

Beware of Cover-ups, even in the Bible

A sermon on Numbers 16 & Matthew 16:1-12 by Nathan Nettleton, 18 October 2020

© LaughingBird.net

Message

Self-interested leaders will frequently manufacture frightening images of an angry dangerous God to silence opposition and maintain their grip on power; but Jesus opens our eyes to these abuses and to the reality of a God of incorruptible love.

Sermon

In our gospel reading, Jesus warned his disciples to be on their guard against the leaven of the religious leaders. After a little confusion about whether he was referring to the recent spike in home-baked sourdough bread, they realised that he was talking about the teachings of these religious leaders.

The way leaven works in bread dough is a bit like the spread of a virus. So Jesus is concerned about the contagious effects of bad teaching. Leaders can and often do use their teachings to advance their own interests and suppress the interests of the people, and Jesus wants us to be on our guard.

There have been so many examples in the news recently of leaders covering up scandals, failures and indiscretions, that I am spoilt for choice. In church, business, and politics, we have seen leaders scrambling to take control of the story for their own purposes. But as tempting as it is to talk about Dan Andrews and Jenny Mikakos and Gladys Berejiklian and James Packer and George Pell and Donald Trump, there is actually a massive example sitting right here in the Bible reading we heard from the book of Numbers. And since Jesus is talking about the contagious distorted teachings of *religious* leaders, we might as well start here and let the implications for those other examples take care of themselves.

What we have in this story from Numbers 16 is a huge political cover-up. The story we heard was the official version, issued to close down a controversy and reassert the authority of the leaders. Only, as often happens in the Bible, clues are left that enable the truth to break through and alert us to what is really going on.

Our Bible is amazing like that. Unlike the holy books of most other religions, our Bible confesses to its own stuff-ups, lies, and cover-ups, and in the process helps us to not keep repeating them. Like, most of the Hebrew Bible is a flag-waving supporter of the Israelite monarchy, but it still preserves the story that tells us that God thought that having a king was a very bad idea which only happened because the people wouldn't trust God. Most of the Bible unashamedly supports the Jerusalem temple, but it also preserves the story that tells us that God didn't want a temple – God was more of an outdoorsy kind of God, and preferred to live in a tent – but the people insisted on having a bigger and better temple than their neighbours.

The Bible is also full of murders and massacres – some are told without shame, and others are covered up. Some of the cover-ups are exposed and condemned – for example King David is exposed and condemned for covering up his rape of Bathsheba and his murder of her husband. In others, the cover-up is what has been preserved in the Bible as the official version of the story. But not only does Jesus teach us how to get at the truth by re-reading

these stories through the eyes of those who got crucified, very often, clues are left in the text itself that act like explosive little lie detectors to alert us to look beneath the spin.

Now before we unpack this story itself, let me tell you a made-up story of what the same thing might look like if it happened in our church.

Imagine that someone kept challenging me in the church, and contacting the Baptist Union to complain that I had become a dictator and had centralised way too much power in my own hands and that I wasn't allowing anyone else to have a say or to exercise their gifts. And in frustration, I start preaching that if you oppose the appointed pastor, you are opposing God. Then one day, this angry person stands up in the middle of one of my self-justifying sermons and denounces me in front of everyone. I shout back at him that he is opposing God's will, and he storms out in a rage and, totally distracted by his fury, steps onto the road and is knocked down by a bus and killed the spot.

So I announce to you all, "Well, it seems that God has made his will perfectly clear."

What would happen if I did that? You'd probably all be pretty shocked, but it is possible that many of you would also be wondering if perhaps I'm right. Perhaps this is God's judgement sorting out a troublemaker. And as long as enough of you are wondering that, that possibility casts a kind of spell over everyone. If that spell remains unbroken, my power to run the church however I want is pretty much absolute.

But what if one of you immediately challenges me and says, "No, this is nothing to do with God. If you had listened and responded properly to this man long before now, this never would have happened"? Right then and there, the spell is broken. The lie is exposed. The contagious leaven of my toxic teaching is out in the open for all to see and its power is gone. Vanished.

Now, remember that story, and let's go back to the book of Numbers. Four blokes named Korah, Dathan, Abiram and On go with two hundred and fifty respected leaders of the community and confront Moses and Aaron. This is not a few isolated trouble makers. This is a delegation with respect and credibility.

Their complaint is that Moses and Aaron have set themselves up as the all powerful leaders and that they are not sharing power with the people – pretty much the same thing people are saying about Daniel Andrews lately. Now I grant you that when one group of leaders starts accusing another group of leaders of not sharing power with the people, more often than not, it is really just a power grab and the people will lose out whoever wins. But the rights and wrongs of the complaint are not the main issue here.

What we are told happens next is that Moses tells everyone else in the community to stand back from this rebellious group because God is going to sort things out. He says that if they die a violent death, here and now, "then you shall all know that these men who are opposing me have despised the Lord." According to this official record, immediately the ground under them split open and swallowed them and their families and all their possessions, so they went down alive to the world of the dead. The earth closed over them, and they vanished from the assembly.

Really? Well, that's what it says right here in the Bible. And there is no doubt that the writers wanted you to believe that. The final form of the book of Numbers was produced by the establishment priests who traced their authority back to Moses and Aaron. They want you to know that if you question their authority, watch out. God will get very angry and deal with you, big time.

But is that what really happened, or is the official version a cover up? Stay with me here.

The priests who put this official version together wanted to really ram home their point, so they include a second story. The next day the whole Israelite community is grumbling against Moses and Aaron, accusing them of killing God's people, and now we are told that God is so angry that he unleashes a plague that kills another fourteen thousand seven hundred people, and the plague only stops when superhero Aaron runs into the middle of the people, burning incense and praying for their forgiveness.

Bloody hell! You really don't want to get on the wrong side of this angry dangerous God, so you'd better support the official leaders without question. Got it?!

Now we are on very familiar territory here, because we are living in the midst of a deadly plague at the moment. A lot more people than that have died. And there are any number of religious leaders who are ready to tell you that they know exactly what God is punishing us for, and that if we would just listen to them and do as they say, God's anger will subside and the plague will end. There have always been religious leaders who have pushed that interpretation of plagues and other disasters, at least as far back as Moses and Aaron. The only difference today is that less people are convinced.

So it is not so hard for us to recognise that Moses and Aaron are taking advantage of a naturally occurring plague to reinforce their own authority. But what about Korah and his mob who died the day before? Moses said they were going to be swallowed up by the earth, and they were. That's got to be the hand of God doesn't it? Well, only if the official version is not hiding anything. But did you spot the lie detector?

In their over-confident eagerness to reinforce their point with the second angry God story, the priests accidentally left in an embarrassing detail. When the whole congregation was grumbling against Moses and Aaron the next day, it doesn't say they were continuing the previous complaint about a failure to delegate. It says they were saying, "You have killed some of the Lord's people."

What?! They've already told us that the entire community of Israel were witnesses to the event, and it would have been very clear to everyone that this was the hand of God at work, and that Moses and Aaron didn't lift a hand against anyone. So if that is really what everyone witnessed, how the hell do the entire community wake up the next morning grumbling that this was not the hand of God but an act of human violence for which Moses and Aaron were responsible?

Something very human happened here, and the official version is a cover up.

Now in case you think I've lost my marbles, I'm not suggesting that Moses and Aaron managed by themselves to go up against two hundred and fifty four men, and slaughter the

lot. But anyone who has seen what happened to Jesus knows that when jealous religious leaders start stirring up their followers with tirades against rebels who won't toe the line and are therefore blaspheming against God, things can get more and more frenzied until riots break out, and they're chanting for crucifixion, or two hundred and fifty four men and their households and all their belongings are at the bottom of a ravine buried under a hailstorm of rocks.

And the official leaders stand back and brush themselves off and say, "Nothing to see here. God seems to have made his will perfectly clear. Now let that be a lesson to you all."

So what are we to make of all this? Let me highlight two things.

Firstly, some of you are no doubt quite shocked by this reading of the story because it seems to cast doubt on the Bible as a bearer of truth, and you need your Bibles to be trustworthy. I understand your fear. But actually, this is a great example of precisely how the Bible is a bearer of truth. It is not a bearer of some fossilised lifeless truth, like an inerrant maths book. It is a book that pulses with real life in all its complexity, and when read in a community gathered around Jesus, it comes alive and leads us into truth.

Do you remember what Jesus spent much of his time doing with his disciples after his resurrection? "He opened their minds to understand the scriptures." (Luke 24:45) "Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures." (Luke 24:27) Think about that for a moment. This is a crucified man teaching us how to read scripture. If you are sitting with the crucified victim of a religious power struggle, and reading this story from Numbers, do you think you are going to still hear it unquestioningly from the side of the victorious authorities, washing the blood from their hands? Or when Jesus interprets to us the signs of himself and his own story in these old scriptures, do you think he might be teaching us to read it through newly opened eyes?

Secondly, once you have begun to allow Jesus to reveal the true nature of God to you and to teach you how to read scripture, you will barely even need to look for the lie detector in a text like this, because you will know that this must be a cover-up. Why? Because the God made known to us in Jesus is not remotely like that.

What kind of God would think that capital punishment, slaughtering 254 men and their wives and children, was an appropriate punishment for daring to suggest that there should be a more even distribution of authority in the community of faith? That's not the God made known in Jesus; that's some kind of horrendous monster. If you want to know how God deals with power struggles, look at Jesus carrying his own cross and letting his angry opponents nail him to it. That's where God positions himself in our fights, and with his dying breath he reminds us that he still loves us and prays that we might be forgiven and healed.

So I hope you can see how this brings us right back to where we started, with Jesus warning us to be on our guard against the leaven, the corrupt and contagious teachings, of the religious leaders. I'm one of them, so you should be ready to question and examine what I say too.

We religious leaders can easily get sucked in by our own influence and carried away by our own egos. Using the image of an angry dangerous God has long been a powerful way of controlling the community and keeping them in line, like a mother yelling, "if you kids don't

behave, just wait till your father gets home!” But it’s a total blasphemy, so if any religious leader, including me, starts jerking you around by threatening you with a dangerous angry heavenly father who will allegedly inflict violent punishments on you if you don’t do what we say, you can know for sure that we have lost touch with the way of Jesus and, as my wife is fond of saying, have begun to believe our own fibs.

The God made known to us in Jesus created you, and delights in you, and loves you to pieces, and wants always and only the very best for you. So be on your guard against any leaven that would tell you otherwise.