

Everyday Sunday, Part 6: Take A Walk
September 2, 2018

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Countryside Community Church

Scripture: Judges 11:1-19, 29-40
Book Excerpt: Chronicles of Narnia, Volume 7

This isn't the sermon I had planned to preach.

Since this weekend is the 12th anniversary of my walk across the country with CrossWalk America and our arrival in Washington, DC, I had planned on preaching about the spiritual practice of walking, drawing examples from this walk. But God interrupted my plans.

Last Wednesday morning, I awakened from an unusually intense dream in which I was preaching this Sunday's sermon, but the walk I was preaching about wasn't the one I took, but a walk taken by the daughter of an ancient Israelite leader named Jephthah (Judges 11). As I was contemplating the significance of this dream, I switched on my radio and heard an interview on NPR that was so deeply troubling that, over the course of the next couple of hours, I actually went to the bathroom three times thinking I would throw up.

I didn't. But I did see a connection between my dream and the NPR story. It convinced the worship team and me to change course and preach on Jephthah's daughter.

Before turning to the stories – the Biblical one and the story on NPR – I'd like to frame this reflection on a happier note. I'd like you to consider one of the most profound passages I've ever read in English literature. It's a passage from Volume 7 of C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*.¹ I read it as a child and it has influenced my thinking about the relationship between Christians and other people of faith ever since.

The story concerns a character named Emeth, a life-long follower of an evil god, Tash, who has a face-to-face encounter with the true God, Aslan. Aslan and Tash

¹ *Chronicles of Narnia*, by C.S. Lewis (New York: Scholastic, 1956/1995), Vol. 7: *The Last Battle*, pp. 187-189.

are metaphors for God and Satan. Here is Emeth's description of his encounter with Aslan, who takes the form of a lion, as he trembles before Aslan expecting to be tossed out of Aslan's realm and condemned:

*But the Glorious One bent down his golden head and touched my forehead with his tongue and said, "Son, thou art welcome [here]." But I said, "Alas, Lord, I am no son of thine but the servant of Tash." He answered, "Child, all the service thou hast done to Tash, I account as service done to me." Then by reasons of my great desire for wisdom and understanding, I overcame my fear and questioned the Glorious One and said, "Lord, is it then true, as [some have] said, that thou and Tash are one?" The Lion growled so that the earth shook (but his wrath was not against me) and said, "It is false. Not because he and I are one, but because we are opposites, I take to me the services which thou hast done to him. For I and he are of such different kinds that **no service which is vile can be done to me, and none which is not vile can be done to him.***

"Therefore if any man swear by Tash and keep his oath for the oath's sake, it is by me that he has truly sworn, though he know it not, and it is I who reward him. And if any man do a cruelty in my name, then though he says the name Aslan, it is Tash whom he serves and by Tash his deed is accepted. Dost thou understand, Child?" ... Then he breathed upon me and took away the trembling from my limbs and caused me to stand upon my feet. And after that, he said not much but that we should meet again, and I must go further up and further in. Then he turned him about in a storm and flurry of gold and was gone suddenly.

*And since then, O Kings and Ladies, I have been wandering to find him and my happiness is so great that it even weakens me like a wound. And this is the marvel of marvels, that **he called me Beloved**, me who am but as a dog ...*

I find this way of conceiving the relationship between good and evil, God and Satan, incredibly helpful – and accurate to my experience of others who do not follow the God I specifically name as the God of Jesus, yet act in ways that suggest they are acting in the spirit of Jesus and his God.

More to the point of this morning's reflection, however, I also find C.S. Lewis' story accurate to my experience of others who make very strong claims to be following the "one true God" yet act in ways that suggest they are following anything but God.

Case in point? Jephthah, the Israelite leader in Judges 11, who made a vow to make a burnt sacrifice out of the first person who stepped out of his house to greet him if he returned victorious from his battle against the Ammonites. Too bad for his daughter!

Jephthah may have believed with all his heart that he was making a vow to Yahweh, the God of Israel. He may have attributed his victory to God's acceptance of his vow. And he – and his daughter – may have followed through on his vow believing that reneging on it would have been against God's will. But Jephthah was flat out wrong. He was wrong to make the vow. He was wrong to believe God had accepted it. He was wrong to follow through on it. And he was absolutely wrong to do all this under the banner of loyalty to the God of Israel.

We know God would never have accepted such a vow because human sacrifice is absolutely anathema throughout Scripture. Of course, reason tells us the same thing. If God truly loves us beyond our wildest imagination, as Jesus reveals and Scripture confirms, then we can expect that God would find human sacrifice to be even more abhorrent than you and I do.

Incidentally, the author of the story apparently does not believe God accepted Jephthah's vow, either. While he does attribute victory in battle to Yahweh, God is completely silent in response to Jephthah's vow and God is completely absent from the story from that time on. God's silence is highly unusual, given the extraordinary nature of the vow and how far out of sync it is with the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures. The author is most likely horrified about Jephthah's vow. Through God's sudden absence, he is trying to show us that, while Jephthah was victorious over the invading Ammonites, Jephthah's vow had nothing to do with it. Likely, the reason this story is included in the Bible at all is to show that horrific acts arise from horrific beliefs about God.

No, Jephthah prayed and vowed to the God of Israel, but his prayer and vow could only have been accepted by one source. Satan.

There, I said it. Satan! Do you believe in the existence of Satan? Jesus did. I do, too. I suspect, however, that Satan is not an evil divine power so much as the collective consciousness of the unredeemed part of the human heart. In other words, *Satan is us* – at least that part of humanity that collectively turns its back on God.

For liberal Christians, Satan is about as far away from their thoughts as the North Pole is from the South Pole. This neglect isn't all bad since talk of Satan tends to raise fear and fear is the very mode through which Satan gains power. However, failing to take account of Satan's power is like failing to take account of an army that is in the process of invading your country.

Whenever human beings are united by the unredeemed part of our consciousness, horrible – and horribly powerful – things result. Like the extermination of Rohingya Muslims by the Buddhist government of Myanmar. Or the terrorism embraced by radical, fundamentalist sects within Islam such as Al-Qaeda or ISIS. They serve Satan, not God. Or, to put it another way, they serve the collective unredeemed part of the human heart, which we call Satan to indicate that the power is real, intelligent, and far greater than that of any individual or group.

Lest we think that the problem of Satan is limited to ancient Jewish leaders, or Buddhists or Muslims, let us remember that the Holocaust took place in a country that was 95% Christian. Shockingly, the theological grounds on which these Christians acted is still very much affirmed today by many Christians. While many factors led to the Holocaust that have little or nothing to do with theology, the theological ground upon which Nazi "Christians" acted was the belief that there is only one true faith – Christianity – and all other faiths are demonic and leading their adherents to hell. Why Christianity as a whole hasn't rejected this belief in light of the horrors it logically leads people to commit is proof that Satan is just as alive and well within Christianity as Satan is in any human collective.

Which brings me to the NPR story on Wednesday morning.

On Wednesday, NPR ran an interview between Morning Edition's Rachel Martin, and Rev. Robert Jeffress, pastor of First Baptist Dallas, one of the largest Southern Baptist mega-churches in the country. Jeffress had just attended a State Dinner that was held not for political leaders, as is normally the case, but for conservative evangelical leaders who remain enormously enthusiastic in their support of the president, regardless of his propensity to commit acts that evangelical Christians spend much of their time preaching against.

I encourage you to go online and either read or listen to the 5 minute interview here, <https://tinyurl.com/y8bdvcs4>, because Jeffress made many offensive statements that go beyond the scope of this reflection. The one statement I want

to highlight – the one that sent me to the bathroom three times because my stomach was convulsing – was this one:

Martin asked Jeffress: "In the past, you have called Islam and the Mormon faith heresies – and I'm quoting now – 'from the pit of hell.' You have said Judaism and Hinduism lead people to hell. You have a unique position now as someone who has a close, personal friendship with the president, the ear of the president of the United States. Is it your goal to recast America as a Christian-led nation?"

Jeffress responded: "Look. The most historic claim of Christianity, the bedrock belief, is that Jesus Christ is the only way to heaven. So that is not a headline-making belief that Christians believe that faith in Christ is the only way to heaven. And as far as Mormonism, it is a theological cult. The Southern Baptist Convention has called it a cult and listed it that way. It's not a part of historic Christianity. Islam is a false religion. I do not back away from saying it is a false religion. Faith in Christ is the only way to be saved."

Let me be clear here: What I am NOT saying is that everyone who believes in eternal damnation is a follower of Satan. What I AM saying is that C.S. Lewis was right: that satanic impulses drive *any* action that hurts people. This is true whether you are a conservative Christian or a liberal one. One of the ways that this satanic impulse hurts huge numbers of people is through trying to force people, through fear of eternal torture, to become Christians. Another is through denying the legitimacy of any faith but Christianity. This belief leads inevitably to certain Christians trying to seize control of the political system in order to impose their faith in a torturing god upon everyone else. Sometimes it even leads to efforts to eliminate "non-believers." This is what causes Christians to commit genocide against Jews, and Muslims to commit acts of terrorism against "unbelievers."

Of course, Jeffress is correct that his beliefs are not headline-making news. But what is headline-making news – and what turned my stomach in knots – is the fact that people who take this satanic belief *most* seriously, who are *most* aggressive about spreading this satanic belief throughout our country and world – were treated to a State Dinner.

I doubt there's a single religious leader who attended that State Dinner who does not believe they were there because God put them there – put them there to carry out God's agenda through political means. And with this president – as any

other – you don't receive his support without something being asked in return – some act of loyalty.

Vows have been made. Bargains have been struck with leaders who seek to convert the world to a god who will throw anyone into hell who doesn't believe the way they do.

After hearing the interview with Jeffress, I realized why my dream seemed to be nudging me to preach on Jephthah's daughter this morning rather than the passage I'd planned. It's because we share a lot in common with Jephthah's daughter right now. Just as Jephthah's daughter was allowed to take a walk in the mountains with her friends before being offered as a human sacrifice, so we are all walking down a path that will result in a great deal of pain and suffering if we keep walking it.

I'm not talking about the path of the Republican party. This is not the path of the Bushes, Ronald Reagan, or even Donald Trump, whom I doubt gives a fig about these religious leaders' actual beliefs. This is a path where the political establishment joins leaders who deeply embrace a satanic element within their faith, making bargains with each other to serve their mutual interests. Making bargains that these religious leaders strongly believe will move their agenda for the world forward.

Like Jephthah's daughter, we can simply accept what these religious leaders are trying to do and walk down the path they are putting before us. Or, we can choose to get off this path and follow a different one.

Of course, many Christians have already decided that they don't want to walk down the path of these religious leaders. The path that has been created in the name of the so-called "Christian" god is so repugnant that many Christians have chosen to get off the path of Christianity itself. In any form. They're done! Perhaps you struggle with this temptation yourself. If you do, then I hope you will hear one word of sincere caution:

Leaving the Christian fold is exactly what these religious – and political – leaders want you to do. Then, the only "Christian" voice will be theirs. They know that this is when they can roll out their agenda unimpeded by effective resistance.

Many in our day are tempted to compare what is happening here to Nazi Germany. I'm not ready to go this far. But what I do believe is that when enough

Christians who believe in a God who loves ALL people beyond their wildest imagination *stay silent* at such a time as this, or *leave the fold entirely*, this is exactly what will pave the way for future leaders to take things much further than our president has taken them.

This is the time. This is the moment when you and I are challenged to ask serious questions about our faith, and our commitment to the God of Jesus. Do you worship a God who sits on the sidelines while a demonic theological system merges with a political one and creates victims out of innocent children? Do you worship a God who had been happy for you to be Christian when it was convenient for you, but now thinks it really doesn't matter?

Not me.

I believe in a God who birthed you into this particular world, at this particular time and place for a reason. I believe in a God who is calling you and me to counter FEAR with LOVE, and HATE with GRACE, and to do so strongly and unapologetically in Jesus' name.

As much as we'd love the Buddhists to solve our Christian issues, or the Jews to do it, or the Muslims, Jains, Sikhs or Taoists, or atheists, those who are in the best position to pull the weed of hellfire off at its root and finally move our faith in the direction of Jesus are those who joyfully and powerfully offer LOVE and GRACE in the name of Jesus and keep doing so until Christianity finally moves beyond its error and those who are effectively "Jephthah's daughters" can live at home safely and become all that God wants them to be.

Which path do *you* choose to walk?