How do I teach about the violent images of God portrayed in the Old Testament?

Question: I’ve been teaching middle school students for six years. I like this age because the kids are just starting to be curious about life issues that have to do with values and morals. I often use a headline from the daily paper to connect with our lesson or get discussions going. I’d like you to give me pointers on how to teach some of the material in the Old Testament—I’m thinking particularly about when the Israelites entered the promised land. I used the Complete-A-Project Bible Searches from this past January, February, March, and April/May issues of CATECHIST, about Moses and Joshua. When I actually read the books in the Bible (for the first time, I’m embarrassed to admit), I was surprised at how much violence is there.

—Middle-School Catechist, Lawton, OK

The heart of the issue here is: “How do I teach about the harsh and violent images of God that I find in the Old Testament?” It is difficult to reconcile the God of Moses and Joshua with the God of Jesus, particularly when you are teaching middle-school students. When dealing with violence in the Old Testament, we can follow at least four teaching strategies:

1. We can take the entire text at face value and teach that the story happened as written, and that it gives us a vivid picture of who God is.

2. We can avoid the violent images of God and shift the focus toward other strong ideas, such as God’s covenant or being faithful to God.

3. We can confront the violence directly and invite learners to explore why our images of God might have changed from ancient times.

4. We can dismiss the violent images outright and teach that the New Covenant proclaimed by Jesus has replaced the “old way” that we find in the Old Testament.

While we may be tempted to use any of the four strategies when teaching about the Old Testament, I do not think that strategies 1 or 4 are helpful. Strategy 1 tends toward a fundamentalist reading of the Bible, and strategy 4写作s off the Old Testament. Neither strategy is faithful to Roman Catholic tradition. I examined three middle-school textbooks and noted how they deal with the story of the Fall of Jericho in the Book of Joshua. Of those three texts, two followed strategy 2 and one used strategy 3.

If you are taking a lot of time with these passages, I suggest working along the lines of strategy 3: Deal with the violence directly and invite your learners to explore why our images of God might have changed from ancient times. As you noted, students in middle school are inquisitive and bright. If they read the original texts, they will question the violence. It is better to help them work through these issues than to avoid them. Harcourt Publishing (formerly Brown-ROA) provides a great example of this in their Crossroads series. Each book on the Old Testament invites students to draw a picture of what they believe God looks like and write three sentences describing and explaining their image. Below that exercise is a paragraph that offers some terrific teaching insights: “The period after the Exodus was a period of war and conquest. God often appears in the Book of Joshua as a kind of war-God, cruel and merciless to the enemies of the chosen people. As you read this part of the Old Testament, keep in mind the Israelites’ understanding of God was still quite undeveloped at this time. A more tender understanding of God’s justice and mercy and God’s love for all people develops later in their history” (Richard Reichert and Susan Dolter, Crossroads: Old Testament, Student Edition. Brown-ROA, 1999).

If you are treating these stories only briefly, as part of the big picture of the journey of God’s people, then strategy 2 might be more appropriate: Avoid the violent images of God and shift the focus toward other strong ideas, such as God’s covenant or being faithful to God. Whatever strategy you choose, keep in mind that while God is unchanging and eternal, our perception of who God is has expanded as we have pondered the mystery of God over the centuries.

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A wonderful searching question as we continue to go to the depths of our scriptural tradition. Thank you.

Chris Weber, Janet Schaeffler, Kate Ristow

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the construction of an ark and all the animals is helpful. But we do not want to lose the message we want students to learn from the story. They might remember the details, but did they learn the message? Did they learn about the covenant? About faith in God? About God’s forgiveness and love? About God’s promise to be with us when we choose a new beginning?

Perhaps the biggest help/key we have as catechists is the catechist/teacher manual. Search through it. It is a magnificent tool. The Scripture passages that are presented for each grade level have been chosen carefully. The writers, as well as the consultants in the areas of Scripture, theology, catechetics, and psychology, have provided various background material to help us understand the meaning and message of these Scripture passages and how to present them in a catechetical setting with today’s youth.

Many catechetical manuals also suggest other fine resources for Scripture study. Hopefully, your parish library contains some of these. If not, encourage your parish to purchase them.

In reading and studying all of Scripture, we need to know the history in which it was written and the literary form that was used. It makes a big difference in reading and studying the Old Testament. For instance, the Book of Job used the literary form of debate. At the time the book was written, the people believed that all suffering was punishment for sin. The author of the Book of Job used debate to argue against this belief. The author portrays Job’s friends arguing with Job about why he is suffering. They tell him they think it’s because of his sin. If we don’t know that we are reading a debate exchange, in which some of the characters argue persuasively for the side with which the author disagrees, we might read an isolated passage and conclude that the book teaches the opposite of what is intended.

Understanding history and literary form is crucial to understanding what the Bible teaches. Knowing the meaning of the passage is vital. “What does this mean for me/us today?” is a criti-cal question we must ask if we are to understand Scripture. As catechists, we need to study Scripture, pray with Scripture, and reflect on Scripture. Our catechist manuals are wonderfully designed today to guide and lead us.

Here are some other reminders/tips for using Scripture with youth:

1. Encourage youth to explore the Holy Lands on appropriate websites. This stirs their imagination to know where the stories of our foremothers and forefathers happened as they study them.

2. As you’re already doing, continue to compare today’s headlines to events that happened in Scripture. For example, do people today worship false idols as some people in the Old Testament did?

3. Engage youth in Scripture drama. Have them “feel into” the
characters to discover what it felt like to be one of the prophets or a leader of God’s chosen people. Becoming one of the characters helps young people better understand these people and their stories of faith.

4. Put a Scripture quote in a prominent place as you begin each new unit of study or theme. (Your text and teacher manual will reference many Scripture citations.) Then take the Scripture quote a step further by asking a “question of the week,” a question that relates the Scripture quote to the students’ daily lives. For example, you might post “The Lord said to Abram: ‘Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father’s house to a land that I will show you’” (Genesis 12:1). Where does God speak to you? Where does God send you?

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Unfortunately, violence has been part of life’s reality and the human experience since Cain killed Abel. Because you utilize the newspaper as a jumping-off point for your sessions, you see on a daily basis that not much has changed. Aggression, hostility, and cruelty toward one another unfortunately seem to characterize much of our human interaction. This can all be traced to the effects of original sin, which permanently damaged the perfect goodness, justice, and love God intended for all people to share in.

Whether you are working with an Old Testament story or a news event, call attention to our belief that, despite our human weaknesses and selfishness, the Lord is always inviting us to choose goodness and love. Remind your students that ever since that first sin, God’s plan has been one of salvation—to free us from the power of sin and death. It is through Jesus that this new creation will come about. That is the true Good News—that God’s plan will be fulfilled at the end of time when Christ will come again in glory, and that perfect peace, love, and justice will reign in the Kingdom. God invites us to share.

One of the things you can do to counteract the impression that violence and evil rule our world is to showcase the peacemakers of our world and point out everyday examples of people showing kindness and respect for fellow human beings. Introduce your students to organizations like Habitat for Humanity, Catholic Relief Services, Bread for the World, and Operation Rice Bowl. Study saints and heroes like Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Maximilian Kolbe, and Archbishop Oscar Romero and Helder Camara, who have worked for the coming of the Kingdom. Call attention to the people and organizations in your own parish work to bring goodness and love to others.

Finally, encourage your students to reject violence and to stand up for people who need our help and love. Brainstorm the many different ways they might do this on a daily basis in their schools and neighborhoods. Help them recognize that they can make a difference—because they can!

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