

**Meadowbrook Congregational Church**  
**“When It’s Hard to Explain the Bible”**  
**Rev. Art Ritter**  
**January 21, 2018**

**Matthew 21.18-21**

*<sup>18</sup>In the morning, when he returned to the city, he was hungry. <sup>19</sup>And seeing a fig tree by the side of the road, he went to it and found nothing at all on it but leaves. Then he said to it, “May no fruit ever come from you again!” And the fig tree withered at once.*

*<sup>20</sup>When the disciples saw it, they were amazed, saying, “How did the fig tree wither at once?” <sup>21</sup>Jesus answered them, “Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only will you do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,’ it will be done.*

**Psalm 137: 4-9**

*<sup>4</sup>How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?*

*<sup>5</sup>If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!*

*<sup>6</sup>Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.*

*<sup>7</sup>Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem’s fall, how they said, “Tear it down! Tear it down! Down to its foundations!”*

*<sup>8</sup>O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us!*

*<sup>9</sup>Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!*

**2 Kings 2.23-24**

*<sup>23</sup>He went up from there to Bethel; and while he was going up on the way, some small boys came out of the city and jeered at him, saying, “Go away, baldhead! Go away, baldhead!” <sup>24</sup>When he turned around and saw them, he cursed them in the name of the Lord. Then two she-bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the boys.*

This morning’s sermon topic is courtesy of Jim Lewis, who purchased the right to select it at last fall’s silent auction. I want to thank Jim and Melissa for their support of our church and our ministries. Jim was kind enough to give me a choice of two topics. First, he asked if I would preach something on the nature of evangelism in the mainline Protestant church, addressing our fear and trepidation at sharing our faith. I believe that I will have the opportunity to speak about evangelism in the coming months so I moved on to opportunity number two. Jim’s specific request was for me to address the one thing that I would prefer never to have to preach about again; or worded another way- the one thing that I would remove from the Bible so that I would not have to address the text in a sermon. That really forced me into seriously deep contemplation, so that is the subject of focus for this morning’s sermon.

There are many verses in the Bible that are troubling. Some are upsetting because they issue a challenge of faith that is so difficult that I would rather not consider it. Sometimes Jesus’s teaching are so personally convicting that I would rather just move onto the next verse or consider the next story instead of reflecting upon how what is in front of me is calling me to change my thoughts and actions and priorities. I

mean, I can't always be meek and humble. I don't always love my enemies. It is sometimes impossible to turn the other cheek.

There is a book on my office shelf entitled, "The Hard Sayings of Jesus." These sayings include teachings that encourage suffering, sharing of your possessions, and denying family while seeking faith. I'm not sure how many Christians take these teachings seriously, or at least as serious as Jesus wanted us to take them. But as difficult as these words are to read and to hear, I wouldn't want to remove them from the lectionary cycle of preaching and certainly not from sacred text. They are there for a reason, even if the reason is to make us understand how far we have to go to be more Christ-like.

I found myself instead contemplating some other problematic Scripture passages. I got stuck at a website called [redeeminggod.com](http://redeeminggod.com) whose mission is to rescue scripture, theology, and church from the shackles of religion. With a purpose statement like that, how can you ignore it! I noticed an article entitled, "These 11 Verses Turn Christians into Atheists. How Do You Explain Them?" I began to read. The author introduced himself by mentioning a conversation he had with a person who had grown up in the church but was now an atheist. He asked her what caused her change. She replied, "I starting reading the Bible." Then she began to point out stories where God or God's followers engaged in brutality, murder, slavery, mutilation, sexual abuse, discrimination against women and children, and just plain random acts of violence. This article really struck a chord in me because it helped me consider that what I like preaching on least are verses in the Bible in which it is difficult to explain God's motives and excuse God's actions. I don't like having to defend God.

The scholars who devised the Church Common Lectionary were wise enough to omit most of these passages from the three year cycle of preaching texts. Therefore I don't have to worry about explaining many of the passages from Leviticus or Deuteronomy or Chronicles or Kings to you. But every once in a while one of these awful accounts of God's wrath will sneak through and it causes me discomfort. I will have to either clarify, apologize, or just ignore something in Scripture that really seems offensive and illogical to the people of God today. Whenever I have to preach upon such a text, and two of the readings today are actually part of that three year cycle, I know that when greeting you after worship, at least one of you will have some serious concerns about what kind of God can act in this way. You might openly ask, "Why is that even in the Bible?"

One of the readings is the section from Psalm 137, a very famous Psalm, where the author seems describes the "joy" of smashing the babies of his/her Babylonian captors into the rocks. Now I could explain that this is only a literary image and that no babies were actually harmed in the writing of this Psalm. I could tell you about the atrocities committed against God's people by the Babylonians. But it still doesn't feel real comfortable. This isn't the kind of stuff we want to hear in God's house at 10 a.m. on Sunday. I wish the authors and editors of God's word did not make it quite so hard!

Another example is from the actions of Jesus himself as described in the gospel of Matthew. Whenever we get angry, we love to point out that Jesus once got mad and through the moneychangers out of the Temple. It helps justify our own bad attitude. Here in this story, Jesus is hungry and perhaps more than a bit cranky. He certainly isn't himself and may have been in need of a Snickers Bar! He curses a poor little fig tree beside the road and at once the tree withers, never able to produce fruit again. How could Jesus do that to such an innocent piece of creation? There is some

added commentary comparing the tree to people who do not have faith but it is still rather shocking to read of Jesus acting so recklessly. Perhaps the lesson is not to cross Jesus when he is having a bad day!

My final example hits very close to home. It is a story from 2 Kings and a story that I have used for many years to entertain cabins full of boys at various summer camps. Along with the story from the book of Judges about the left-handed Ehud, slaying the horribly fat king Eglon in bathroom, this story is a staple of nearly all of my confirmation classes. Teen age boys tend to really love this story. It is about the prophet Elisha who is traveling to the sacred city of Bethel, the place where Jacob met God face-to-face. While he was on his way, some small boys came out of the city and made fun of him. They shouted, "Get up out of here baldy!" Elisha heard them and cursed them in the name of the Lord. Then two she-bears came out of the woods and tore forty-two of the children into pieces. Quite a story, right? Those of us who are follically challenged find quite a bit of satisfaction in this bloody tale. You must learn, "never insult a bald man." But it also create some serious problems. If we dismiss it as nonsense, how do we draw the line in judging other teachings that may be intended to be totally serious? If God can make she-bears maul little children, how can we find God to be loving and merciful? And if mere name calling can produce such a calamity of divine punishment, how do we encourage ways of mercy, forgiveness, and understanding?

The author of the article I read offered three possible Christian responses. The first is that we can stick our head in the sand and ignore these troubling verses. We can pretend that anything that doesn't describe God as good all the time doesn't really exist and doesn't need to be addressed. If we are asked about something troubling in Scripture we can change the subject and just move on. This kind of picking and choosing probably does drive those outside the faith really mad.

The second way of response is to point out these stories are human errors and translations. They are stories of specific historical times and places that probably were not inspired by God and certainly shouldn't be in the Bible. I read a lot of things this week that tried to explain this particular story through human error in translation; for example the young boys weren't really young at all but men who were against all prophets of God. And the bears really didn't maul the victims, they only frightened them. And Elisha wasn't really bald, he had shaved his head to show the priests of Bethel that he was mourning the loss of his teacher Elijah, and thus carried the authority of the former prophet. The problem here is that blaming everything we don't like about the Bible on incorrect translation or biased editing leads us to the question of what words are beyond such scrutiny. If something in the Bible makes us uncomfortable, can we simply ignore it because it is human error rather than God inspired teaching?

The third response suggested by the author makes the most sense to me. In reading the Bible we must understand that it is the story of God as written through the experience of God's people. We can always learn more about ourselves as human beings by reading Scripture. Thus the Bible is a divinely inspired text that reveals some awful human behavior. It portrays even the most faithful people of God in situations that produced absolutely regrettable behavior. It tells stories with graphic examples to remind us that we fall short and need to do better. We can see that even on our best days we can lash out against enemies, turn a blind eye to injustice, and excuse our selfish behavior by the circumstances of our world.

For example, as I read over the story of Elisha and the she-bears, I trust that the story is in the sacred text for a reason. It is not to be ignored because it is too bloody and graphic and it is not to be dismissed because of a mistake in translation. Perhaps the passage is not supposed to be taken as newspaper account of an historical incident either, something that happened so long ago that could never happen again. I have never preached about this story but yet this week I have come to believe that the story is supposed to be there. The savage and bloody nature of the ending is supposed to shock us. Like other accounts in Scripture, what happens is clearly morally repugnant. Yet this piece of Scripture is to be read not as historical record but as a fable or morality tale that teaches a time honored lesson. I see the story of Elisha and the she-bears as a story that inspires us to honor God and not profane the creator. It was told and written and canonized as a lesson to us to be faithful to God alone, amidst the competing and compelling interests of the world. We cannot ignore the intention of God, God's claim upon our lives, no matter how difficult and challenging that intention may be. If we do, we will be attacked and swallowed up by those worldly she-bears with a fate just as certain as the young boys in the story. Don't take God's intention lightly. You will find out that following God is supposed to be serious business.

Yes, the passage was meant to shock and offend, like many in Scripture, but it wasn't meant to relate actual history. It was a story told to teach an important lesson about honoring God's way in the midst of our own human journey. It is a story with relevance today.

I am grateful for Jim's sermon topic suggestion and I hope I haven't strayed too far from his original intent. Perhaps I can remember what I have learned this week the next time the preaching lectionary hands me a difficult piece of Scripture. The people of God are not given the task of defending facts or ignoring what is uncomfortable and hard to explain. The people of God are always to seek the holy lesson in the human story.