and wrath of Almighty God one moment; but you must suffer it to all eternity. There will be no end to this exquisite horrible misery.*

Now, the kind of God that Jonathan Edwards is describing is a violent, wrathful, vengeful God. I find this image of God troubling and repulsive, myself, and I would only speak of it in the pulpit in order to raise my objection to it. Yet, this dark vision of God has had a long history in our tradition and is even etched in the pages of the sacred texts.

**Violent image of God number one: God orders the murder of disobedient children.** In Leviticus and Deuteronomy, God is portrayed as advocating killing disobedient children, taking them out and stoning them if they disrespect their parents. Of course, we would never endorse such a thing today. But how do we come to terms that they are embedded in our sacred texts? Mostly,

we conveniently ignore them. I am suggesting that we confront them and deal with them head on. There's another incident described in which the prophet Elisha takes offense at some small boys who call him "baldhead." He curses them "in the name of the Lord," and immediately two bears come out of the woods and maul the boys. (2 Kings 2:23-24) In the name of the Lord!

**Violent image of God number two: God sets up a means-test to measure faith—willingness to murder our children.**

*God said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love... and offer him as a burnt offering..." He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand to kill his son. (Genesis 22:2,9)*

Despite the miraculous appearance of a ram as a substitute sacrifice for Isaac, the point remains that God required Abraham to be willing to kill his own son. What kind of God is conveyed through this image? And is it worthy of worship?

**Violent image of God number three: An angry, punishing God destroys the earth.**

*And God said to Naoh, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth..." He blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground, human beings and animals... (Genesis 6:13,23)*

Imagine someone being angry with the fellow residents of earth to the point of destroying all of life except one family. We are often asked to look past this troubling image and focus on the rainbow. But this is hardly a children's story! We cannot gloss over this narrative that points a picture of a violent God who commits genocide. Yet this violent image has been sanctified in our sacred texts.

**Violent image of God number four: God is a land thief.**

*On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I give this land from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates..." (Genesis 15:18)*

How would we respond, I wonder, to a group of Canadians invading the United States and claiming the land as their inheritance based on God's promises? Probably, we wouldn't take it very well. And yet it is through this image and Manifest Destiny that Europeans justified the conquest of the Americas.

**Violent image of God number 5: God orders humans to commit genocide against those who resist divinely-sanctioned land theft.**

*But the Lord said to Moses, "Do not be afraid of [the king of Bashan]... You shall do to him as you did to King Sihon..." So they killed him, his sons, and all his people until there was no survivor left; and they took possession of the land. (Numbers 21:33-35)*

Later, Moses became angry when he finds out that his men did not kill the women of Midian:

*Have you allowed all the women to live? ...Now therefore, kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman who has known a man by sleeping with him. (Numbers 31:14-17)*

Now, It is no coincidence that Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu cited a passage in the Bible in which God commands *herem*, the utter destruction of Israel's enemies. "Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy all that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men, women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys." ( 1 Samuel 15:3) The hatred of the Amalekites began with an ambush when the Israelites were making their way to the promised land. The attack prompts God to tell Moses to wipe out Amalek. And today, this narrative is being used to justify the genocide of Palestinians that we are seeking in Gaza, calling them "Amalek," where 40,000 men, women and children have died, and many more now face death though an imposed famine.

About 25 years ago I read an important book by Regina Schwartz, who is a professor at Northwestern University, called *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*. Schwartz writes about teaching Bible to a class of undergraduates one day:

*I was telling the class that the Exodus is the central event of the Hebrew narrative, asserting that the myth of liberation from slavery was deeply inspiring, especially in comparison to so many other foundational myths of conquest and plunder. This was, after all, not a myth that described the rich getting richer, but the enslaved getting freed...*

*I lingered over the fact that this story has now come to have urgent political force in Latin American and South Africa as it had during the U.S. civil rights movement. Then, in the midst of this celebration, the student raised his hand and asked simply, "What about the Canaanites?"*

Schwartz points out that this violence embedded in our sacred texts has had a devastating and predictable effect. Holy Scriptures have been used against whatever "Canaanites" people wanted to loathe, conquer or exile.

Professor Schwartz traced the root of this violence to something she calls the "myth of scarcity." When the Hebrew people forge their collective identity, they do so over and against "the Other," and there is simply not enough to go around—not enough land, prosperity, power, even God's blessing.

*In many biblical narratives, the one God is not imagined as infinitely giving, but strangely withholding. Everyone does not receive divine blessings. Some are cursed—with dearth and with death—as though there were a cosmic shortage of prosperity.*

In the story of Cain and Abel, each brother offers a sacrifice to God, but for some mysterious reason one sacrifice is deemed unacceptable and the other is well-received. We see a God who excludes some and prefers others, who confers favor on one alone, and casts out the other. One can only prosper at the other's expense.

By the way, we are mistaken if we think that all the violent images of God are in the Hebrew Scriptures. We find them in the Christian New Testament, as well. For example, there is the violent avenger of injustice in the book of Revelation. We encounter in the text a God who is wrathful and full of fury, a God who feeds on our fear and is both capable and willing to destroy humanity, a violent judge executing vengeance against enemies:

*But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death. (Revelation 21:8)*

But the fact that these violent and troubling images of God have made it into the sacred texts has created a dilemma for many spiritual seekers and has called us to examine what is divinely inspiring in our own hearts. Which God do we choose? Or better, which God do we allow to create us?

In Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the White boy, Huck, who has helped a Black slave, Jim, to escape from his owner, Miss Watson, felt judged by God because he stole the old woman's slave. He decides that in order to get right with God and avoid "everlasting fire," he's got to do the right thing and tell Miss Watson where old Jim was. He does so in a letter and then feels "good and all washed clean of sin for the first time I had ever felt so in my life."

But before posting the letter, Huck thinks of Jim. "And got to thinking over our trip down the river; and I see Jim before me, all the time, in the day, and in the night-time, sometimes moonlight, sometimes storms and we are floating along, talking, and singing, and laughing. But somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him but only the other kind." Huck thinks about how sweet and good and gentle Jim always is with him, and what a good friend he is. Then Huck looks around and sees the letter he's written to Miss Watson.

*I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was a-trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself, "All right, then I'll go to hell"—and tore it up.*

In his book, *Stealing Jesus: How Fundamentalism Betrays Christianity*, Bruce Bawer says that Huck does the truly Christian thing. He writes,

*The true disciple of Jesus, Twain tells us here, is not someone who follows Church dogma out of fear of hell; it is someone who, in defiance of everything, up to and including the threat of hellfire, does the right thing out of love. (p. 328-329)*

For me, I have to side with Jesus, the authentic Jesus, who challenged fear-based religion. The God Jesus followed, it seems to me, was not coercive and violent, but persuasive and gentle, a God who calls us to be gentle *through* gentleness, who calls the world to love *through* love, whose message and method are consistent.

My friend, Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, who's a professor of Peace Studies in Minneapolis, wrote a wonderful book, in which he said,

*We see in and through Jesus glimpses of a God... whose power is invitational rather than coercive, non-violent rather than violent, a God whose very essence and character is compassion... It is time to leave apocalyptic and messianic promises behind and throw images of a powerful, violent, punishing God... into the dumpster.*

*(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)*

