You know there are some strange things in the Bible. And today we are going to talk about some of them. And some of the hard topics, like what are we to think about violence, and what is God’s role in violence and genocide and conquest? And how do we understand that role today?

Let us pray:

It may be one of the stranger passages in the Bible, the Psalm 137 about bashing babies’ heads against the rocks. You won’t find many pastors preaching on it. In fact, when I was preparing for this service and I was looking up the Psalm I said outloud, “oh, it won’t be in the hymnal,” and to my shock it was there. I know I have never heard it used as a responsive reading during worship.

We just don’t generally talk about killing children as worship. But it is in the Bible. How are we to even understand that?

Last week I asked you to take the 10 commandments and look for how they might be relevant in your life today. And here we are, in the Old Testament, breaking one of the commandments—you shall not commit murder. I mean, how do you reconcile that commandment with a psalm glorying in the idea of killing children—or for that matter the passage in Deuteronomy about the conquest of the Promised Land.

In the course of our Journey we’ve looked at creation and the rivalries between brothers, the calling God gave to Abraham, and the slavery suffered by the Israelites.

Now that they are free from Egypt and they are returning to the lands where Abraham and Jacob originally settled, we come to a new phase and a new problem—the land that had been promised to them was settled by other people in the centuries that they lived in Egypt.

And so begins the story of conquest and conflict. How is this not coveting? A war of invasion and great bloodshed all to get what someone else already has. Thousands would die in the many battles to claim the Promised Land.

It raises for us one of the most difficult questions of all: what is God’s role in violence? Does God condone violence? Does God cause violence? Is God the author of violence?

Or is there another way to understand God’s calling as it relates to violence?

We cannot ignore that in Deuteronomy, God tells the Israelites that they are to completely destroy the Canaanites, even the young children, even the little girls are to be killed. None are to be left alive. Failure to kill them all will bring harsh judgment. All 7 nations of Canaanites are to be wiped out. Every last one. God is on the Israelites’ side, and against “them.” God is working only for the Israelites and against the Canaanites, against them.

Before we think too harshly of the Israelites, remember how prevalent this kind of thinking still is—God is for us and against them. God wants my team to win.

How many athletes, or team fans, thank God for a win as if God was on their side and against the other team? And that’s just in sports. We are even more sure that God is on our side when we talk about countries and war. After all, the enemy is always godless, right?

And we cannot ignore the history that is recorded in the Bible. The Bible teaches that God wants the Israelites to conquer the people and take the land, wiping out the people who are there.

Of course, this is all contingent on remaining faithful to God. And God repeatedly tells them to remember that they were once strangers, and once slaves, and to treat the stranger well, to remain humble themselves.

It does appear to be a one-time thing—just to establish the promised land, although that is little comfort to those who are forced out.

And remember eventually, the entire world would be blessed through them. But first, their Promised Land must be established, and that involves conquering the people who are living there, the Canaanites. So we cannot ignore the passages that call on the Israelites to kill all the Canaanites, even the little children.

Or the rather bloodthirsty psalms calling for dashing the babies heads against the rocks—things that today we would likely call war crimes. They are part of the history of or faith story. We have to wrestle with them.

But these images are not the end of the story—that isn’t where God leaves us, thankfully. It isn’t the end of the story of faith. There is the Canaanite woman who comes to Jesus and asks for healing for her daughter.

Did you catch it? The critical detail? It was a Canaanite woman. But the Canaanites were all wiped out when Joshua took the Israelites into the Promised Land.

Now in another gospel, the story describes the woman as the Syro-phoenician woman, which is how she would have more likely been described in Jesus’ time. But the author the of gospel of Matthew is trying to teach us something more, and he deliberately describes her as Canaanite, and Canaanites should not exist anymore, not as a people.

It would be like meeting a Viking or an Aztec or a Druid. And yet, here a Canaanite woman asks Jesus to heal her daughter. And that’s significant too. Even little girls were to be killed. And yet, this woman, who shouldn’t even be alive, wants Jesus to show her daughter mercy. And Jesus gives the standard answer—I’m here for God’s chosen. I’m here for the lost sheep of Israel.

And the woman answers with such humility and grace: “Even dogs get the crumbs from the master’s table.” I don’t know about you but that answer embarrasses me, humbles me. And in that response Jesus, in turn, is humbled. I think this is a remarkable moment. This woman who shouldn’t even exist humbles Jesus, shows him a better way.

And because of her faith, he grants her request and heals her daughter. From Deuteronomy where Israel is told to kill all the Canaanites, even the little girls, to Jesus who heals a Canaanite girl, we see and are given a new way to treat others and to think of the other. Instead of killing, Jesus shows mercy.

And then Jesus goes on to show mercy on a crowd, a crowd that was made up mostly of the “other” of non-Israelites. How do I know that? Because they “praised the God of Israel” which is how those outside of Israel would refer to God, as opposed to praising the Lord, or praising the God of Abraham, or the Lord of our ancestors.

Jesus had sympathy for them and so we have a repeat of the miracle of the multiplying of the loaves and fishes that Jesus had previously done for a crowd of Jews. We often don’t read of this second miracle of feeding in Matthew, perhaps because it seems redundant. But Brian McLaren makes the point that there is a significant difference.

With the first feeding of the crowd, the first multiplying of the fish and loaves, there were 12 baskets left over, perhaps for the 12 tribes of Israel. This time there are 7 baskets, perhaps for the 7 nations of Canaan, linking this miracle with the healing of the little girl.

Where the rule was to kill or destroy the other, Jesus showed mercy to the other, mercy and grace.

Through these stories, we see an evolution in the understanding of who receives the good news, who receives mercy. Where it began with one family and then one people, it now includes all. God is the God of all people. We see a better vision and a better future. It is no longer an “us versus them.” The ugliness of conquest and war changes.

Now we have a vision of a future together with Jesus offering mercy and grace to all. From an ugliness, God brings beauty and grace. Swords are indeed turned into plows, and the lion of Judah lies down with the lamb. And so instead of the “other” we are all called to be one. Instead of war, Jesus gives us peace and grace.

Instead of hating and even killing the children of the other, Jesus heals even a Canaanite child and calls all children to him.

It is not insignificant that we read of a meal in today’s scripture. How often does Jesus teach through the sharing of a meal and the breaking of bread? In today’s scripture, he shows compassion on the crowd and feeds them all. And we remember Him and His compassion for us, in the sharing of this meal, and the breaking of this bread, at His table.