

I meet lots of interesting people and have some fascinating conversations when I sit in our coffee shop ministry CrossRoads Café during the week. For example, a few months ago, a gentleman came in to purchase a cup of coffee. As he waited for his coffee to be prepared, he turned around and looked at me, sitting at a table, enjoying my own coffee and working on something. I smiled and nodded. He leaned back against the counter and gave me a look like he was sizing me up. I noticed him glance over his shoulder at my picture on the wall identifying me as your rector. Then he started talking at me.

I say it that way because up until this point he hadn't introduced himself to me, he didn't bother to come over and ask if I had time to talk, he just stood at the counter and began speaking. He first confirmed that I am indeed the rector of this parish, asked who the Good Shepherd is we named our parish for. I explained the name is a reference for Jesus, a name Jesus gave himself that comes from the prophetic scriptures of the Old Testament. Then he said something I suspected might be what you could call a "loaded statement." He said, "The Old Testament is full of violence." And his tone that wasn't casual, it was confrontational. In that moment I knew I had lots of choices how to respond. I could be argumentative, I could be curious, I could lecture or preach. It was a salt and light opportunity, and I felt some pressure to get it "right".

Whether it was right or wrong, I responded by saying, "I hear a lot people say stuff like that. But as someone who has read the Old Testament many times, studied it in classes, and even read parts of it in its original language, I have to say it has a lot more in it than just violence. It has promises, life, forgiveness, blessings, healing, strong women leaders, men who beg God for forgiveness, all kinds of things." My response caught the man off guard; I must have said something he wasn't expecting. He then took and paid for his coffee, sat down at my table across from me and introduced himself. We continued our conversation and he admitted he had never actually read either the Old or New Testaments, even though he claimed he was raised in a church. His comment on the Old Testament, it turned out, was about his person pain.

This has been a conversation I've frequently thought about, as I often hear people from all walks of life refer to the Old Testament negatively. Only a few weeks ago I was watching a BBC television entertainment talk show and one of the actors on the show referenced the Old Testament as being about punishment and violence, and

another guest on the show, a Jewish woman who is also an actor, corrected her by saying for our Jewish siblings the Old Testament isn't old, it's their only testament, their religious book of God's promise, covenant, commitment to them, and love. It was lovely to watch this exchange because it wasn't harsh or combative. It was honest.

These two exchanges remind me of the common assumptions we human beings make about all manner of things, but especially the Bible, that can sometimes unintentionally cause harm. Pastor and speaker Adam Hamilton has written a book about this called *Half Truths* where he explores how some of the things we believe are in the Bible actually aren't – especially the things that support personal bias and prejudices or put the blame on God for our miseries. Hamilton argues in his book that these common assumptions can end up harming our relationship with God and our neighbors instead of being the stuff of salt and light Jesus talked about in today's Gospel, and cause breaches between people and God instead of repairing those breaches like we heard in today's Old Testament lesson from the prophet Isaiah.

Today's Gospel is just a small part of Jesus' very long Sermon on the Mountain in Matthew's Gospel. Because of its length, the people who decide our Sunday lectionary, broke it down into smaller parts. The section we just heard this morning comes immediately after the part of the Sermon called the Beatitudes, where Jesus proclaimed the poor, those who grieve, the meek, and persecuted are blessed. Although the beatitudes have become one of the most beloved pieces of scripture for followers of Jesus, at the time it was radical, because what Jesus proclaimed went against the common assumption of the time that God's blessing, or God's favor, was evidenced in things like wealth, good health, long life, and many possessions especially land and livestock, and those who were suffering were cursed or not in favor with God. When Jesus proclaimed the opposite, there surely must have been some gasps in the crowd, as Jesus might be understood as contradicting scriptures, which is where we pick up the Gospel this morning.

After his radical proclamation, Jesus' words to his audience are a sort of explanation and a reminder of what the law and prophets really were about and what that meant for the people of God. God's people, those listening to Jesus that day, were meant to be salt – a powerful substance in the ancient world. Used for everything from healing to preservation of meats and fish to payment for work, to religious rituals. According to the second chapter in Leviticus, one of the books in the Old Testament, salt was to be given as an offering to God because due to its ability to preserve meat, salt had come to symbolize the eternal covenant between God and God's People. The interpretation here is salt was seen as being part of giving life, much like God gave life back in the beginning.

When Jesus said people were to be salt, he was both bringing up something from the scriptures and explaining the expectation that people were supposed to live their faith by participating in the covenant, the promised agreement between the people of Israel and God. The people with God are to be life-givers, healers, restorers like salt.

The same is true when Jesus said people were to be light. The purpose of light isn't just to shine. The purpose of light is to let things be seen as they are. Therefore, the People of God are to let everyone see the places in need of repair, the places where God is present, and let the people of the world know God is at work through God's People. That is what was at the heart of the law; and the prophets were the people who throughout the ages had tried to remind God's people of their promise to God and their purpose in keeping their promise, and God's promise to always be with them.

That is why Jesus' next words were about why he had not come to abolish the law or the prophets, but to fulfill them. I wonder if there is an assumption this means Jesus negated everything that came before him, and we don't have to give much attention to the Old Testament because we follow Jesus. Fulfillment doesn't mean all that came before is now irrelevant, it means Jesus confirms the law and prophets, so that as followers of Jesus' we continue to respect them through the lens of Christ. Indeed, if we want to follow Jesus, if we want to gain a deeper understanding of who he is why he came, we need to turn to the Old Testament.

So, we're not off the hook when it comes to reading and studying the Old Testament, which is not one very long book full of violence. It is a collection of many different books written at different times in different contexts by different people. We get one reading from the Old Testament and one or part of one psalm in our Sunday services, as well as Morning and Evening Prayer services, so the Old Testament is still very much a part of our faith even as followers of Jesus. Each book in the Old Testament still has value, and if we were to read them, we'd probably see more than what we assume is already there; we'd see complex situations that might challenge our assumptions. Like violence. Yes, there is violence in the Old Testament. But not all of it is from God or even condoned by God. The first act of violence committed in the Bible was by a man named Cain who brutally murdered his brother Abel. But there is more to the story. When the murder happened, God knew it instantly because according to the book Genesis, the very earth cried out in anguish when Abel's blood was spilled. That's how connected God is to the earth, God felt the suffering of the earth and its people caused by humanity committing an act of violence and God felt that pain all the way in God's core. That's pretty powerful. That can make us think about the ways we treat the earth and each other.

After that happened, God acted. I'm sure you are familiar with term "the mark of Cain" that God placed on Cain after God banished him as the consequences of his actions. Like many people, I once assumed this mark was a curse, because that is how I had heard it used. So, I was surprised when I first read the story for myself and discovered it was the opposite. The mark God gave Cain was a blessing and a protection, an intention that no harm would come to him. It was an act of mercy. Not a curse. And yet the term "mark of Cain" has been used with the common assumption God did not love someone. The term has even been used to justify slavery and racism. Which is an example of the terrible and unjustifiable harm that can be done by common assumptions of what the Bible says instead of looking at what the Bible says and wrestling with the complexity of what is written in the Bible.

Perhaps that is what Jesus himself was addressing in today's Gospel, the common assumptions that can keep us from God and each other. Which is why Jesus came: to fulfill the law and the prophets, and in so doing repair the breach between God and people, so that we can live what Jesus showed in his life: loving the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and loving our neighbors as ourselves. To live this way isn't new. It's the fulfillment of Jesus' ministry that all God's People are to be the stuff of healing and repair and shine with God's love that can shed light on those common assumptions that can drive people from God instead of offering healing and restoration to God's love so we can all grow deeper in love with God and each other. Sometimes it happens.

Sometimes salt and light can show up in a coffee shop, maybe even our own coffee shop in a church on hill. Where the gentleman I mentioned still comes to get coffee and before he leaves, he stops in the chapel for a moment of his own with the light of a candle and the peace of Christ.