

As a kid I used to watch the Jesus Movie with my family every Lent. I can still see the snake the camera zooms in on and hear the deep voice of the narrator, “If you are the Son of God...” Y’all are lucky I’m not terrified of slithering things.

Satan, in this story, is sneaky and persistent. Three times Satan tempts Jesus, and three times Jesus resists. Besides the snake, what stuck out to me most as a child, (and what resonates now), is that Jesus quotes scripture to beat back Satan. But, in Luke’s version of events, the final climactic trick of Satan is to quote scripture right back. Yes, in this Bible story about 40 days of temptation in the wilderness, Satan quotes scripture, but it is not the Word of God.

How do we know? God is love. Jesus reveals to us that God is love. Teaching by word and deed, Jesus tells us the greatest commandment, the sum of the law, is love God, love your neighbor. So, we Jesus-followers seek to read scripture through the lens of love that Jesus gave us; when we do, that is the Word of God. But if we read scripture through a different lens than that lens of love that Jesus gave us, it is not God’s word for us.

Too many times, humans have quoted scripture, but it was not the Word of God.

The slave holders who used Genesis 9:25 to justify enslaving fellow human beings were quoting scripture. “Cursed be Canaan; lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers.” They claimed that Black Africans were descendants of Ham, the father of Canaan. They claimed black people were the “slaves” the apostle instructs to, “obey your earthly masters in everything.” God set it up that the black man would serve the white man, they claimed. It was the natural order. The racist humans were quoting scripture, but it was not the Word of God.

The anti-vax Christians who use Psalm 91 to justify not taking the Covid-19 vaccine are quoting scripture. “You will not fear...the pestilence that stalks in darkness, nor the destruction that wastes at noon day...it will not come near you...Because (you) hold fast to (God) in love,...(God) will protect (you).” Life-saving vaccines are a good gift from God – who gave us our minds, our hands, and our medicine. Getting vaccinated is a concrete way to love and protect your vulnerable neighbor. But antivaxers will claim the Bible says: “Do not fear disease! Why do you need a vaccine if God will protect you?” The antivaxer humans are quoting scripture, but it is not the Word of God.

Today, there are some church leaders who use 1 Timothy 2:12 to justify subjugating women; they too are quoting scripture. “I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man, she is to keep silent.” They lift this verse out of its context while keeping others in their context. Prohibitions against braiding hair or wearing expensive clothes, they say, are cultural and conditional and contextual. Yet, the next verse that deals not with consumerism but prohibits women in authority? They claim that verse applies to all cultures, unconditionally, regardless of context. The sexist humans are quoting scripture, but it is not the Word of God.

Today, American Christians are known for our defense of “traditional family values.” We take verses like Genesis 1:27, “male and female he created them,” and Romans 1:26-27, “God gave them up...women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural...men...were consumed with lust for one another,” and 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, “men who have sex with men...will not inherit the kingdom of God.” We use six passages scattered throughout our holy book to discriminate against trans people, lesbian women, and gay men. Beloved, there are plenty of biblical scholars who have dedicated their life to the work of studying Scripture, showing how the literary structure of Romans 1, the historical context of the church of Corinth, the biblical language of the Genesis creation poetry, not to mention the theological trajectory of the whole book, means we don’t have to use those texts to clobber people with divergent gender identities and sexual orientations. We can both believe what the Bible teaches and welcome and affirm everyone in the LGBTQIA+ community in our churches. The two are not mutually exclusive. The same way of reading scripture that enables our church family to call a female pastor to the pulpit enables our church family to welcome a gay couple to be married in our sanctuary. Even so, we’ve held on to our prejudices. We might quote scripture – to cover up our bias, rebranding bias and bigotry as belief; but, when we do that we have not read scripture through the lens of love, and, in that moment we are not understanding the Word of God.

Last week I asked our Youth Director, Jon Richwine, whether Russia’s invasion of Ukraine would have people scared enough that I should rewrite my sermon to address that fear. He said, it’s on the other side of the world, don’t rewrite your sermon. But we do hate to see it happening: the little guy getting beat up by the big guy.

He was right. We had so many prayer cards last week praying for the people in Ukraine, the little guy. That is a very Christian instinct, y’all. Because when Jesus was crucified by the

Roman Empire, that was: “the little guy, being beat up by the big guy.” And our faith teaches us, God is on the side of the little guy. When Jesus went to the cross, that was God declaring forever, “I am so on the side of the little guy, I will die! So that, in every “little guy” you see being “crucified” you will see My face (the face of God), and you will do something about it.” This idea is central to the teaching of liberation theologians...that today, Christians should pay attention to who is the little guy, who is getting hurt, who is being marginalized, who is being oppressed, who is getting abused by powerful people? Who is being “crucified” today? Jesus is on their side, by their side, dying with them. And, if we want to follow Jesus, we cannot ignore their suffering, staring piously at our decorative crosses while ignoring the cries of those society is currently crucifying.

This is why, when scripture is used as the very hammer and nails to crucify “the little guy” – black people, indigenous people, women, LGBTQIA+ people, religious minorities, disabled people, poor people – when scripture is used as a weapon, it is not the Word of God.

I’ve invited the church family to join me in reading through the Bible in a year. This week we read through John 10. Jesus says: “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me....(my) sheep follow (me) because they know (my) voice.” We will know what is the Word of God because we know Jesus who reveals to us that God is love. God is on the side of the oppressed. God, as Jesus tells us, wants to “draw ALL people to (God)self.” (John 12:32). The gospel is about welcome, inclusion, radical generosity, compassion, service, and sacrificial love. We know the voice of our shepherd; any time we hear scripture used in a ways that banish, exclude, hoard, judge, shame, hurt or hate, we know that is not the Word of God.

Like scripture, Lent has also been used as a weapon all too often. There are so many “shoulds” stored up in this season. But, so often, what we get out of Lent and Scripture both, is what we are looking for.

Beloved Christian author, Rachel Held Evans, writes: “If you are looking for verses with which to oppress...you will find them. If you are looking for verses with which to liberate or honor...you will find them... This is why there are times when the most instructive question to bring to the text is not "what does it say?", but "what am I looking for?" I suspect Jesus knew this when he said, "ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened."”

During this season of Lent, may you seek and find the God of love. May you fast from hate and feast on love. May you join our savior Jesus Christ on his journey to the cross. May you know this path is a safe place to confess your sins, to grieve, to pray, to prepare to return to the dust. One unforgettable Ash Wednesday, my mentor marked the cross of ashes on our foreheads saying: “You are dust, and to dust you will return. But also, you are loved and to Love you will return.” You won’t find that phrase in scripture: but its tone evokes the Good Shepherd, whose word is never used as a weapon, because the Word of God is only ever heard through love.

Amen