I want to start this sermon by asking you to please turn to someone beside you and discuss this question: What Bible passages/stories do you struggle with the most, because they make you think to yourself: I don’t want this in my Bible! (and you don’t need exact verses or anything like that…just in general)

We have generated a range of various types of passages…some that you mentioned and others that I thought you might are: genealogies…all those boring lists of some random guy with a long name begetting some other random guy with a long name…all those laws (see the book of Leviticus)…the violent stories of genocide found primarily in the Book of Joshua…stories where God kills people…stories where people kill each other…stories that seem too fantastic to have ever happened (Noah’s ark, for example)…the historical stories about kings and wars…and those passages that seem to forbid such things as divorce, homosexuality, and women in leadership. I am sure that we could possibly add to this list, but I think these are the most obvious.

What this exercise shows us is that the Bible contains passages that can upset us, that are boring, that feel out of place and irrelevant. To put it another way, the Bible contains passages that can actually cause us to want to rip pages out of the Bible. There are, of course, a lot of passages that do not evoke these kinds of responses…that clearly point to God and make us feel how we likely think Scripture should make us feel…comforted, loved, in awe of the divine…we can, for example, get these feelings when we read the 23rd Psalm, the creation narrative, the Lord’s Prayer. But, this is not consistent…for as many wonderful and lovely passages that we find in scripture, we can find just as many boring and awful ones.

And this reality is, for us, as Christians, something of a problem. Christians typically treat the Bible as holy, but it does not always cause us to feel holiness. Speaking from my own experience, when I started seminary and had to read the Bible for various classes, I hated that I actually struggled to find holiness throughout the holy book. My faith was broken because not only did I not like certain parts of the Bible, those violent and boring parts…but the God that I found in some biblical stories did not fit how I understood God to be…in the Bible, God was not always a loving mother or father, but could at times be the cause of violence. Who knew, God of hosts, meant God of an army…this is not the God I want, need, or expect to find in Scripture.

So what do we do? Do we throw out those passages we hate? Do we ignore them and just pretend they don’t exist? Or is there, maybe, another way forward?

As I am sure you can guess, I am going to suggest that there is another way to deal with those passages in Scripture that are not the easiest to handle and, I think, we can begin to find that way by turning to our reading from 2 Timothy. In this letter, the author writes: All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. This verse should be very familiar to those of you in Alpha, because it came up in the video on Thursday, so you will have already been introduced to some of what I am going to talk about.

2 Timothy offers us the helpful phrase: “all scripture is inspired by God,” which is typically thought to imply that God wrote the Bible. But, it is important to note that the author of 2 Timothy never says this…he does not say that God wrote scripture, that God put pen to paper to create the text…but God inspired scripture. The word he uses in the Greek is *theopneustos*, which means “God breathed.” So the author assumes that people wrote the Bible, as history has shown us is the case, but, he also believes that in the midst of the writing, God did something too…God breathed.

By accepting inspiration of Scripture in this way, as pointing to the presence of God’s breath through human penned words, we can now begin to make sense of all of those parts of the Bible that we just cannot stand…all those parts of the Bible that we would probably rather delete. Marcus Borg’s words are helpful here; he writes that scripture is “a human response to God. Rather than seeing God as scripture’s ultimate author, the Bible is the response of ancient communities to their experience of God. As such it contains their stories of God, their perceptions of God’s character and will, their prayers to and praise of God, their perceptions of the human condition and the paths of deliverance, their religious and ethical practices, and their understanding of what faithfulness to God involves. As the product of these communities, the Bible thus tells us how *they* saw things not about how *God* sees things.”

Because people wrote scripture, they necessarily integrated within it, information about their world. They did not write about violence to entertain or shock, like we might see it used in some horror movies, but they wrote about violence because it was a part of their world…those unbelievable stories like Noah’s Ark reflected the myths of their world…the laws, were the laws of their word…the sometimes horrendous image of God that they produced resonated with the horrendous images of the gods in their world, and so on.

And, all of this was breathed into by God…it is interesting that the author of 2 Timothy does not say that God only breathed into the happy stories or the ones that offer us comfort…but he says God breathed into all scripture…the good bits and the bad bits, the peaceful bits and the violent bits. Into each word of each human author, God breathed, thus, infusing their pen strokes with some of who God is, making their words as holy as God is holy.

And, while we can clearly feel the holy in those wonderful passages, in the words of the 23rd Psalm for example…we must also be open to the fact that the holy is in those parts of the Bible that upset us or bore us….I mean, the holy must be in these passages, if God breathed through the entire Bible, warts and all. Maybe feeling the holiness of scripture means more than experiencing the warm and fuzzies, but it means feeling other emotions too…feeling challenged, bored or upset. Maybe feeling the holiness of scripture can include that realization that there is more that we need to make sense of what we are reading, that we, actually, have to learn more, discuss, ask questions, to grow in our own wisdom and understanding. I guess, as we know, God rarely keeps things neat and easy, but often works through challenges and difficulties…maybe the challenges and difficulties inherent in some parts of the Bible are another way in which God is working, God is breathing, and God is calling to us.

For me, this is how I see God working through Scripture. I admit, even after spending the majority of my life studying the Bible, I still hate it from time to time…it still, often, drives me absolutely crazy…but I still hold it as holy in my life. I believe that it is through these ancient human accounts, even those that are filled with violence, that God is breathing and doing something…using the absolute disgust I feel when I read about God smiting innocent people to teach me something…to lead me to dig deeply into the text…maybe, even, to ask questions of those who know more than I do or who see things differently than I do.

I hope that this sermon has offered you something this morning that could maybe help when you next encounter one of those passages that you identified earlier…one of those passages that make you think, “I don’t want this in my Bible!” Yes, all of this might slip out of your head as soon as we begin the Creed, I know (and I am not sure I should say this), but sometimes I hear a sermon and the minute we shift gears to something else, I have pretty much forgotten what the sermon was about…but, maybe, some of this will come back when you read something in the Bible that causes you to want to rip out the page. As the author of 2 Timothy accepts: all Scripture is inspired by God…people wrote scripture, but all of it, from the most violent verse to the most lovely, from the most engaging verse to the most boring, is filled and alive with the breath of God.