

In the Hands of the Prophets
United Church of Broomfield
May 15, 2021

Psalm 1 NRSVue

¹Happy are those
who do not follow the advice of the wicked
or take the path that sinners tread
or sit in the seat of scoffers,

²but their delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law they meditate day and night.

³They are like trees
planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.

⁴The wicked are not so
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

⁵Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous,

⁶for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.

We continue our journey through time and space with our spring study and preaching series, Trekking through the Bible. Today, our inspiration comes from the series Deep Space Nine. It was the fourth series in the Star Trek franchise and aired from 1993 to 1999. Set in the 24th century, when Earth is part of a United Federation of Planets, its narrative is centered on the eponymous space station Deep Space Nine, located near a planet named Bajor and adjacent to a wormhole. For clarification – a wormhole is a [speculative] structure linking disparate points in [spacetime](#). Theoretically a wormhole might connect extremely long distances such as a billion light years, or short distances such as a few meters, or different points in time, or even different universes.

As far as Deep Space 9 is concerned, the wormhole connects Federation territory to the Gamma Quadrant on the far side of the Milky Way galaxy. The space station, DS9, is jointly administered by Starfleet crew and Bajorans.

So, without further ado...

Stardate: 46951.7

Keiko O'Brien is a botanist and schoolteacher on DS9. In this episode, she is teaching her class about the science of the Bajoran wormhole and the aliens that live inside it. Her scientific instruction and view is different from the religious approach taken by the Bajorans, who believe the wormhole is the legendary Celestial Temple inhabited by their "Prophets", whom they worship as gods.

Her class is interrupted by one of Bajor's spiritual leaders, Vedek (Bishop) Winn, who is quite orthodox in her beliefs and rigid in her teachings and practice. Winn questions why Keiko doesn't teach Bajoran religion in her classroom, to which Keiko says it's her job to teach science, history, mathematics, and literature - it's Winn's job to teach Bajoran spiritual beliefs. Winn responds by denouncing Keiko's position as blasphemous and declaring that it can't be allowed to continue. Afterwards, Keiko reports the incident to the Commander of the Space station, Sisko. When Sisko asks Winn about the dispute, she says there may be consequences if Keiko refuses to teach the religious truths of Bajor's Prophets.

Meanwhile, Miles O'Brien, Keiko's husband and Chief of Operations, and Neela, his Bajoran assistant discover the remains of a Starfleet crew member. Later investigations will confirm that the remains are of a missing crew member, Ensign Aquino, and that he was in fact murdered.

Winn's message has been spreading throughout the station. Bajoran vendors refuse to sell items to Starfleet members and Sisko's Bajoran first officer, Major Kira Nerys, is struggling in her position, as she sees Winn as a very devout cleric. Winn has gotten all the Bajoran parents to pull their children out of school. With the threat of the classroom being emptied of all but five students, Winn suggests what she calls, "a compromise": Keiko doesn't have to teach their spiritual beliefs...she just has to stop teaching about the Wormhole (and anything else that contradicts Bajoran scripture). Keiko refuses, saying that her job is teaching information, not hiding it. And so, the Bajoran parents take their kids away, leaving only the human children.

While this is going on, Commander Sisko seeks some advice on the planet Bajor by visiting Vedek Bareil, a more progressive Bajoran Cleric challenging Winn's orthodox sect and currently leading the race for Kai (Pope), the leader of the Bajoran religion. Bareil wants to help, but he knows politics. He knows supporting Sisko at this time could sink his chances for becoming Kai and make it easier for Winn to become Kai. He says he'd love to help... if he becomes Kai.

Later, a massive explosion rocks the promenade on DS9. The thankfully empty school is the source of the explosion has gone up in flames. With the incident, Vedek Winn tries rallying the Bajoran residents against Sisko, but Sisko shuts her down hard.

Sisko: You claim the Prophets as your personal constituency...who DO you speak for...?

Winn: You are not simply misguided as I once thought. Now, I see you want nothing less than to destroy us. ... You live without a soul commander. You and your federation exist in a universe of darkness, and you would drag us in there with you. But we will not go.

Sisko: The Bajorans who have lived with us on this station, who have worked with us for months, who helped us move this station to protect the wormhole...who have begun to build the future of Bajor *with us*, [they] know that we are neither the enemy nor the devil. We don't always agree [but we come away with better understanding and appreciation of each other.]

Following this very public encounter, Neela, O'Brien's assistant, secretly meets with Winn, revealing (to us) that the two have been working together. She informs Winn that it will be discovered that she is the one who murdered the Starfleet crew member and their plans, and her escape will no longer work. Winn tells Neela to continue with the plan, even if it means Neela must sacrifice her life – it is the will of the Prophets and the sacrifices that the Prophets call for are sometimes great.

Because of the explosion at the school, Vedek Bareil decides to visit the station to help ease tensions, and at the same time, Chief O'Brien is closing in on the killer of Aquino. Doing a bit of digging, O'Brien finds a secret program that has deactivated the weapons sensors on the promenade, coincidentally as Vedek Bareil is visiting the promenade. And there's only one person with the skill to do this: Neela.

O'Brien alerts Sisko who is on the Promenade with Bareil and Winn as they begin to address a crowd of Bajorans. Sisko searches the crowd just in time to see Neela raising her phaser at Bareil. Sisko tackles Neela to the ground and saves Bareil's life.

Afterwards, Major Kira is on the bridge, contemplative about what has transpired. Sisko enters and tells Kira that unfortunately, Neela claims she worked alone, and there is no way to prove Winn's involvement – she'll get away with attempted murder.

Kira: I envied Vedek Winn because she was a true believer. I wanted my faith to be as strong as hers.

Sisko: Maybe it is.

Kira: Commander, I heard what you said to Vedek Winn at the school [about Bajorans and humans working together these past several months]...I just want you to know, you were right...I don't think that you're the devil.

Sisko: Maybe we have made some progress after all.

Vedek Winn is a faithful and devout Bajoran who fervently believes in the Prophets. There is nothing wrong with that. Being devout in one's faith is good. So, is the problem really with faith – with religion? Many people think so. In our class last Monday, after we watched the episode, someone made reference to John Lennon's song Imagine:

*Imagine there's no heaven
It's easy if you try
No hell below us
Above us, only sky
Imagine all the people
Livin' for today*

*Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion, too
Imagine all the people
Livin' life in peace*

John Lennon clearly felt that religion itself, was the problem. Religion has undoubtedly been a breeder of intolerance and at least a contributing factor to some of the world's bloodbaths and that certainly includes those acting in the name of Christianity. But is it simply the religion itself that is the problem or rather is it the religious beliefs, perspectives and practices, **enforced** in extreme ways and upon all others? And what about other contributing factors - political ideologies like, communism, fascism, capitalism, imperialism, and nationalism.

For millennia, today and even in the science fictional 24th century near an alien planet called Bajor, we again find that religion is sullied and strangled by abusive power; One person or group who believes that **only their** interpretations of sacred writings and experiences are correct, **FORCING** them onto others is extreme and hurtful. It feeds an intolerance, fear and anger that suggests allowing contradictory ideas is blasphemous and those abhorrent, sacrilegious ideas shouldn't even be allowed to be *shared, taught or disseminated!* That's where oppression, extremism, and violent, terrorist acts enter the picture.

Such extreme thinking births such despicable factions and events such as The Crusades during the Middle Ages and The Spanish Inquisition in the 15th Century. In modern times, right here in the U.S. we've had "The Covenant, The Sword, and the Arm of the Lord, Ruby Ridge, the siege at Waco and of course 9/11.

Biblically, we only need to look to Paul, "who looked back on his earlier days of religious ardor with a good deal of embarrassment – indeed, shame. In 1 Timothy 1:13 Paul says, 'I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence.' Before his encounter with the risen Christ, remember that Paul, or Saul as he was known then, was a zealous persecutor of the church. He was involved in the killing of people he could not tolerate because they offended his religion. He was an ardent, devotee follower of his religion. We sometimes tell the story as though the problem was with his religion – his Judaism ...but remember that according to our Bible that was all given by God. We Christians sometimes talk as though year 1 BC, the religion of the Old Testament was just fine; the Law and the Prophets and the wisdom literature, the Temple, its sacrificial system, the pilgrim festivals – all of that was established by God and was great, but 33 years later, suddenly it was all rubbish, second rate, worthless and misleading, because Judaism now counted for nothing as we had the only real, proper revealed religion, Christianity – or we say that Judaism's not a religion at all because all religions, except for Christianity, are bogus and we have the real thing.¹

The problem with Saul (Vedek Winn, Davide Koresh, Osama bin Laden, Jim Jones, etc. etc. etc.) wasn't their religion; as we've seen, all religions have their Sauls --- and all nationalisms, all ideologies have their Sauls. The problem with Saul wasn't his religion; the problem with Saul was Saul. Saul had to be changed; he had to become a new person, he had to be transformed right in the core of his being, he had to become Paul.

There is a moment in the episode, after Vedek Winn convinces the Bajoran parents to remove their children from the school, when Commander Sisko is speaking with his son, Jake. He tells his dad about only the five human kids at the school now and how, instead of the wormhole, they learned about Galileo. Galileo challenged the beliefs of his time, teaching heliocentricity - all planets traveled around the sun, versus the Earth being at the center. He expresses his anger and frustration that Galileo was tried by the Catholic Church and convicted for teaching something that went against the church and its beliefs and teachings. Jake says, "how could anyone be so stupid...it's the same thing happening now with the wormhole and the Celestial Temple." Sisko says, [It's not stupid. You've got to realize that it's the Bajoran's faith in the wormhole and the Prophets that has allowed them to survive, have hope and courage. To them it's not just a bunch of aliens in a wormhole.] It's a matter of interpretation. It may not be what you believe, but that doesn't make it wrong. If you start to think that way, you'll be acting just like Vedek Winn, only from the other side. We can't afford to think that way...we'd lose everything we've worked for..."

We're always encountering disagreements and challenges between religious beliefs, whether it's within Christianity or between Christianity and other faiths Or non-faiths. To avoid the continual repetition of religious intolerance and its subsequent violence, we must strive to be accepting of difference. We can disagree with others and do so zealously, but we must understand that one's beliefs are important ... to them. We must stop forcing our interpretations onto others, especially when it results in oppressing them, marginalizing them, hurting them and even killing them.

Our teacher, Jesus Christ, knew the law well – better than any - and he never instructed anyone, including us, to use the law, the Word of God, for harm or violence. Never, did Jesus instruct anyone to abide by the laws of God in forceful, legalistic ways. Jesus said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not

¹ Moir, Nick. "Religious Extremism," September 11, 2016.

one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished” (Matt. 5:17-18). Jesus also warned, “Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray” (Mark 13:5-6).

We must work on ourselves, so that we may transform and become new. We do so by delighting in the law of the Lord. May we ALL live long and prosper.

AMEN