

It is an interesting time to be looking at this topic—"The Great Conversation." How do we understand how the parts of our faith fit together? That's what our scriptures today do as well. They invite us into the conversation of our faith. Let us pray:

How many of you took the opportunity to participate in conversation with our Bishop this week? He called them Holy Huddles, specifically Holy Huddles on Church Unity and we looked at things like how do we understand scripture? How do we remain a unified church if we disagree on our understanding of scripture? And I suppose at some level, is there a point at which we say that is too far, that isn't who we are as United Methodists? We are looking at similar

questions today. Specifically, we are looking at how do we understand differences in scripture? And we start with some history.

Centuries ago, indeed more than 7 centuries before Jesus was born, the kingdoms of Israel and Judah were being threatened. They were surrounded by more powerful nations on three sides, the north, the east and the south, and to the west, the Mediterranean. The northern kingdom of Israel fell first to the Assyrians who invaded and exiled many of the people. Many of those exiled from Israel lost their identity and are referred to as the 10 lost tribes of Israel. Some of the descendants who were of mixed ancestry, Israel and Assyria, became known as Samaritans, we are

familiar with them from the parable of the Good Samaritan and we know that in Jesus' time, Samaritans were looked down upon as less than, and as "other."

The southern kingdom, Judah, lasted a little longer but were eventually conquered by Babylon and many of the elite, educated, and important Judeans were taken into exile in Babylon.

How were they to understand what happened to them?

They were the chosen people of God, given the Promised Land, a Covenant People with God. How could they have been conquered?

It was during this time that much of the Bible was written, or at least written down from oral traditions and collected together, in part to create and sustain their identity during exile, and in part in an effort to understand what had happened to them.

Some thought God had abandoned them. They wrote impassioned poetry of their devastation and their heart-break.

Some thought they were being punished because they had abandoned God. They wrote detailed accounts of the ways that they had broken the covenant. "They did evil in the sight of the Lord," they would write of their ancestors.

This collection of writings that we call the Bible and in particular the Hebrew Scripture or the Old Testament, contrary to what some will say, is not a uniform collection of identical understanding, but instead reflects this confusion and difficult period in the history of Israel and Judah. It reflects the history of the people.

We can see this in how God is described. When the people are nomadic, God is a pillar of fire or a cloud that moves with them. When they are conquering the land, God is a warrior God. When they establish a stable kingdom, God is a king in a temple with a throne, the ultimate king, the king of kings.

When they return to their homeland, God is seen in gentler images, as a Shepherd for example: The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.

When they suffered, God was their avenger bringing justice and bringing the lofty low, releasing the captives and bringing justice. When they felt alone, God was “a loving mother who could never forget her nursing child.”

(McLaren, *We Make the Road by Walking*, 57)

We see throughout the stories in the Bible that a single clear picture does not always emerge. There is not a clear definition of “us” or “them” or for that matter “good leaders” and “bad leaders.” For among the “them,” are Moabites who are enemies to be wiped out. And yet there

is the Moabite Ruth, an ancestor of Jesus. And among the “us” are the many kings who repeatedly “do evil in the sight of the Lord.” Even the good kings, like David and Solomon, do evil things—David committing adultery and then compounding that by arranging to have Bathsheba’s husband killed in battle and Solomon, the wisest of Israel’s kings, who took many, many wives from other countries and allowed their conflicting religions and gods to influence him—eventually leading to the dividing of the united kingdom into the Northern and Southern kingdoms, Israel and Judah.

There are often two opposing views in the scriptures on many points.

Last week we looked at the fable about the trees picking a king—which was a cautionary tale intended to caution the tribes not to pick a human, mortal king but keep only God as their king. But other scripture will present King David as a great blessing given to the people by God. Both versions are presented and both have truth—there is power in a strong central government, although there is also cost.

Other contrasts in the biblical record, are animal sacrifices what is required to please God? Much of the biblical record would say yes and goes at great length to describe exactly what is required to prepare and present an acceptable sacrifice. These are the priestly writings, like those found in

Deuteronomy and Leviticus, for example, emphasizing rules and law, traditions and taboos.

Other voices say it is not animal sacrifices that God wants, but justice, and compassion and mercy shown to others.

These are the voices we often hear in the prophetic books, like today's reading from Isaiah.

“Give up your evil ways.

<sup>17</sup>Learn to do good.

Seek justice.

Help the oppressed.

Defend the cause of orphans.

Fight for the rights of widows.”

Another point of contrast is who are the people God loves? Does God love the descendants of Abraham—the chosen people, above and beyond all else? Or is God the God of all creation and all people. There are accounts of both in scripture.

Again, our reading in Isaiah:

People from many nations will come and say,

“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,

to the house of Jacob’s God.

There he will teach us his ways,

and we will walk in his paths.”

This contrast—the idea that scripture holds more than one idea reminds me of a famous fable, One who touched the

tusk says an elephant is a spear, one who touches the leg says a wall, one who touches the ear, a fan, one who touches the tail says an elephant is like a rope, and so one. And they each are certain that they are right and will not allow that someone else might be right. When in fact they are all right, and they are all wrong. But if they were in conversation with each other, they could all be right together.

We see this happen all too often in the church. There is a practice in interpreting scripture that you may hear from time to time, it's called proof-texting. This is using brief sections or passages or even as little as a verse, to prove a

particular point or theological perspective. Sometimes I've heard it called "sound-bite theology."

It's finding the verses that support the conclusion already reached and then essentially going, "ta da!" as if that is the end of the story. But as we discussed last week, there is more to understanding the Bible than simply looking at a verse or two. We also have to look at how the verse fit within the biblical witness as a whole. How does this story or this verse, fit in with the entire story of salvation, as exemplified by the life and teaching of Jesus Christ? Because that is our standard bearer—right? As Christians? The life and teaching of Jesus Christ?

Because Jesus entered into this dialogue between the old and the new, between ritual sacrifices and sacrifices of the heart.

In the story from our gospel reading, Jesus was criticized for hanging out with the wrong kind of people — people labelled “other” and “sinner” and “loser,” people who did not follow the rules and the rituals. They were, in short, the “wrong” kind of people. But Jesus replied, those are the very people I have come for. Those are the people I have come to save, the very ones I am called to heal and to be in ministry to.

We know it can be challenging to mix “insiders” with “outsiders.” In churches, those who are new to faith, new to

grace, and new to the membership in the community, are sometimes distrusted, or their ideas are not listened to, by those who've been around a long time.

The "new wineskins" and "new patch on old garment"

illustrations describe that tension. And in many churches that have a long history, they have a very difficult time welcoming new people and incorporating them into the life of the church. Oh, they are welcome enough to attend worship and give donations, but become part of leadership? Make decisions? Change anything? No. That can be very difficult. That is one of the reasons we are so blessed at Journey, as a new church, we can be more successful at incorporating new people than long-

established churches are. **After all, we haven't all picked** out assigned pews or designated life-long jobs that no one else can do.

My prayer this day is that we keep holding this ministry of ours, and this truth that has been entrusted to us, very lightly, with open hands, and with hearts open to receive new people, new voices in the conversation, to new inspiration from the Spirit to better understand the conversation of faith and to new pictures of grace and calls to engagement. It might mean that our ideas of what ministry is may have to change. Our ideas of what it means to be the church or how we reach people, or what is successful ministry may have to change. **And in all things that we seek out God's**

spirit and God's guidance as we look to be obedient to  
God's call on our lives.