

The Third Way
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Exodus 2:11-22

I didn't intend to preach this sermon. I don't particularly want to preach this sermon. It's not that I'd rather be somewhere else. It's that I'd rather have something else to say. I did not mean or want to end up with these words. They trouble me too much. Be careful when you go paddling about in Holy Scripture, confident you can navigate the currents you're in. One minute you're splashing around in the kiddie pool. The next minute you're swept out to the turgid depths of a roiling sea, struggling to stay afloat.

That's what happened to me on the way to this sermon. When Matthew and I set up this series, I was clear about today's outline. Moses has an impulsive and violent anger. It kills an Egyptian guard. It almost gets Moses killed. It almost loses the Ten Commandments when he shatters the tablets in rage over the golden calf. It is a fatal flaw, but by God's grace, it is not fatal to Moses or Israel, just to the Egyptian (but that's OK, he's not one of us). God turns Moses into the Great Liberator and etches a new set of tablets – like a movie plot on The Lifetime Channel. I even considered a quip about God enrolling Moses in anger management school as a condition for getting his certificate of meritorious service. Ha, ha – let's go get brunch.

But that dead Egyptian kept haunting me. What if his name was Eric or Zachary or Connor – you know, somebody's son or grandson, somebody like me or you? Suddenly a lot of common adages sound barbaric – “The enemy, not one of us.” “Collateral damage.” “To make an omelet you have to break some eggs.” – all those pretenders to wisdom that justify the use of violence to pursue our interests. Yes, the Egyptian guard was abusing the Hebrew slave. Yes, he was perpetuating injustice, whether or not it was legal. Yes, something needed to be done to stop the wrongdoing. But is Moses' murderous violence the only answer, or even an acceptable one?

I kept thinking about that Egyptian guard. He is just a lower-level functionary in the kind of domination system that has ruled the vast majority of people in history. He's not living the high life either. I wondered: How has he or his family been threatened with violence in the coercive hierarchy necessary to capture and control slaves? What must he fear if his commander thinks he can't control this slave? How powerless does he feel in the gears of this massive empire? We don't know. Negotiation and mutual understanding are never given a chance. Moses immediately resorts to violence as the solution to violence, and therein lies the tale of much human history.

What does God want us to hear in this story? I keep seeing the dead Egyptian, somebody's son, God's son. I notice how Moses' acts. Before he kills the guard, he looks both ways to make sure no one is watching. He does not act on impulse in a fit of unthinking rage. It's premeditated murder. Then he hides the corpse. Moses knows someone will pay for his action. He just doesn't want it to be him. My hero. Moses assumes that the cycle of violence will continue. That seems OK as long as it doesn't land on him. If violence against the Hebrew

slaves is the problem, then Moses performs surgery to remove one tumor when the whole body is riddled with metastasized cancer, a condition the surgery will only compound.

My study of Moses confronts me with questions I hadn't anticipated. Is violence the first, the necessary, the only way to oppose violence? Are our choices limited to craven acquiescence to evil or violent opposition to it, or is there a third way? Does our faith distinguish between evil violence and righteous violence, or is all violence against God's will? My study of Moses has me questioning what Moses' fatal law really is – violent anger that calls for some sessions with a shrink, or embracing the myth of redemptive violence that calls for an encounter with God? This isn't shaping up as a sermon. This is shaping up as a six-month study.

But this is a sermon, so I'll condense what deserves exhaustive attention. The Myth of Redemptive Violence is an account of reality and how we must cope with it. It has found expression in countless stories as various as the ancient Babylonian creation narrative and a Popeye cartoon plot. Every version includes these elements:

- Violence is built into the nature of things; we cannot escape it.
- An indestructible hero is opposed by an irreformable villain.
- There is no reflection on the evil in the hero or the humanity of the villain.
- Most of the time, the villain pummels the hero.
- Supernaturally, the hero finds power to kill the villain and save the day.
- On the matter of violence, there is no distinction between hero and villain, except hero violence is good, and villain violence is bad.
- Even though the villain is killed, he or she comes back again, and the cycle repeats eternally.

The clear assertion in the myth of redemptive violence is: there is no effective way to oppose evil except with violence, and it is never fully effective, so we must use it again and again and again. Old school professional wrestler Gorgeous George expressed this faith quite eloquently: "Do unto others before they have a chance to do unto you." Walter Wink asserts that this faith is the dominant operative religion of the modern world, not authentic Judaism or Christianity or Islam.¹ It is often painted over with Jewish and Christian and Muslim verbiage, especially by national political leaders. If a functional definition of a god is what you turn to when all else fails, then violence is quite the trusted god of many.

The Bible may be seen as recording a long, agonizing, and not yet completed exodus from enslavement to the myth of redemptive violence. Thus the Bible does not speak in one clear voice on the matter. On the one hand, there is the creation story that portrays God not as a warrior using violence in creation (as did the Babylonian myth), but more like a domestic potter firmly and gently shaping things. The creation story's conclusion is that reality is good and a gift of a loving God. And there's the story of conflict between Hebrews and Canaanites being settled by a jam session at Jericho, not by weapons of war. And there is the prophets' abiding insistence that the word of the Lord is "swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks." On the other hand, there are claims that God demands Israel kill everyone in a conquered city, and there is the holy warfare of David.

For Christians, however, all paths start with Jesus and lead to Jesus. Jesus summoned people out of death and the grave, but never sent anyone there. When he counseled us to turn the other cheek to a bully, hand over not only our coat but our underwear as well to rapacious creditors, and walk more than the mile the troops could legally demand, he was counseling nonviolent resistance by shaming the oppressors and revealing their power for what it was – oppression that grieved God. When arrested by armed guards in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus refused the logic of self-defense and ordered his disciples to put down their swords, at that hour and for the rest of their lives. Where Moses killed the Egyptian guard punishing a Hebrew slave, Jesus forgave the Roman soldiers crucifying him. If the battle for truth and justice must involve violence, then Jesus will suffer it, not inflict it. This is the third way of Jesus between accepting evil and killing its perpetrators.

There is no instance of Jesus employing or endorsing violence as a way to fulfill God's will. If you mention the whip in the Temple, I will point out he used it not on people but to chase the animals out of the courtyard, with the result that they were not slaughtered in ritual sacrifice. The whip in the hands of Jesus symbolizes, if anything, that so-called sacred sacrifice stops with him. Shedding blood is not God's way. Prayer is, and suffering love. We follow as Lord and Savior someone who absolutely forswore the use of violence as a righteous strategy to participate in God's holy purposes. We follow someone who accepted the cross, demonstrating that "we are liberated, not by striking back at what enslaves us – for even striking back reveals that we are still controlled by violence – but by a willingness to die rather than submit to its command."ⁱⁱ

Jesus calls his followers to do the same. We find it hard, and many before us in the faith have found it nearly impossible. Who can do it? Only those who have died with Christ to the impulse to preserve our existence at all costs. Only they do not lose their lives by seeking them. We are not freed from violence by counter-violence. We are freed from violence only by dying to its control. As a colleague once told me, "It's hard to threaten someone who's already dead." Baptism is a drowning, a dying to our preference for domination. We who seldom see baptism by immersion may forget that. We may think we can have spotless new lives with a little washing. But the language of the baptismal prayer over the water is clear: "...dying and being raised with Christ, we may share in his final victory." That's not a metaphor. It may not refer to physical death, but it does refer to a real death with Christ.

The early church resisted the overwhelming and violent power of the Roman Empire only with prayer, preaching, love, and martyrdom. All that changed with Constantine. The Empire (now nominally Christian) could not tolerate the authentic way of Jesus that delegitimated the use of violence to assert its will. Christian religion had to serve the state. So the weekly mass became a perpetual scapegoating sacrifice. The cross no longer unmasked the evil of state-sanctioned murder, but suggested God requires violence to Jesus before God will forgive us. The nonviolent God of Jesus became the God of unequalled violence, demanding the blood of the holy one. Then we Crusades, Inquisitions, genocide in South America, and slavery – all in the name of Jesus. When it comes to getting in line with Jesus on the matter of violence, we are slow. We live in a world where on the days they died, more people grieved Michael Jackson than grieved Jesus of Nazareth. I don't say that in disgusted complaint, but in matter-of-fact recognition. We live in a world where more people grieve the death of Michael Jackson than grieve the death of Jesus. In other words, the kingdom of God begins imperceptibly,

unpopularly, and (in one sense) unsuccessfully. It's like a mustard seed. On the issue of violence, we are still waiting for that tiny mustard seed of Jesus to grow into the great bush that gives shelter to all creation. Non-violent mustard appears to be a very slow-growing variety. But mustard is a weed. It will grow. God promises. The question is, will we water it?

It turns out Moses' flaw is the flaw of us all. Moses' call is also the call of us all: to resist injustice with our whole being like Jesus, to be a conduit of God's liberating grace like Jesus, but to use only the power of love, refusing to fight fire with fire – like Jesus. That call really tests our faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior. Does his way rule? Does his way save? If we answer “yes” with our lives, we are betting everything on Jesus, betting everything on the resurrection, betting everything on God. But isn't that the definition of Christian faith?

ⁱ Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1999) p. 42.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 93.