

## **Choices: Reflections on Torture, Violence, and Nonviolence for Lent 2009**

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### **Preface**

Two days after his inauguration, President Obama issued three Executive Orders, sending a strong signal that our nation intends to step back from the practice and policy of torture. This is a cause to give thanks for prayers answered, for the advocacy of Presbyterians on all levels of the denomination, and for the conscientious, persistent work of many faithful people.

Many will believe that the issue is now resolved, but this is not the case—work remains to do. As it is said, the devil is in the details. Numerous details remain. The Executive Orders need to be reinforced by carefully crafted legislation. Closing the Guantanamo prison is a start. We also need to close any and all “black site” prisons currently operating out of sight and outside the law. We must make sure that the practice of extraordinary rendition (sending detainees to other countries with a record of abusive practices) ends as promised. We need to turn off the spigot on torture by enacting one national standard for interrogations within the parameters of the Geneva Conventions.

The 217th General Assembly (2006) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) called for an independent, authoritative investigation to “inquire into whether any official or officer of the United States government bears direct or command responsibility for having ordered or participated in violations of law in the mistreatment of persons detained by the government of the United States at Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib Prison, or elsewhere or in transporting persons into detention in nations with known records of brutality and torture.” Without such an investigation, it is possible that the use of torture will go underground but it will not go away. Sin loves secrecy. As Jesus said, “nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known (Matthew 10:26).” Our denomination has taken a lead in seeking the truth.

These actions to rein in torture will make us more secure, not less as they reassert that we are one nation under law and under God.

Finally, there is an unfinished piece of spiritual business. As citizens and people of faith, we must acknowledge our own complicity in the matter of torture. Lent, the season of repentance and renewal, is a good time to do this. Rabbi Abraham Heschel wrote that a prophet’s role is to remind us that “few are guilty, but many are responsible.”<sup>1</sup> While most of us have not tortured anyone, we are all part of a society that created the systems that have permitted torture. We are a part of a culture that has allowed torture to begin to become the way we do business. Sin is bigger than individual choice; it is embedded in our institutions and our assumptions unless we prayerfully and intentionally, by the grace of God, make other choices.

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<sup>1</sup> Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 16.

## Introduction

Christ claims our allegiance as we seek to follow him. Often this means that his followers must choose between Christ and culture.<sup>2</sup> To choose will put us at odds with either our country or the realm of God.

Followers of Jesus in the United States face such a choice as we consider the policy and practice of torture in our country. Torture, sadly, has been a part of the way governments “do business” since the establishment of the first civilized government. It has been practiced by our government ever since the indigenous people were displaced. But recent years, since 9/11/01 to be exact, have seen a shift in the understanding of torture’s role in our country. It has become a valid topic of discussion; the use of torture has been legitimated, even legalized.<sup>3</sup> People make a case for torture as a “moral” way. “If we can get information that will save others,” the argument goes, “then we must torture.”

When the very form of abuse that Jesus endured has become normalized, Christians must resist the culture. It is a time for the story of Jesus to be “against culture.” We must choose the ways of God’s realm over the ways of our own country. And, as pastors, we must help people understand the urgency of this choice as well as the very real risks. This is not theoretical. This is not just about how we choose to interpret the text. This is serious work with serious demands on our lives.

Violence must be properly placed in the Lenten story of crucifixion. It is the horror, not the means for prophetic fulfillment. It is not the way of Jesus. We must also place ourselves in the story properly. We are not like the religious people who either saw Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecy or protested this vehemently. We are Rome. We are those who choose to torture one person in order to save a country/ideology/world. Jesus posed a threat to the Roman Empire. He offered a new vision with real possibilities for undermining its stated, practiced, embraced ideology. And Rome acted to remove Jesus and the threat his vision posed.

When we place ourselves as citizens of the United States properly in the story, we realize that we have to choose between the ideology of Rome and the vision of Jesus. We have to choose Christ against culture. We have to reject any ethic of the ends justifying the means or any approach that seeks to secure peace through violence.

John Dominic Crossan, in his book *God and Empire*, makes the case that our Scriptures contain a counter-narrative to the dominant, empire-based narrative of the day.<sup>4</sup> He acknowledges the complexity and difficulty of finding that counter-narrative in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures because they often weave together threads of violence and nonviolence in relation to God. Crossan admits the narrative and counter-narrative “often coexist in the same book or even the same chapter.”<sup>5</sup> This presents a fundamental dilemma for us today: do we uncritically worship this

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “Rethinking Church Models Through Scripture,” *Theology Today* (Volume 48, No. 2, July 1991), <http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/jul1991/v48-2-article1.htm> (accessed on February 8, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Jane Mayer, *The Dark Side: The Inside Story of How the War on Terror Turned into a War on American Ideals* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* p. 88.

multifaceted God and thus accept that God sometimes works through violence or do we continue the ages-long tradition of searching for the one, true God who is made known in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection?

I share Crossan's thesis that the Bible "presents the radicality of a just and nonviolent God repeatedly and relentlessly confronting the normalcy of an unjust and violent civilization."<sup>6</sup> It is this relentless narrative of a just, nonviolent God that we must use as the authority for our lives and that as pastors we must tell. This narrative is a counter-narrative to the Empire culture practiced in our country at this time in history. There are multiple witnesses to the identity and activity of God, including witnesses to a violent God. The Bible is not univocal. We must choose which narrative within the text we acknowledge as our authority. Consequently, part of faith, and the *power* of faith, is found in how we choose to tell the story.

The choice of how we tell the Lenten story intertwines with how we understand atonement. It is impossible to preach on the Lenten texts without addressing, either explicitly or implicitly, atonement theology. At the heart of atonement theology for much of Christian history is a glorification, or at least a justification, of violence. The crucifixion is seen as *God's* means justified by the end; or in atonement language, *God's* means to justify our salvation. Left unaddressed, the substitutionary theories of Anselm remain intact and are embedded, whether people are conscious of it or not, in the popular, conventional understanding of why Jesus "had" to die.<sup>7</sup> Such a theology witnesses to a violent God demanding the death of Jesus.

If Jesus is, in any way, a revelation about the nature of God, we must reject this traditional theology. Jesus rejected any ethic that advocated the ends justifying the means. He rejected the idea that he could use power to accomplish even good ends. And of course, in the end, he rejected completely any violent resistance even when his life was at stake. There is no room for a God who uses violence to accomplish even the best of ends. Jesus was not sacrificed for us to be saved any more than we can ethically argue that we justly sacrifice the victim and perpetrator of torture to save ourselves from terrorism.

### **Overview of Lenten Texts**

Each year we read the stories of Lent and Easter and, as preachers, we have to decide where to put our emphasis. Pastors need to choose carefully how to tell the story of Lent and Easter. It is the foundational story of our faith—what "happens" in the days and weeks leading to Jesus' death shapes how we read the gospels, Paul's letters, and other Christian Scriptures. Whatever core message we find in the Lenten texts creates a filter through which we pass every other story we tell of Jesus' life.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p. 94.

<sup>7</sup> Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker have a brilliant book on atonement that deals directly with both the problem of conventional atonement theology and offer a different way of understanding the story of Jesus' death. See *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, Books, 2001).

Are there parts of the story, either in the texts or in the canon of tradition, which we can choose to emphasize that will distract us from the message we need to hear? Specifically, in a time when our country believes in the necessity of war and torture to achieve peace, are there ways we tell the story that merely affirm that belief or can we recapture the radical counter-narrative to peace won through violence?

Crossan suggests that the way to understand all of Lent and the texts therein is to begin at the end—with the Good Friday text. He argues that in John 18, Pilate interprets Jesus to us and identifies the main issue of Jesus' life—violence or nonviolence. Crossan's starting point is Jesus before Pilate saying, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews (John 18:36)." In Pilate's kingdom, when a violent revolutionary is arrested there is an attempt to arrest as many of his followers as possible in order to stop the insurrection.<sup>8</sup> By not arresting Jesus' followers, Pilate assumes that Jesus is a *nonviolent* revolutionary with *nonviolent* followers. In this conversation, we see clearly the difference between the two kingdoms: one chooses to win peace through violence and the other chooses peace through justice and nonviolence.

Each Lenten text can be told through either the narrative of peace and justification through *violence* or peace and justification through *nonviolence*. We can tell the Lenten story through the understanding of a violent God who would demand the death of Jesus or through the understanding of a nonviolent God who brings salvation by offering a way to resist any Empire. That offering is Jesus' life. He shows us a way in this world distinct from that of the Empire. His death is caused by those who refuse to accept God's gift and live in God's realm. But, we affirm at Easter, the death of Jesus does not have the final word. God does not condemn even this act. Instead God offers the radical grace of resurrection.

What follows are preaching helps for the first five Sundays of lent. Each week is cast in terms of a choice we must make about how to tell the story. One is told through the lens of a violent God, the other through the lens of a nonviolent God. The choice is ours.

### **First Sunday of Lent: Mark 1:9—15**

**Choice:** Jesus' life and message is a continuation of John the Baptist's **or** Jesus' life and message eventually diverge from what John believed and taught.

Before Jesus enters the stage in Mark, John was already preaching an alternative to Caesar's kingdom. John's version of the coming of God's realm includes the inbreaking of an avenging God who comes to clean up the mess we have made of the world, thus paving the way for this new kingdom. For John, oppression by Roman power was a punishment for Israel's sins. That sinfulness impeded the promised advent of God. What was needed, therefore, was a great sacrament of repentance: baptism. John believed that "a critical mass of repentant people would prepare for, or

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<sup>8</sup> Crossan fleshes out this point in a comparison between Jesus and Barabbas, a violent revolutionary who had been arrested at the same time.

possibly even hasten, the start of God’s violent coming to judge the world and establish a reign of peace.”<sup>9</sup>

Jesus is baptized by John. This is likely based on an historical event.<sup>10</sup> The baptism of Jesus signals that Jesus was committed to John’s cause—at least at first. However, Jesus’ baptism only begins the story. His relationship to John and John’s ideology must be understood in light of the rest of the story. Jesus proclaims a different understanding of God’s realm and how it would come or, more precisely, had already come to this world.

Jesus taught that God’s realm would not come through violence. Rather Jesus preached that God’s realm was already here and we can choose the realm in which we will reside. Jesus was a revolutionary, like John. And his message was just as radical as John’s. But it was based on salvation won through nonviolence.

### **Second Sunday of Lent: Mark 8:31—38**

**Choice:** Peter understands Jesus’ identity as the Messiah foretold in the Davidic tradition **or** Peter misunderstands Jesus’ identity by believing violence will be a part of how the Messiah establishes a new kingdom.

This text focuses directly on the identity of Jesus and so offers an important opportunity for pastors to suggest who Jesus is in contrast to who we are as participants in the dominant culture. It is also an opportunity to offer an interpretation that can counter the traditional reading where this first passion prediction indicates that the Son of Man must undergo suffering and die in order to fulfill an atonement formula with God as the divine sacrificer.

Peter names Jesus as “Messiah (Mark 8:29).” At first this seems a correct identification. But there is more—what does Messiah mean? In Jewish Messianic tradition and eschatology, Messiah refers to a future King of Israel from the Davidic line, who will rule the people of united tribes of Israel and herald an age of global peace. For some, such as Elijah and John the Baptist, this would happen through violent revolution. For others it would come through nonviolence.

Walter Brueggemann writes of the multiple understandings of God’s actions in this world found in the Hebrew Scriptures. To be sure, prophets like Elijah and Elisha win God’s way in epic, violent battles. But there are also prophets like Micah and Amos who attest that God comes without violence to save God’s people.<sup>11</sup> Crossan says we are to identify Jesus with the prophets who understood the coming of God’s realm not in violent terms, but with nonviolent justice. He writes, “From Amos onwards [after Elijah and Elisha], the biblical prophets worked always on that same dangerous interface between politics and religion and spoke always in the name of God and Torah, justice and equity, but never again did a biblical prophet promote a violent internal revolution as the will and plan of God.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Crossan, p. 112.

<sup>10</sup> Oxford Bible Commentary on Mark.

<sup>11</sup> Walter Brueggemann. *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> Crossan, p. 77.

Based on the eventual rebuke of Peter, it seems Peter misunderstood who Jesus was. One could argue he misunderstood because he did not know that Jesus must suffer and die for our sin. However another reading would be that Peter expected a Messiah in the tradition of the kings and prophets who sought peace through violent revolt and Jesus was distinctly opposed to any such notion—so opposed that he rebuked Peter with very strong words. Jesus then explains his rebuke saying, “You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things (Mark 8:33).” In other words, Peter is choosing the dominant narrative—peace through a violent rise of the Messiah. That, in Jesus’ eyes, is the way of Empire.

Jesus does predict that he will undergo suffering and die and that many religious elites will reject him (Mark 8:31). However these happenings will be the consequences of his life. Revolution of the kind Jesus brings will always be met with vehemence by those in power. Jesus will die because he will never, even to save his own life, choose to respond violently.

It is all too easy to use this passage to glorify the violence Jesus suffers on the cross. It becomes a magnificent conclusion to the life of God’s only Son. He ends up on the cross, suffering what we should suffer for our sin, dying for transgressions we commit.

Approaching the passage through the lens of nonviolence, we see that Jesus suffers because of a choice he makes to save his integrity and his soul by not giving in to the way of violence even at the cost of his “life.” And he invites us to follow him, knowing clearly the risks *and* rewards. After death, life still has the last word.

When we were attacked on September 11, 2001, we needed to restore our sense of security and protect any further loss of life. We turned to violence to do so. What would have been the response of the divine realm? It is a question we rarely ask, which is understandable. It would take incredible effort and risk to resist the temptation of a violent response in the face of indiscriminate violence on the scale we saw that day. The stark truth is also that by choosing the way of nonviolence, we too may suffer and die at the hands of the terrorists. Jesus asks, with his very life, that we choose it anyway.

### **Third Sunday of Lent: John 2:13–22**

**Choice:** Jesus is the new sacrificial lamb **or** Jesus condemns all sacrifice as part of an unjust economic system.

From Jesus’ actions at the Temple, it should be clear that he is not advocating a more economically fair sacrificial system. His concern is not just that those who were selling and changing money were taking advantage of people; he challenges the whole system. He objects to the idea that violence needs to be committed on any level in order to please God.

Violence is found in both the sacrifices and the economic system that grew up around them at the Temple in Jerusalem. The Temple is something David dreamed of and Solomon built. But, as Mark Bredin points out, David provided the wealth for this construction project through plunder and

Solomon employed slave labor to build it. From the very beginning, the Temple was a site of unjust economics.<sup>13</sup>

The sacrificial system was by necessity an economic system. When religion demands sacrifice that creates a demand for things to be sacrificed. Sacrifice involves accounting: payment for sin, offering to God, and restitution. These all assume a balance sheet kept by God. The problem with the sacrificial system is not that the sellers they are charging “too much” or being unfair to the poor. The problem is that the system itself leads to death and sacrifice, and justifies that in God’s name.

God does not require sacrifice. Jesus does not offer himself as a sacrifice once and for all. That would indicate that Jesus provided the necessary payment for our debts on God’s ledger. Jesus was very clear that the Temple should not be a place of trade thus he clearly would not offer to become the object of a trade between God and us. Sacrifice is simply unnecessary—including Jesus’ own sacrifice.

#### **Fourth Sunday of Lent: John 3:14–21**

**Choice:** God loved us so much that he gave his only son and then required him to die as a gift to us so we would not have to perish for our sins **or** God loved us so much that God came in human form as a gift that we squandered.

In the famous verse, “for God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life (John 3:16),” many believe we have the very formula for faith. But we too often forget the context in which John places today’s passage and this verse. The passage immediately follows a conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus where Jesus tries to explain what new life is, and Nicodemus does not understand. Nicodemus is probably a member of the Sanhedrin, a court that decided guilt or innocence. They condemn; Jesus says clearly that *he* did not come to condemn. He questions the rules of the Sanhedrin and asks that they put their trust in a God’s new realm where God does not condemn but offers eternal life.

It is for this that Jesus will be “lifted up (John 3:14).” Lifted up can refer to the cross, but it can also refer to the resurrection. The term refers back to a story of Moses and the Hebrew people during the Exodus. In the wilderness, “Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live (Numbers 21:9).” The corresponding miracle, the cause of God’s glorification in Jesus, is the resurrection.

Finally, we can choose to read, “God gave his only son,” as “God gave Jesus as a sacrifice.” Such a reading sanctions divine violence. We can also choose to read this as “God offered us a gift in the life of Jesus, and we killed him.” But instead of our condemnation of Jesus being judged and condemned by God, Jesus is resurrected and we are offered the “gift” of a new chance to respond differently to Christ.

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<sup>13</sup> Mark R. Bredin, “John’s account of Jesus’ demonstration in the temple: violent or nonviolent?” *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, Summer 2003, [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0LAL/is\\_2\\_33/ai\\_103673630/pg\\_1?tag=content:col1](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0LAL/is_2_33/ai_103673630/pg_1?tag=content:col1) (accessed February 8, 2009).

**Fifth Sunday of Lent: John 12:20—33**

**Choice:** Jesus had to lose his earthly life in order to save ours in heaven **or** this is a decision between having our life in the world of Empire or in God's realm.

Jesus' death should not be glorified, nor is he glorified because of his death. He is glorified because in spite of his impending death, he chooses life by refusing to return violence for violence and by not asking his disciples to fight for him.

When Jesus talks of being lifted up from the earth, it should be read as being lifted from the world of Empire into the realm of God through resurrection. This realm is not heaven or the afterlife. Jesus was resurrected *into* this world as the living Christ, continuing to bring the realm of God near for us to choose. When we are lifted up with Jesus, we lose the life in which we have to sacrifice our soul in order to be protected by the Empire. But we gain our life in Christ (with our souls fully intact) when we remove ourselves from such a system and recognize God as our only authority and only source of protection.

Some understandings of this passage suggest that when Jesus wonders if he should ask God to save him from what was about to happen, he is thinking about asking God to save him from death. I suggest instead that Jesus momentarily contemplates the advantages of participating in the Empire: "Let me fight them violently so I can remain alive and bring about God's peace through the violent defeat of God's enemies." But he realizes that such an approach might save his life, only if he sacrifices his soul. That is the very real, very difficult choice of nonviolence: even to save our lives we cannot resort to violence. To do so would compromise the joy of God's realm for us and the world.

In his choice to maintain his place in the realm of God, Jesus offers the choice to us. He asks us to live nonviolently as he did. This is a terrifying notion because of where it led Jesus, but it is the choice to make for our souls' sake. And the choice of nonviolence will ultimately be more powerful and will drive out those who rule by violence.