

“Hot Potato Texts: Did God Really Say That?”

1 Samuel 15: 1-23
Manifest Destiny
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Someday, maybe 1000 years from now, a group of construction workers are going to be digging on this site. Who knows exactly why they will be digging. Maybe it will be to erect a helipad for the travel between planets. Maybe it will be to build underground homes to shield people from a depleted ozone layer. And maybe it will just be because people are curious. A group of archeologists and anthropologists will want to know more about these people who called themselves Oregonians. Or maybe they'll be studying a small, but strange sect of people called Presbyterians. In the course of their digging they might just come up with a document written just one month ago today called, “What Did God Say?”

I want you think about this. One month ago we completed a three month discernment process where we prayed, we listened, and we talked. We met for dessert and we shared in conversation. Your leaders met with community members to hear about the needs of our neighborhood. All of this, we said, was to listen for what God was saying to Eastminster in this time of our congregational life. In the end we put a four page document in front of you that was titled, “What Did God Say?” And then we detailed what we believed we had heard. Here are few things we believe God said:

God said, “Eastminster, this is not the right time to close up shop.”

God said, “Eastminster, I know you are tired. I want you to concentrate on you being you and not work so hard trying to be somebody else.”

God said, “Eastminster, you have too many gifts and a such a rich history to pass away without leaving a legacy of mission, ministry and service to this community.”

Now let me ask you. Did God really say all that? Although you were the ones who shared and listened, I am the one who wrote the document titled, “What Did God Say?” How do you imagine I found those words to write that document? Did I get out my tape recorder and note pad and interview God and then just report God's words to you? Did I come in one morning and discover that God had sent me an email during the night and all I had to do was print it off for you?

We all know that at the end of the discernment process we did not receive the literal words of God. What we had before us was our best attempt, our most honest assessment of what we think it means to be faithful to God in this time. Did we get it right? We don't know. How will history judge our attempts at being faithful? We just don't know. Later church records may tell the story that this moment was the great turning point in the story of Eastminster, maybe even the story of the larger Church itself. On the other hand, history may point to Eastminster as one of many churches too stubborn to give up while facing the tide of history.

In our Scripture reading today we have what I can only hope are disturbing words to you. **“Thus says the Lord of hosts, ‘I will punish the Amalekites for what they did in opposing the Israelites when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and attack Amalek and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.’”** It's one thing to say we are a Bible-believing church, but do we have to believe that too? Did God really say that? That is the question.

In fact, what is especially surprising about this text is that Saul carried out God's mission almost entirely. He killed the men. He slew the women. He took the lives of children. He crushed the infants. Then he went for the animals, the livestock and just about wiped all them out as well. "Just about," I said. Even though God had commanded Saul to "utterly destroy" all of the Amalekites, he saved the best of the sheep and cattle to sacrifice to God in honor of Him. In other words, he disobeyed God and for this act of disobedience, because he did not slaughter all of the animals God replaced Saul with King David.

I hope you are troubled by this passage. Because if you aren't, be careful when you rush to judgment about people who commit heinous crimes claiming that "God told me to do it." If we take these texts literally we have a weak argument when a person kills an abortion doctor on God's orders. If we take these texts literally we have to acknowledge that it is reasonable that 19 religious men might have heard a divine word from God to hijack planes and plow them into the Twin Towers. Did we ever think that maybe we are the Amalekites whom God ordered to be destroyed? That was the contention of Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson after 9/11. That God was using the terrorists to punish America for her sins. You see, if you are not troubled by this passage then you have to take seriously that God sometimes enters history and speaks in someone's ear, "Kill them. Kill them all. Kill the men and women. Do not think about sparing the children and infants."

Did God really say that? I am guessing that most of us are puzzled by these strange texts. That is why I am calling them Hot Potato Texts. They are the texts we would really rather not address. They are the texts that we usually turn a blind eye to because they challenge our assumptions about God and the Bible. On the one hand we so desperately want to believe that this book we call the Bible IS the Word of God. We want to believe that when we hold the Bible in our hands we are actually getting this rare glimpse into God's mind. On the other hand, it is beyond our comprehension that the God we believe in could have actually said those words. For any thinking Presbyterian we cannot fathom how God could have ordered the slaying of an entire tribe of people, especially women, children and infants. And we do not understand how this God whom we usually think of as forgiving, punishes Saul severely simply because he saved a few sheep and cattle from the violent destruction he brought on the Amalekites.

This is a very important sermon series for me personally. It's important because I see how hard so many of you struggle with how to read the Bible. In our classes you often bring to me questions about "how are we expected to understand this stuff." This series is also important to me because the extreme edge of religious fundamentalism is becoming more and more dangerous. The most strident forms of fundamentalism have become ugly. You see it in radical Islamic terrorists who will kill innocents in the name of God. You see it in a Pat Robertson who blames the Haiti earthquake on a prior pact with the devil and this destruction is God's punishment. And you see it in a Glenn Beck who plays on our basest fears when he tells people to run as fast as they can from churches preaching social or economic justice (which he claims is a code word for communism).

So, the question today is did God really say that? Did God really order Saul to utterly slaughter every living thing in Amalek? Absolutely Not! But, I am sure that the Israelites at that time believed that God had said that. I am sure that they felt in their heart of hearts that taking the land before them was their divine right. I think they believed that God was leading them into a Promised Land just as much as we believe that God is leading Eastminster into a new future. What we have here are just two different versions of something that we Americans call the Manifest Destiny Doctrine. As I read earlier, Manifest Destiny is the doctrine that we Americans

have used that propelled us to expand our borders all the way from the Atlantic coast to the Pacific Ocean. It has been a glorious story and one of epic, even mythical proportions. Of course, along the way we displaced, we massacred, and we nearly eradicated the Native Americans who had already lived here for some 8,000-12,000 years by recent estimates.

But, in the minds of American colonists at the time, that was a small price to pay for the greater movement of divine providence. And look at us now. Over 300 million strong. Great cities like New York City, Denver, San Francisco, and Seattle. Interstates linking state to state, city to city, people to people. A military unequaled in power and might. We have put men on the moon. We routinely outshine every other country in the Olympics. Our universities are the envy of the world. Who could argue with the fact that America was destined, was pre-ordained to become the “city on the hill”? That is the Manifest Destiny Doctrine and when a people begin to believe that God has a pre-ordained plan for them, all kinds of atrocities suddenly receive God’s apparent blessing.

Does that mean that God literally said, “*Slaughter the Native Americans. Kill their buffalo. Take their land. Move them to reservations.*” No. It only means that at the time Americans were asking the question, “*What is God saying to us?*” “*What future does God have for us?*” “*What special purpose does God want us to play in the unfolding of history?*” They were doing the best they could to be faithful to what God was doing in their time. Did they get it right? Well, at the time I think they believed that they got it right. The whole country galvanized around the pioneering spirit to expand west. In fact, thousands and thousands of white settlers died along the way in their attempts and in their belief that this is what they were meant to do.

1 Samuel is a clear example of what we call the Manifest Destiny doctrine. Those early Israelites and Jews today still have a belief that they are a chosen people, that they have a special purpose in history. And when you believe that great things can happen. Amazing things can happen. But, there is also a dark side to it. Because when you believe that sometimes the blinders go on and you can’t see the destruction you are leaving in your wake. Tiger Woods always believed he was destined for greatness and it propelled him to the most amazing heights. But, he has also left a path of destruction in his wake. America is a great nation, but does that mean that God told the early Americans to slaughter the Indians? I don’t think so. Israel is a great nation and a great people. But, does that mean that God actually said those words to destroy and kill a whole nation of people, including children and infants. I don’t think so.

My friends, the story continues. Every generation has to ask the same question. What is God saying to us? What does God want us to do? What does it mean to be faithful to God? What special purpose does God have for us to play in the unfolding drama of God’s story?

Someday, someone is going to uncover a four page sheet of paper here on this site. And at the top of that sheet it is going to say, “What Did God Say?” They are going to read down that sheet and see a whole list of things that God was saying to us here in 2010. Did God really say those words? No, of course, not! There are just our best attempts at being faithful to God in our time.

If you can get this you will have the window into how to read the Bible. When I read Scripture in public I usually say, “Listen FOR the Word of God” rather than “Listen TO the Word of God.” Our discernment sheet last month was not the actual words of God, but were the words that best described what we believe about God’s presence for us now.

My friends, that’s really all the Bible is. We had a three month discernment process and came up with a four-page sheet of what God was saying to us. The Bible is the result of an over

1000 year discernment process which resulted in 66 books. It is really just this deeply intuitive, profound set of books that answers the question, “What is God saying to us?”

When we read the Bible we are not reading the WORDS of God. We are reading the words of those who are praying, discerning and discovering what it means to be faithful to God. And what is so exciting about this is that it erases the lines between those first faithful followers and us. It’s not that God spoke once and then forever abandoned us over the next 2000 years. No, it’s that the Bible is just the record of those who were seeking faithfulness in their time. And when we write our story it becomes the next chapter of God’s people trying to be faithful in our time.

We Americans have a great story of faith, but we didn’t get it all right. Just ask our Native brothers and sisters. The Israelites have profound story of faith, but they didn’t always get it right either. Just ask the forgotten Amalekites. And we too are building a story of faithfulness, of prayer and of compassion. We are on a mission to bring God’s love to East Portland. I don’t know how history will judge us 1000 years from now. I don’t know if we will get it all right. But, we have to try because that’s what faithful people do.

The Bible is not the WORDS of God. The Bible is the words people who struggle to be faithful just like us.