

## Questions of Faith – IS THERE A GOD OF THE OLD TESTAMENT AND A GOD OF THE NEW TESTAMENT?

### Scripture Readings: Jeremiah 31:31-34, Mark 9:38-41

This morning features the last of our summer Questions of Faith. Thank you again to everyone who submitted questions and to those who responded to their preacher's thoughts with their own thoughts at our Zoom sermon talk back sessions after worship. Feel free to join us again after the service today.

Next Sunday we will begin our program year with an emphasis on *The Circle of Faith: Love of God, Self, and Neighbor*. We're going back to basics this year as we reflect on the heart of Jesus' message – the call to love, to love with all one's heart, soul, mind, and strength, with a love that goes inward to self, outward to others, and everywhere and in all things to God.

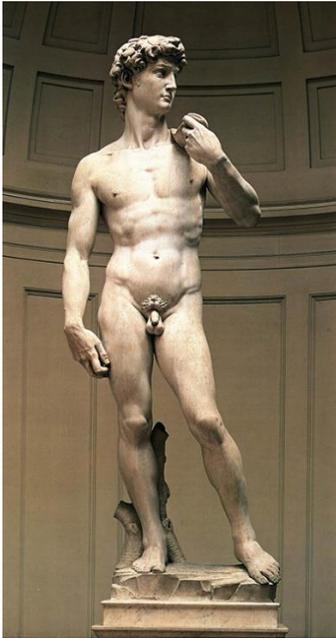
And the question of faith offered this morning makes for a good transition to our program year by addressing one of the most frequent questions I get asked as a Christian pastor – Is There a God of the Old Testament and a God of the New Testament?

I think we all know where this question's coming from; namely, from someone from a Christian tradition with its "Old" and "New" labels. This can partake of a not-so-subtle assumption that New is better than Old with the added implication that somehow the Christian scriptures have superseded the Hebrew scriptures. In fact, they sometimes feel like we are talking about two different Gods!

But the question is also coming from a place of real concern over the things we read in the scripture, particularly in the Old Testament: stories that clearly are more myth than history, and contain multiple "texts of terror" depicting a Canaanite genocide, sexual violence, God ordained slaughters, and very harsh divine consequences imposed on human sin. And that's not to mention those long passages that simply seem impenetrable and completely antiquated. What a breath of fresh air it is to leave the scary Hebrew prophets behind when we arrive at the Gospels and a clearly loving and nonviolent Jesus. This is a face of God easier for us to understand and accept as loving, forgiving, faithful, and kind. Of course, that's until Jesus starts talking, like in our Gospel passage this morning, about some of us being cast into the outer darkness or how we should pluck out eyes or arms or hands. Its before Paul carries on with what seems to us as unyielding moral judgments, and before the book of Revelation gives us nightmares of an Apocalypse.

Some of the deep uneasiness we feel about our scriptures isn't only with the "Old" Testament but with the "New" as well. So the most important place for us to begin is to address our understanding of what scripture is and does and how we are to understand and interpret it.

And let me come at this a bit sideways. I want to direct your attention to perhaps the most famous piece of sculpture in the world.



**IMAGE: David**

Most people who visit Florence end up going to the Gallery of Fine Arts to see Michelangelo's wonderful sculpture of David. There David stands, the moment before he hurls the rock at Goliath, pensive, ready to act and achieve greatness. Among other things, it's a beautiful piece of marble and David stands tall and free. It's at least two times life-sized because it was originally created to stand at the roofline of Florence Cathedral. Bringing it down to the floor makes it seem larger and more imposing than ever.



**IMAGE: Bacchus**

As I said, Michelangelo's David may be the most famous sculpture in the world. But there are other Michelangelo sculptures in the Gallery and throughout Florence.



**IMAGE: Victory**

They are beautiful, inspiring, masterworks.



**IMAGE: The Deposition**

In some of his sculptures, you'll notice that the figure does not stand completely free from the raw marble from which Michelangelo began.



**IMAGE: Bearded Slave**

In one or two cases, Michelangelo died before he had finished his work.



**IMAGE: Awakening Slave**

In other cases, however, Michelangelo chose to leave the figure partially embedded in the rough stone with which he was working.



**IMAGE: St. Matthew**

Take a good look at this wonderful sculpture of St. Matthew. Michelangelo wanted this work to be only partially completed, only somewhat emerged from chaos, a figure and a destiny still embedded in rough, unshaped marble.

In the same way, the Bible brings us the beautiful and liberating Word of God's love for us but, I believe, it also contains some of the "*rough marble*" of the times in which it was written. You can find Patriarchy in the Bible because it was written in patriarchal times and cultures. You can find the legitimization of such horrors as slavery and conquest. There are unscientific descriptions of natural phenomena, ancient and inaccurate understandings of gender and sexuality. All of these things and much more are the rough, cultural rock from which the Gospel, the Good News of God's love, emerged.

A literal approach to scripture would have us worship such cultural forms, embracing as religious truth such cultural burdens as sexism, racism, violence, and oppression. When we take such a literal approach, we are taking the cultural, political, scientific, and social understandings of the past and mistaking them for the masterwork that God is seeking to create of us – The Beloved Community, the Reign of God, the Kingdom of Heaven, hearts and minds and souls and strength transformed by God's love and devoted to spreading that love to others.

That's the Gospel. Not those passing and limited understandings that are so often the raw rock of our Biblical accounts; indeed all of the stories and books and works of humanity are formed from the raw rock of our culture and can be misused to authorize our ignorance.

Do our scriptures reflect some of this “rough marble,” some of the time and place in which they were written? Of course, they do. Does that mean that our scriptures have no authority for us today? Of course not! The scriptures have every bit as much power and authority for us today as it did for the people two thousand years ago.

There is a beautiful and poignant passage in John’s Gospel when many of those who had followed him were turning away from him and going home because the way Jesus was showing them was difficult. Jesus turns to those who remain and asks them, *“Do you also wish to go away?”* Peter answers him, *“Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:67-68).*

For all the flaws and raw cultural rock of our scriptures, what brings us back to them is the Gospel it proclaims, the Word of Eternal Life that we sense within it.

- It’s what the poet of Genesis meant when writing that at each graceful movement of Creation, looking over the sky and sea, birds and beasts, trees and flowers and humans, God declared that It Was Good.
- It’s Jesus as he tells us not to be anxious about our lives because God cares for us beyond the splendor of lilies and the noticed fall of a sparrow.
- It’s what Isaiah was talking about when offering a word of comfort beyond the end of what had been our familiar lives, and joyously announcing “Look! I Am Doing a New Thing!”
- It’s Jesus telling us to love our enemies, the Apostle Paul telling us to feed our enemies, and the prophet Elisha leading the blinded battalion of his enemies into the palace and then serving them a hot meal.
- It’s Moses and Miriam, leading a people to liberation; it’s Paul and Silas and Priscilla and Aquila expanding the reach of the Gospel message beyond human create boundaries.
- It’s Jeremiah, in our first reading this morning, lifting up a faithful, forgiving God who will pick up the pieces of our foolish betrayal and form a New Covenant, and Jesus sharing a last meal with his friends telling them that his body and blood are the new covenant of grace.
- It’s the Psalmist leading us by still waters, the disciples urged to share a cup of cold water to all who come in Christ’s name, and Amos telling us that justice will roll down like waters and righteousness line an ever-flowing stream.

This is the masterwork of God emerging from our scriptures, emerging from the raw rock of our often cruel and ignorant culture, leading us past our own foolishness and sin, and offering us a vision of loving salvation. It is that vision that unifies our scriptures in pointing to the one God, the mysterious architect of creation, the living hope woven through our history, and the loving spirit that animates our relationships and inspires us to reach toward the future.

Is there a God of the Old Testament and a God of the New Testament? No. It is the same Gospel-bearing God we have been reaching toward throughout, even as we try to scrape away the dross, the raw rock of our twisted history and our present foolishness.

The first prayer that a Jewish child learns is the Shema, the prayer found in the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy that begins, *“Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4).* This is the fundamental confession of monotheism, that there is only one God, one everlasting source of loving kindness and faithfulness and righteousness for the whole universe. We hold this confession in common with our Jewish friends and with our Muslim friends – there is one God. It is central to our Christian faith. For listen to the next words of the Shema: *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your might” (vs. 5).* This confession was so central to Jesus that he referred to it as the Great Commandment.

This morning I included another reading, a curious little passage from Mark's Gospel where the disciples are complaining to Jesus that a stranger to them – someone who didn't belong to their little club of disciples! - was out there doing ministry. We tried to stop him, Jesus, they tell him. He instructs them not to stop this strange exorcist for *whoever is not against us is for us*. And whoever gives even a cup of water is beloved of God.

I included this passage in anticipation of the next logical question of faith: Is there a God of Christianity and a different Great Spirit of the Native Peoples? A different God for Jews and Muslims, for Catholics and Protestants, for Buddhists and Sikhs?

A simple answer to this question wouldn't pay sufficient respect to the real differences of our faith traditions. But as monotheists, believers in One God, we should always be filled with a profound humility that there is a God that cannot be expressed or experienced through one tradition, one set of scriptures, one religion. There is a living, loving divine presence that is the subject of all our seeking, all our yearning, all our questioning. I've appreciated the way our friends at First Congregational of Oshkosh put it: *Many paths, same journey*.

The precious Gospel of our scriptures has placed many of us on the Christian path to God, but we walk that path without arrogance or snugness. We honor and respect the many paths people follow to God. After all, whoever is not against us is for us. And isn't that good news?

Amen.

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Sermon preached by Reverend Steve Savides at First Congregational United Church of Christ, Appleton, Wisconsin  
Livestreamed on September 6, 2020