

Confronting Scripture, Fighting Injustice

Luke Bushman, May 5th 2024. How Scripture Can Harm and Heal. Based on *Acts 10:44-48*, *Inspired* by Rachel Held Evans, and *Highway of Tears...* by Jessica McDiarmid

Good morning. I typically have a knack for keeping my sermons brief and concise, but today I had a hard time doing that, so my apologies that it might be longer than usual, but that's what most people have to endure on a Sunday morning so I don't feel too bad. That said, we might talk a while, and some of the topics are a bit sensitive, so if you need to remove yourself to stretch your legs or clear your head, I won't be bothered, I understand. Today we are talking about Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls, as well as 2 Spirit people. This day is about learning more about the violence that afflicts too many people in this country, particularly if they are an Indigenous Woman. Since we are at church, I want to focus a bit on how abuse of scripture has played a role in the violence against Indigenous women. I think our Acts 10 passage today gives us some permission when it comes to changing how we understand scripture. Because thankfully, we try to not interpret scripture the same way as people who have used it for harm. This isn't to bash the Bible at all though.

I love the Bible. That might not be a terribly shocking statement considering I spent four years and a lot of money to get a degree in Biblical Studies, but when I say I love the Bible it is a relationship that has evolved and changed over the years. I got my first "adult" Bible in the 2nd grade, and I read it quite a lot for someone that age. What drove me to read this strange and at times boring book, far above my reading and comprehension level? Probably a lot of things. I thought it was what I was supposed to do. I think I wanted to feel smart at church and know my Bible really well. It was sometimes almost an act of showing off. I thought maybe the Bible would make everything better when I was having a hard time at school.

I was joking with the Executive Council a while back that I had "unsupervised access to the Bible". We laughed but there is something very true

about that. The Bible has a lot of gory, troubling and strange things in it, and as a kid I just found them interesting. My favourite passage was 2 Samuel 23, where it talks about David's mighty men. They are talked about like superheroes killing off enemies, and I used to pick my favourite one as if they were comic book characters. I remember thinking "If I have kids I am going to name one Adonijah, because he was really really fast". He also died a horrific death but that is besides the point.

As I got older though, some of what used to be interesting stories began to trouble me. I was past just being entranced by the stories as they came alive in my imagination. I knew the book well from being interested in it, but when it was supposed to guide my beliefs and actions I felt it came up short. Why did God tell Israel to kill all of those Canaanites? I was told not to be violent, and yet God seemed very violent. Why were women supposed to be quiet and submissive? I had lots of well spoken and bold women around me in my childhood, why couldn't they preach in church according to the Bible? What was so wrong with being gay that so many Biblical authors felt the need to talk about it? I didn't know any openly gay people at the time, but they seemed nice enough to me. These were all questions that I found myself asking in my formative years.

Eventually people had answers to all of my questions. I felt an initial sense of relief that there were simple answers to my questions. As I got older, as I thought more, even those answers didn't feel complete to me. It was at this point that I felt annoyed at the Bible, like it had taken so much of my time, and for what? I knew it backwards and forwards, and wrote tons of what I thought were interesting papers on it, and yet it became harder and harder to tie a bow on the passages, and go to sleep with a comforting VeggieTales-Esque moral of the story. As I learned more of the history of how these books came together, and how the Bible was used to justify nasty actions in history, I wanted even more distance from a book that was so special in the past.

I recently listened to Rachel Held Evans book “*Inspired*”, and found comfort in the similarities between our stories with the Bible. In it she has a great paragraph that sums up how complicated the Bible is, and how it is used in different ways, and at times, harmful ways. **SLIDE CLICK**

If you are looking for Bible verses with which to support slavery, you will find them. If you are looking for verses with which to abolish slavery, you will find them. If you are looking for verses with which to oppress women, you will find them. If you are looking for verses with which to honour and celebrate women, you will find them. If you are looking for reasons to wage war, there are plenty. If you are looking for reasons to promote peace, there are plenty more. If you are looking for an outdated and irrelevant ancient text, that’s exactly what you will see. **SLIDE CLICK**

If you are looking for truth, that’s exactly what you will find. ... If you want to do violence in this world, you will always find the weapons. If you want to heal, you will always find the balm. With Scripture, we’ve been entrusted with some of the most powerful stories ever told. How we harness that power, whether for good or evil, oppression or liberation, changes everything.”

— *Rachel Held Evans, Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again*

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When we consider Rachel Held Evans’ quote about how the Bible can easily be used for harm, or for good, I cannot help but think about how interpretations of scripture have fueled attitudes and ideas that have harmed Indigenous women, girls and 2 Spirit people. The Doctrine of Discovery, the assimilation of Indigenous peoples, and residential schools were all justified in many circles using scripture. Under the guise of “missionary work” and “evangelising”, ideas of settler superiority and misogyny were allowed to thrive. A

memorandum of the Convention of Catholic Principals in 1924 said this about their mission in regards to residential schools: **SLIDE CLICK**

“All true civilization must be based on moral law, which Christian religion alone can give. Pagan superstition could not suffice . . . to make the Indians practise the virtues of our civilization and avoid its attendant vices. Several people have desired us to countenance the dances of the Indians and to observe their festivals; but their habits, being the result of free and easy mode of life, cannot conform to the intense struggle for life which our social conditions require.” (Facing History & Ourselves)

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People found ways of supporting these ideas with scripture. These ideas had very long lasting repercussions. Life is connected, and every atrocity has long term consequences. The colonisation of Canada stripped power and autonomy from Indigenous peoples. Leaving them vulnerable to the whims of a government that mandated they attend residential schools. Residential schools traumatised those who were forced into the system. Doctor Gabor Mate' talks extensively about how trauma is directly linked to addiction and poverty, two things that many survivors of residential schools are faced with. The stealing of land and culture stripped people of resources to fall back upon as they navigated these issues after leaving residential schools. This horrible mixture of identity loss, land loss, trauma, addiction, and poverty has left Indigenous women, girls, and 2 Spirit people incredibly vulnerable. We have not done a good job of protecting this vulnerable people group. **SLIDE CLICK**

In preparation for this sermon, I listened to the book *Highway of Tears* to learn more about the stories of Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls. The book documents several biographies of Indigenous women who have gone missing along the 719 kilometre stretch of highway from Prince Rupert to Prince George in northern British Columbia. Researchers have attributed the

horrible crimes to a variety of factors, with many of these factors also being part of the aftermath of the residential school system. Poverty for example, decreases the amount of car ownership in the area, and with a lack of public transportation, people commonly have to resort to hitchhiking- a very dangerous means of travel.

I have heard different statistics regarding Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls many times, but often statistics can create an emotional shut off for me. I cannot fathom the heartbreak, and the numbers often create a numb or dissociative response. Listening to the stories of the many who were taken or killed on *The Highway of Tears* was a far more personal experience. The author of this book, Jessica McDiarmid, tells the stories of several of these women who have gone missing or been murdered. She does not just talk about their disappearance, or the heartbreaking aftermath- she tells their life stories. She writes about their joys, their personalities, what they were like with their families, and what their friends had to say about them. A common theme throughout these stories is the victim's families feeling like their loved one's lifestyles were blamed for their disappearance. It seemed the world was often dismissive of their concerns, typecasting the victims as hitchhikers and sex workers. Many of them were neither, and regardless, all people are worthy of our concern. Many families also noted that they felt their loved ones were not looked at as seriously because they were Indigenous. There were almost identical cases where white women went missing, and those stories received national, or even international coverage. It was hard to hear these stories. Darvin Haugan who was interviewed for the book after his daughter Lana Derrick went missing in October of 1995, brought up the inability to stop thinking about his missing daughter, as he obsessively looked for answers in each moment of the day. He said **SLIDE CLICK**

“The way families hammer at that stuff in our brains when they don't have any answers. Otherwise banal occurrences take on new frightening

significance. Sitting at the kitchen table, hearing a cougar scream off in the distance. Is that her? Out there? Needing help? The man who lived nearby, who was always a bit of a weird fellow, was it him? A piece of women's clothing lying in the bush where Darwin was working. Was it hers? A girl calling out 'Mom' in the mall, was it Lana?"

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I cannot imagine having to live a life the way Darwin has been forced to live life. To constantly be thinking and hoping, while also mourning, sounds horrible. His words stuck with me as I imagined what it would be like to not only lose a loved one, but to also always be wondering.

The statistics that outline how big this problem is are shocking, and discouraging. There are many to look at and examine, I will share just a few this morning to help us understand how Indigenous women are at a disproportionate risk of violence and death. These statistics come from the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC). **SLIDE CLICK**

- Between 1997 and 2000, homicide rates of Aboriginal females were almost seven times higher than those of non-Aboriginal females.
- Aboriginal women 15 years and older are 3.5 times more likely to experience violence than non-Aboriginal women.
- NWAC's research indicates that homicides involving Aboriginal women are more likely to go unsolved. Only 53% of murder cases in NWAC's Sisters In Spirit database have been solved, compared to 84% of all murder cases across the country.

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These statistics, and stories are horrible and heartbreaking. Anything shared here is just scratching the surface, as I cannot begin to comprehend the horror of watching one's community suffer in this way. I think it is clear that justice is needed, and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls need to be heard and taken seriously. There is a lot of practical, institutional, nationwide work that needs to be done. There are 231 calls for justice, published in the final report by The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. These

calls range from providing affordable transportation, to more education resources so that people are educated about these issues.

In addition to these practical calls, I think it is important to look deeply and earnestly at how scripture interpretations have been used to harm people. We need to pause sometimes and ask “How did they get that hurtful idea from scripture”, so that we can avoid doing the same thing in the future.

There are a lot of parts of the Bible that I don't believe can be explained away, or spun in a positive way. I don't think there is a world where killing is right, and I don't feel the need to convince someone that what Israel did to the Canaanites was right, just because the Bible says so. That would go against my personal convictions, and my belief that God is full of love. That kind of thinking has been used to hurt others throughout history. Sometimes we look at these scriptures in a very abstract way, as their application feels removed from our world.

Rachel Held Evans says this of her time of beginning to question the war stories in the Bible.

When I turned to pastors and professors for help, they urged me to set aside my objections, to simply trust that God is good and that the Bible's war stories happened as told, for reasons beyond my comprehension.

“God's ways are higher than our ways,” they insisted. “Stop trying to know the mind of God.”

It's an understandable approach. Human beings are finite and fallible, prone to self-delusion and sentimentality. If we rely exclusively on our feelings to guide us to truth, we are bound to get lost.

But this response doesn't work. We cannot remove ourselves from scriptures' big questions and expect it to not affect us in some way. Rachel Held Evans points out how detrimental this can be to our view of humanity.

If the slaughter of Canaanite children elicits only a shrug, then why not the slaughter of Pequots? Of Syrians? Of Jews? If we train ourselves not to ask hard questions about the Bible, and to emotionally distance ourselves from any potential conflicts or doubts, then where will we find the courage to challenge interpretations that justify injustice? How will we know when we've got it wrong?

What is stopping us from shrugging our shoulders at the genocide of Indigenous Women? Sometimes we need a shift in thinking from our old understanding to a new one, in order to love our neighbour. Sometimes that can be scary. It is what we are called to do, otherwise we will find ourselves standing complicit, holding our Bibles, when we should be holding our suffering neighbours.

That brings us to our passage in Acts today. Peter finds himself at a pivotal moment in our faith tradition. A moment where his faith and understanding evolve, which sets off a much larger evolution of what it meant to follow God. Based on the scriptures Peter grew up reading, and the interpretations he grew up hearing, he believed that it was unclean for him to enter the house of a Gentile. These teachings would have greatly affected Peter, and more importantly the Gentiles around him. Peter likely would have viewed the Gentiles as "less than". That is what happens when you ostracise, and generalise an entire group of people. People get hurt. God here called Peter to not focus on acting within a framework of scripture, and instead, act within a framework of love and meeting others where they were at. Because that is the essence of scripture. This monumental moment in Christian history changed a lot of things. But that change did not mean things immediately became perfect for the Gentiles. When something changes in theory, or in thought, it still takes a long time for things to change in reality.

When Christians began denouncing the Doctrine of Discovery, Residential Schools, and acknowledging the harm done by missionaries of the faith, that was an important shift in thinking. That is step one. We might feel that condemning

these things is old news, but to put it in perspective, the Doctrine of Discovery was only formally denounced by the Catholic Church in 2023. Those realities and attitudes will take a much longer time to dismantle. Indigenous Women, Girls, and 2 Spirit People will continue to be negatively impacted, as these ideas and systems have been entrenched in Canadian life since Canada was colonised. That takes time to undo, and that takes a lot of work, beyond just changing what we say and what we believe. We need to be intentional about listening and moving forward. I think we are hopefully now in the stage where our beliefs and our hearts are now in the right place.

Now we have to do the long hard work of undoing past harms. Being an example to hopefully model a future where Indigenous Women and Girls are not significantly more at risk of violence. I think education is always a good start. I would encourage you to take some time this week to learn more about the disproportionate violence Indigenous Women, Girls and 2 Spirit people face. Common Word has some recommendations about resources to learn more, and there are countless Indigenous writers and publications that are doing great work in the hard work of bringing these issues to the forefront of Canadian discourse. I am sure there are people in this congregation who have done far more study on this than I have, and who probably know some good resources. In addition to education, we can also participate in contemplation. Think about any existing biases we might have, or think about how our application of scripture could be hurtful to others. Think about any negative assumptions of old, and ponder how we got there. I look back at my beliefs and thoughts ten years ago, and although I was well intentioned, I was misguided, ill informed and I had blind spots. Also in contemplation, look at the scriptures for encouragement for seeking love and justice. While it has been misused, the Bible can also inspire us to make changes in our world. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, get involved. Whether that is giving to organisations who are seeking justice, writing to your politicians, or helping out with programs and fundraisers.

I hope that we can be like Peter. That we can choose love, inclusion and change even when it is scary. I hope we can be realistic about how our scriptures have been abused and hurt others. I hope we can be sympathetic to that when we talk to our Indigenous friends about our faith. I hope the Bible can still enchant us and inspire us. I hope we can be agents of change in our world, and an example of seeking justice. May we honour the Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls, by hoping for justice, and working alongside others for justice.

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