

SERMON: "BIBLE BASICS - LAND"

**TEXTS: OLD TESTAMENT GENESIS 15
OLD TESTAMENT DEUTERONOMY 31:1-8**

July 28, 2024

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INTRODUCTION

How did soccer become the world's most popular sport?

Here is one possibility. Football, what the rest of the world calls it, has its origins in England. The English men's team has done well in recent tournaments

They's made it to several finals. Their fans get excited and start singing (lots of singing in football) that football is 'coming home.' Then they lose the final

So here is how the game became so popular all round the globe

The British brought the game with them wherever they went (and they went everywhere thanks to what for quite a long time was the world's most powerful navy)

That and the fact that it doesn't require lots of equipment, just a ball.

Oh, I'm telling us this because this sermon will be a bit different

Today we come to the bible basic that is land. Seeing that we're talking about land I'm going to utilize the screen today and show you several maps

We start with one of my favorites – a map of all the nations that Britain has not invaded. All 22 of them, almost all of which are landlocked.

Show map of nations not invaded by Britain

The point I'm trying to make in a playful way is a painful truth

Any talk of land (and who it belongs to) needs to be honest

Most land, including this land, has been taken by violence

You may have purchased it fair and square ... but before that someone probably took it by hook or by crook, by force.

That includes the land that God promised (and delivered) to Israel

They were freed from slavery in Egypt, led through the desert wilderness

Then gifted the land of Canaan ... which was already home to other people and those people were forced off their land ... by God

God makes that quite clear back when God appeared to Moses in the burning bush

We find that in Exodus, chapter 3, the passage we focused on to talk about exodus

"Go and assemble the elders of Israel and say to them, 'The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, has appeared to me, saying: I have given heed to you and to what has been done to you in Egypt. I declare that I will bring you up out of the misery of Egypt, to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey.'

A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE

God says the same thing even earlier in Genesis in making this promise to Abram

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, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.”

That kind of language from God will be repeated many times in reference to the land we call ‘the Promised Land.’ And it will not just be the words God speaks God will be the one who drives these other people off that land. God did that and gave it to Israel to settle by tribe. You see that map on your bulletin and screen.

Show map of Israel by tribe

Let’s be honest ... The history of the world is a history of violence
That includes what we have done. And it includes that God has done

Think through some of the bible stories you might remember
Joshua and the walls of Jericho, David and Goliath (lots of stories of David as a warrior), Deborah, Samson. The bible would get a PG-13 (or R) rating
Lots of violence ... violence in God’s name, violence wrought by God

What then are we to make of all that violence?
There are a couple of things we’ve done that we should not do
One is to ignore it, skip over it. Only see the good, pretend the bad is not so bad
The other thing we should not do is to use that violence as an excuse for our own violence today. Let me speak to both of these.

First about using God’s name to justify violence ... to take land, to take life.

I heard a great presentation from a mission co-worker in Bethlehem (which you may know is in the occupied West Bank, Palestine).
She talked about the settler movement, how the number of settlements keeps growing – both settlements built by the Israeli government and those that are just started illegally by settlers acting as squatters.

She described settlers as loosely fitting into two groups – economic and religious
Some of the larger settlements are multi-story apartment buildings being built around East Jerusalem. Rent is expensive in Jerusalem
But these units are not expensive. The government wants to fill them up
So, lots of people, lots of secular Jews take advantage of that and settle there

Show map of settlements

VIOLENCE HERE?

Many other settlers seek to move into the West Bank because they are convinced the land is theirs to occupy. God gave it to them not just back when Joshua led the people into the Promised Land ... but now. And just as God cleared that land of the people there and then, so too God would do and is doing now. Therefore, for far too many of these settlers, they see violence as acceptable.

You may have read the stories about recent violence against Palestinian farmers (and the foreign volunteers who are there to protect them). Yes, there are organizations committed to that ... because it is needed. Because the Israeli government is not doing much to stem that violence. Instead they are encouraging and expanding settlements.

I'll share another map that shows how much land there was that might be considered a Palestinian state and how that has changed over the years. The question remains – whose land is it.

Show image of Israel and the West Bank

The use of violence to take lands one might believe to be promised to you is not just something settlers may do. A troubling trend in Christianity is what is called Christian Zionism. Some Christians support Israel because of their respect for our Jewish siblings and their faith. You see this in the work interfaith groups – Jews, Christians and Muslims.

Other Christians support Israel not so much out of mutual respect but based on a view that Jerusalem must be restored (no Palestinians, just Jews) as a step toward the final judgment when Christ will come again. Hence the full throated support to move the US embassy to Jerusalem. That move is seen by Christian Zionists as a step closer to the second coming.

I pray regularly “thy kingdom come thy will be done” ... and I mean it. But I don't mean it as a way to get all the Jews together, not for their own sake, but so as to hurry up and end it all. This kind of Christian Zionism is terrible biblical interpretation, bad theology ... And sure as heaven is not how we are to love our neighbor. It is just violence of another kind.

When is violence acceptable, especially violence done in God's name?

That is one way we deal with the violence in the bible ... we use it as a rationale to take the land. This is, of course, quite dangerous. Do we really think Father, Son and Holy Ghost are cheering us on to violence? Maybe to defend ourselves ... but to take the initiative, take the land like some settlers have done, like Vladimir Putin has done?

Maybe you heard the ridiculous rationale that Putin invaded Ukraine to protect Christians – that is not true, it is propaganda!

HISTORY LESSONS

Another less aggressive but dangerous thing we do about the reality of violence is to gloss over it. Maybe we just skip over those passages in the bible
Maybe we just highlight the good and pretend the bad never happened
That is easy to do, comfortable ... but doing so keeps us from learning the honest lessons of our own history.

Admitting the wrong we have done, especially wrong done in God's name
Well, it is the right thing to do. Isn't that how repentance works?

One thing that has happened here in Iowa (and in other states) is a real effort to shape how we teach history. A bill in the legislature designed to review our social studies curriculum was changed just a few days before the end of the session as reported by the Des Moines Register. A brand new curriculum was adopted. It has been signed into law and will be taught.

It is a curriculum developed not by educators but by a political advocacy group
The Civics Alliance and the National Association of Scholars whose stated aim is to stop civics education from being turned *"into a recruitment tool of the progressive left."* Those are their words, not mine.

The curriculum seeks to highlight the contributions of Western Civilization. I get that. Sounds a bit like what I was taught. I remember learning about 'manifest destiny'
What is troubling with this mandated curriculum is not so much what it emphasizes
It is what it fails to emphasize. You may have heard about the example from Florida where students will be taught that 'slaves learned valuable skills.'

An example about the land ... and the lessons not learned

Show image of Iowa

Talking about the western expansion that chronicles our origins as a state
the emphasis will be on (again using words from the Civics Alliance) ...

Our children should understand that our conquest of half the continent fulfilled the moral imperative to expand the republic

I understand that is how our nation's leaders and peoples understood that expansion as a "moral imperative" ... But can we not also acknowledge that our so-called moral imperative was used to justify taking land and taking life?
This land was someone else's before it was ours. Iowa is native name.

My heart is heavy, very heavy as I consider how dangerous this kind of 'skipping over the difficult chapters' approach to education is.
Yes, our strengths and heroes should be lifted up. But don't we learn more, grow more by wrestling with the sometimes difficult and honest truth

SUMMARY

Our history is a violent one ... and that includes Church history
that includes biblical history. So as a follower of the Prince of Peace
and a student of the bible this is how I have wrestled with the violence of the bible

I'm not going to skip over it. Nor am I going to use it to justify my own violence.
I'll admit that God did wage war to claim a land that belonged to someone else
But the way I read that is as history. God did that once.
God gave them the land (land that other people called home)

What has happened since that initial conquest is human history
A history of conquest, of lands and lives taken.
And I pray lessons learned

I believe, with my heart and my head, that God is at work in this world
That said ... My reading of scripture leads me to believe that work
God's work today and tomorrow is not about taking lives or taking land
It is about peace ... making peace

And one way to make peace is to be honest about
and learn from our history