

Understanding our faith
1

The peace vision of the Old Testament

Reading

Genesis 12:1-3; Exodus 1:1-15:21, 20:1-21; Jeremiah 8:18-9:2; Jonah 1:1-4:11; Psalm 46:1-11

Teaching

What is the main point of the Old Testament story?

The Old Testament deals with the intersection of faith with everyday life—wars and rumors of wars, people in communities and families trying to live together, parents and children, friends and neighbors and enemies, joy and sorrow, fear and courage, love and hate.

The Old Testament writers understand their experiences in terms of faith. We too strive to understand our lives in the light of our faith. We share with the biblical writers the same earth, the same ongoing story. They have much to teach us.

The Old Testament story is sad—the rise and fall of the ancient Israelite state, the building of a little empire and its destruction, the construction of the great temple and seeing it reduced to rubble. The actual political history is one of failure, broken dreams, pain, and even despair. However, in the midst of that brokenness come words of hope, words of assurance, awareness of God’s mercy and love. God was not contained in the temple. God was not inextricably identified with the king and with the nation state. When the temple fell, when kingship fell, when the nation-state fell, God remained. And God remained merciful and

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loving. God promised a future, structured a new way, centered on little expressions of faithfulness and trust, rather than on nation-states and power politics.

The deepest, underlying point to the whole story is God’s mercy and love. God’s creation of *all* things is an act of love. God’s calling of Abraham to be the father of a people serving as a light to the nations is an act of love. God freeing the enslaved Hebrews from Egypt to new life is an act of mercy. God’s giving of the law to structure the Hebrews’ life is an act of love. God staying present amidst corrupt kingship and empire as a way of life, often through the prophets, is an act of mercy. God being with the people in grief and promise and as a healing presence amidst exile is an act of mercy. God’s prodding through the post-exilic story of Jonah to remain open to all peoples and not to be self-centered and proud is an act of mercy. God’s call through Daniel during the Maccabean revolt patiently to await God’s kingdom, neither accommodating with corrupt empires nor impatiently trying violently to overthrow them, is an act of mercy.

The story concludes, in Daniel in the Old Testament, with a call for people of faith to find peace through patience. Live faithfully, live mercifully, accept that you don’t control history. Be patient, trusting that your finding little ways to be at peace, your refusal to bow to false gods of warfare and exploitation of others—this is part of God’s continuing works of creative mercy. Aligning ourselves with that *is* the peaceable way.