

***This Is the “Word of God”?***  
9-17-17 Deuteronomy 21:10-14

The last couple of weeks we’ve been looking at the Ten Commandments and the Law given at the foot of Mount Sinai.

We’ve seen that these were the natural next step in the narrative that began when God called Abram to a strange land with the promise that he’d father a great nation that, some day, would bless all the nations of the world.

That wild promise made no sense to Abraham and Sarah as they waited for decades to conceive a child, and it made no sense to this weary band of recently freed slaves gathered around a stony mountain jutting up from the vast desert floor.

But we saw that the Ten Commandments are reflections of the grace and priorities of the God who is powerful enough to defeat Pharaoh, and compassionate enough to care about the Hebrew slaves.

The Law reveals God’s vision for an alternative community where all people are valued and able to live with justice – a radical departure from the oppression of Egypt.

And we saw that by living as a new kind of God-shaped community that these people could change the world by their example.

Today’s passage is part of that Law.

Hear the Word of God:

*Deuteronomy 21:10-14 When you go to war against your enemies and the LORD your God delivers them into your hands and you take captives, if you notice among the captives a beautiful woman and are attracted to her, you may take her as your wife. Bring her into your home and have her shave her head, trim her nails and put aside the clothes she was wearing when captured. After she has lived in your house and mourned her father and mother for a full month, then you may go to her and be her husband and she shall be your wife. If you are not pleased with her, let her go wherever she wishes. You must not sell her or treat her as a slave, since you have dishonored her.*

Wait a minute ... say what?

If that passage did not appall you, then you weren't listening.

What does this – and I could have chosen dozens of similar examples – have to do with a compassionate God and an alternative community?

I've been reading a wonderful book by Kent Dobson called *Bit by a Camel*.

It's his personal faith journey, beginning with his childhood spent in Jerry Falwell's Thomas Road Baptist Church.

In fact, Kent's father, Ed Dobson, was Falwell's personal assistant who helped implement the political strategy they dubbed "the Moral Majority" and "the Culture Wars" that was part of a successful move to unite evangelical churches with the conservative wing of the Republican Party.

Kent eventually moved away from Falwell's world, for a time living in Israel trying to understand the world of Jesus, which led him to question everything about the faith of his childhood ... even the existence of God.

A lot of his book deals with his struggle to make sense of the Bible.

He'd been raised to believe that the Bible is the inerrant and infallible Word of God.

Like many evangelicals, he'd been taught to turn to the Bible as God's answer book.

Facing a life decision?

Then grab a concordance, look up a key word, and then just flip right there to God's answer.

But as he studied more, faced the contradictions in scripture, and learned more about Judaism and the Near Eastern culture, he couldn't embrace that narrow concept any longer.

It took courage, but as he reentered the Bible with scholarly curiosity, cultural awareness and spiritual honesty, he discovered a much deeper and life-affirming book – really a collection of books we know as the Bible.

I think we may offer *Bit by a Camel* as a book discussion soon – it is a straight forward, humorous and insightful read.

We are all familiar with Rob Bell from his videos and a few of the books we've read together, and we remember that Rob Bell was the lead pastor of Mars Hill Church in Minnesota, which for a time was the fastest growing church in America.

They were attracting the elusive millennial generation by the thousands with a progressive, socially engaged message.

At the same time Rob was attracting a national audience, he was running into dogmatic conflicts within his own church, eventually forcing him to resign.

It was a very painful time for Rob and for the Mars Hill community.

Well, Kent was on staff with Rob, and he eventually stepped into Rob's vacated position as lead teaching pastor.

In *Bit by a Camel* he tells the story of how the church stumbled when confronted by the issue of gay marriage.

There they were seeing themselves as a radically inclusive church, leading the way for a new generation of evangelicals, yet they couldn't resolve among themselves the biblical issues raised by all those verses that address homosexuality.

By "all those verses" I mean the half dozen, none spoken by Jesus, among the 31,102 verses in the Bible.

The conflict was largely between their clergy – who mostly favored gay marriage – and the church elders, who couldn't get beyond the plain-as-day, black-on-white words they read in scripture.

They wrestled with this for months, always telling themselves that they were open to hearing one another's views, and committing to impartial study.

Their approach was to keep going deeper into word studies hoping to uncover the real meaning God had in these passages – but, not surprisingly, they always came back to the same old arguments with everyone just dug in deeper into their original position.

It didn't take long for Kent to also exit Mars Hill – now thoroughly disenchanted with the church, but yearning to find God in his life ... if God, did in fact exist.

For this, he moved his family back to Israel to further immerse himself in the world of the Bible.

Looking back, Kent now understands that the reason they kept hitting a dead end at Mars Hill was because they were trying to make the Bible into something that it was never intended to be: a 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century idea of an “answer book” in which God's Words given for an ancient culture are frozen in time.

He said that none of them had the imagination to question that assumption, and more rigorous Hebrew and Greek word studies alone could never reframe the question so that they could get nuanced insights relevant for today's world.

As Einstein once said, “No problem can be solved by the same consciousness that created it.”

Start with the wrong question, and you'll never get a good answer.

They needed a new way to hear scripture speak.

Maybe you've sat in a worship service at some time or another listening to some preacher justify some socially regressive or anti-scientific point of view with the authoritative, that-settles-it phrase, “this is the Word of God”.

Now sure, we can counter their message with an alternate verse ... but then they'll just flip to a different verse that supports their point of view, and back and forth it goes ... we call that “scripture ping pong”.

Or we can try to dilute their certainty by pointing out hundreds of Biblical rules that we don't practice today – from prohibiting tattoos, to women not speaking in church ... and I'll bet that you've never taken your yellow highlighter to all the passages about how to treat your slaves.

But when you come right down to it, how do these counter-arguments really address troublesome passages like Deuteronomy 21?

To understand this passage about how to claim a pretty woman whose family you just slaughtered in battle, let's step back another five centuries and remember something we talked about a couple of months ago.

Do you remember what happened when God ordered Abraham to sacrifice his one and only son, Isaac?

Abraham had waited decades for a son, and now that he has one God says to lead him up Mount Zion, build a fire, slit his throat and offer him as a sacrifice.

What was Abraham's answer?

"Whoa, Lord, I could never do such a thing!"

Or was it, "Lord, tell me what to do because I've never heard of such a thing!"

No, and no.

Abraham knew just what to do because there was a current practice of child sacrifice among his Canaanite neighbors.

And Abraham wasn't shocked because that was exactly what people in his culture expected of the gods: they were always demanding sacrifices in return for a good crop or a fertile wife.

If we weren't curious enough to look at the cultural context in which this narrative took place, then we'd just conclude that Abraham demonstrated great faith by taking a knife to Isaac, and that the God of the Old Testament was egotistical and bloodthirsty.

But what happened on that mountaintop is about far more than Abraham being faithful or Isaac escaping death by the skin of his teeth when a sacrificial ram appeared and the angel intervened.

No – it turns out that this whole episode was about the surprising news that the God of Abraham is different than the other gods.

Rather than demanding sacrifice like all the gods the people had known, our Lord provides.

Isaac was not sacrificed because God provided a ram.

God provided the sacrifice ... a game changer.

So maybe you're wondering why God had Abraham go through this whole charade.

Why didn't God just come out and say it: "I will provide"?

Because if God had just said to Abraham, "I will provide", His words would not have been understood or remembered.

They may have just sounded like platitudes.

Rather, God had to lead Abraham through the whole, gut wrenching experience for him to really get it ... and then his story was so memorable that it would be told and re-told for generations.

Now, human consciousness advanced a notch as this small Semitic tribe, led the way toward abandoning child sacrifice.

At the same time, the Hebrews were learning that their God is not a taker but a provider.

So, do you see how God used this episode with Abraham as a step in growing human consciousness from the primitive to the just?

So, now, let's apply that same understanding to Deuteronomy 21.

What did you think when I first read this passage to you?

"How barbaric!"

"How brutal!"

And I say, "Yes" ... you're right.

Those were brutal, barbaric, primitive times.

But what God can do was meet people where they were at and lead them to a next step.

The practice in Ancient Near East wars was to rape the women and then enslave the desirable ones in concubines.

But now God is saying to the Hebrews that you're going to be different.

How they practice war becomes part of how God is calling them to be a "holy nation" ... "holy" meaning set apart for a reason.

God is saying, within your barbaric world, you'll still fight, but you'll fight differently.

When you see a beautiful woman after the battle, you are to recognize that she is more than your personal plunder.

In this alternative way of war, you are to recognize that even she is a person.

She is not to be raped and enslaved.

If you want her, then you must marry her.

Is this the 21<sup>st</sup> Century view of equality?

Of course not.

Is this brutal and primitive?

Yes – but for 1300 BC, it was a step forward.

Remember, that in that culture, once a woman had been raped, her future was ruined.

She'd have been shamed, unable to marry and left with few options for her support beyond prostitution.

But in the alternative community of the Hebrews, once you've agreed that you'll marry her, you are to treat her with compassion.

How so?

Deuteronomy 21:12 *Bring her into your home and have her shave her head, trim her nails ....*

Shaving her head was both a sign of mourning, and symbolic of changing religions.

Then she is to be cleaned-up, given fresh clothes and a full month to grieve.

Deuteronomy 21:13 *After she has lived in your house and mourned her father and mother for a full month, then you may go to her and be her husband and she shall be your wife.*

Again, not our modern understanding of how to grieve – but look how much more humane this is compared to the barbarism the Hebrews had known.

And, your respect and obligation for this person continues into marriage.

Rather than discarding a woman who does not please the man, once you've accepted her, you remain responsible for her.

Deuteronomy 21:14 *If you are not pleased with her, let her go wherever she wishes. You must not sell her or treat her as a slave, since you have dishonored her.*

Click ... human consciousness just advanced a notch.

And it's not just in here.

The previous chapter, Deuteronomy 20, has a several rules for who will become a soldier.

For example, no longer can the army just hand a spear to every able-bodied man and march him off to war.

No.

Under these new laws, a man who was just married is to stay home to enjoy the pleasures of his new life.

And there's more things like that.

Now, can you see how God genuinely speaks through Bible once we free it from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century notion of it being God's answer book?

We see God meeting people in their time and culture and leading them a step forward toward His vision of a just society.

This is what God spoke just before he presented the Ten Commandments:

Exodus 19:6 *“If you will listen obediently to what I say and keep my covenant, out of all peoples you'll be my special treasure. The whole Earth is mine to choose from, but you're special: a kingdom of priests, a holy nation.”*

Now we understand that God is not just talking about personal piety.

Through the Law, He is casting a vision for a just society where all people, not only the powerful, are to be respected and protected.

So, getting back to Kent Dobson's conundrum at Mars Hill.

Think how differently their cantankerous debate would have been if they could have imagined stepping outside of more word studies and scripture pin pong, and instead looked for the direction of the Spirit.

Imagine if they had looked at how God had guided people in those ancient cultures to become more just, to press through the social boundaries of the time, and then to be curious about how God might be trying to do the same thing as they faced issues of gay marriage.

Imagine what might have been had they stepped back from the literal words for some ancient application to a specific culture and instead applied to themselves the underlying and consistent themes of scripture: growth and movement toward love, inclusiveness, human dignity and justice.

Instead of their church splitting apart again, what might have happened if they had asked where God was asking them, in 2015 Grandville, Michigan, to move toward inclusion and justice for all.

Think how different it might have been had they asked, what does the Bible teach about how to move toward welcoming the marginalized, the de-humanized, the victimized people of our city?