

On Earth Peace, Goodwill: Preaching on Peace During Advent and Christmas

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When armies take up the banner of God . . . then the Christian commandment to sacrifice oneself for the sake of one's neighbor at God's command is transformed into permission to sacrifice one's neighbor for God's sake. In the pre-nuclear world, the assumption led to considerable slaughter; in the nuclear world it could lead to the end of the species.

It speaks powerfully against any Christian justification for destroying the world that when the Christian God appeared on earth in human form not only did He not sacrifice a single human being for His sake, but He suffered a lonely, anguishing, degrading human death so that the world might be saved.

Clearly, the corpse of mankind would be the least acceptable of all conceivable offerings on the altar of this God. Johnathan Schell, (*The Fate of the Earth*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982. pp. 133-4)

It is with some sense of reluctance that I begin an article called "Preaching on Peace." So often in the church when we set up task forces to study, develop conferences to organize and inform, or (God help us) write articles about how to preach on something, that *something* soon becomes a dead issue, lost to our culture's insatiable need to be stimulated by the next social problem. But with peace we may have reached an end point, or in the deepest sense, a crisis. For if we imitate with peace what we have often done with important human causes in recent years, we may not have long left to preach about anything. There soon may be no texts left to expose, no bread to break nor cup to share, no hymns to sing to the praise of God Almighty through our Lord Jesus Christ. So dangerous is the situation that humankind faces that American and Soviet nuclear strength combined can obliterate every human being twenty-seven times right this moment. And American and Soviet leaders promise more, even more nuclear warheads in delivery systems of ever increasing sophistication. Jonathan Fine, Executive Director of Physicians for Social Responsibility, says that he and his (adult) children talk with dismay but with reality of the world's not surviving more than fifty years unless something is done immediately to halt the arms race and reduce the number of nuclear weapons.

So we dare not, as preachers, trivialize the meaning of peace with overkill, with uninformed moralisms, or with strident and offensive harangues. Too often in recent years we have cried 'Wolf!' in an attempt to be prophetic. This go 'round it is imperative that people hear from us careful biblical and theolog-

ical preaching, and thereby be comforted, given hope, and empowered to seek change.

An initial difficulty we encounter in preaching on peace at Christmas is that from Bethlehem to Damascus, carnage is king. The Holy Land is presently a nightmare straight from Hell, where mortal flesh, far from keeping silence, keeps piteous vigil with death and desecration. In our kind of world what the nations *seem* to prove is as far removed from the glory of God's righteousness and the wonder of God's love as is the mushroom cloud that billowed up over Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. Somehow the peace and love we sing about and feel good about during Christmas doesn't quite fit. Can we honestly say that the claims made for the birth of Jesus, (or at least the commercial promotion of those claims through our culture) are believable? Or do they remain beautiful but sentimental stories, fit for children and the simple-minded, essentially unavailable as descriptions of reality to insurance brokers and loan officers and small businesswomen, doctors and lawyers—or even pastors?

In this initial difficulty, Matthew is of much more help than Luke, for with Matthew, Jesus Christ, born son of David, son of Abraham, who is also Emmanuel (God with us) begins his infancy under the shadow of Herod's suspicion. And then he continues that infancy in a flight to Egypt to avoid massacre along with the rest of the male children of Bethlehem. At least Matthew's tales of the birth remind us that the Advent of God into this world—whatever blessing may accrue to us on that account—also occasions grief and danger, and hostility from the powers that be.

But the gospel for this Advent and Christmas is Luke, which stories contain only subtle hints of a cross in the future. And the readings from Luke, along with most of the other lectionary passages have as their primary theme deliverance. In the Old Testament lessons and the gospel readings, what is looked for (and what arrives in Jesus, according to the angels and according to Simeon in the temple—Luke 2) is the day of salvation—God's deliverance coming to people who are in bondage, who are in need, who are the victims of some previous military victory.

In the thirty-two passages suggested by the lectionary, only four of them explicitly mention peace. One of these is the often read 'prince of peace' passage from Isaiah 9, and though the result of the advent and reign of that prince, whom we have associated with Jesus, is peace and security, the peace and security are won by a military victory. The same also applies to the passage from Isaiah 53 where the deliverance of the exiles is accomplished by military might. Peace in Jerusalem is the promised end.

If we take the lectionary seriously, and intend to use it, then this raises homiletically urgent questions: do we want our hearers to identify with the powerless who need deliverance, when the word descending from the national church (not wholly unlike the word coming from Washington) is that peacemaking is the believer's calling? can those who await deliverance, those who live by the mercy of someone else's military might, make peace? Most Presbyterians and other mainline Christians, if they are responsive to the urgent calls for peacemaking, would see themselves as anything but powerless.

The urgency (again the homiletical urgency) is heightened by the fact that

Luke's gospel builds the notion of those without hope who hear the good news of Jesus' birth into the heart of the birth narratives. And I am suggesting that it is impossible to do lectionary preaching on peace in Cycle C without at least addressing the contrast between Luke's original audience and our hearers today (if not Luke's audience, then at least those in the story who hear the announcement of the birth).

Though attitudes may be moderating slightly, I would be very surprised if most of our hearers don't see themselves as the deliverers, as ones who bring peace and hope (even to the Pentagon), or as citizens of a nation which, in the present condition of this world, is the last best hope of the human race. What we encounter in the birth narratives in Luke is an entirely different situation: Mary, the Lord's humble servant, singing of the overthrow of the mighty; shepherds (only shepherds!?) hearing the angel's announcement; Zechariah, Simeon, and Anna who rejoice in the deliverance that comes to Israel. (It is as a result of seeing that deliverance that Simeon can *die* in peace!)

Raymond E. Brown believes that Luke took songs from the Anawim (pious, hopeful Jewish Christians) and put them in the mouths of Mary and Zechariah and Simeon and the angels. Brown writes that:

Though the title, Anawim, meaning "poor ones," may have originally designated the physically poor (and frequently still included them), it came to refer more widely to those who could not trust in their own strength but had to rely in utter confidence upon God: the lowly, the poor, the sick, the downtrodden, the widows and orphans. The opposite of the Anawim were not simply the rich, but the proud and self-sufficient who showed no need of his help. (*The Birth of the Messiah*. Garden City N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1979. p. 351)

Who could be more different in self-concept from the Anawim than most of us mainline Christians, and even if our attitudes are changing from a "win-the-world-for-peace-in-one-generation" stance, we are confronted by Christians on the right who believe that a strong, armed-to-the-teeth-with-nuclear-weapons America is the hope of the world. Deliverance? Surely *we* don't need it!

What this suggests is that preaching becomes an opportunity to help congregations identify themselves with the Anawim (only, of course, if the preacher is willing to work on her self-concept, too), and become unhooked from the illusions of self-sufficiency, strength, and impregnability. We are, after all, not our own deliverers/saviors. From identifying with the Anawim (and who, staring the nuclear arsenals of the world in the face, does not feel need of deliverance?) it becomes possible for us and our hearers to see ourselves both individually and corporately as people who matter to God beyond compare, even with all our defenses down—refugees that we are to the bomb, to our own strength, to the notion that our way of life and our economic productivity, and our "peace" are of our making and doing. At the very least, identification with the Anawim gives us empathy for those who must obtain deliverance from beyond themselves, and puts us in solidarity with everyone from Genesis to Revelation who experienced an Advent of God.

The other, always-to-be-expected preaching opportunity of the Advent/

Christmastide season is the Second Coming or the final Advent of Christ our Lord. This emphasis of the Second Coming has been with the church for centuries, and it provides preaching opportunities for opening the closed world of space and time, for expanding the poverty-stricken modern imagination which turns in the silence of the church to astrology and gnosticism, to reincarnation and to visitors from outer space. Preaching on the Second Coming allows us to declare unequivocally that God does not abandon the creation to death, or to the frightening possibility that "out there" there is nothing or no one to rescue us from the silent universe of modern secularism.

The Second Coming is the New Testament's way of saying that something is coming from beyond time and space, which contains and completes all of time and space, to give meaning to all reality. Nature is finally renewed. History finds a meaningful end. As Robert M. Herhold has written:

If the Christmas carols are true and the candles we light on Christmas Eve really do represent a light that Washington and Moscow can never put out, then Christ has to come again. The mystery and promise of the First Advent insist upon a second Advent. Clearly God has not finished the work of the first Advent. We are further away from peace and goodwill on earth than ever before. Without a follow-through on the promise of the first Advent, God only leads us into false hope, which is worse than no hope at all. Without the Second Advent, the candle-light of Christmas Eve cannot ever answer the fires of Hiroshima. ("An Advent Meditation," *The Christian Century*, November 25, 1981.)

In the kind of world in which we live, nations armed with the destructive power of a million Hiroshimas and Nagasakis—there has to be a Final Advent. Or else in honesty we must conclude that history is bunk and that nothing even approximating the God we know in the Bible created the universe with humankind in love and longing and tenderness. We really do have the power to extinguish ourselves—no word, no table, no songs left to sing or be sung. Absolute nothingness.

I am not suggesting with this writing that from the pulpit we counsel irresponsibility, that we see ourselves as utterly helpless, that we leave our hearers with the notion that they are capable of nothing, that they can make no changes. Who would have believed a year ago that Reagan's limited nuclear war would have mobilized the numbers of people in Europe and America to speak and act for nuclear restraint, nuclear freeze, nuclear disarmament. We and our hearers are *not* as poor and defenseless as the Anawim. I am simply arguing that the pulpit is not always the best place from which to lead a charge, into war or out of it—though Presbyterians preached for the revolution in 1776 and against the Germans in 1914. There are too many other opportunities in the life of the congregation to teach about and encourage our members in the work of peace; as prophetic ideologues, we can never compete with the likes of Jerry Falwell.

I am suggesting that preaching on peace is most effective when hearers are enabled to experience the greatness of the love and mercy of God, to know that God protects and cares, and that as strange as it might seem, not a hair can

fall from our heads without notice. It is out of that faith, and not one born of desperation and anger, that those same hearers can obey with confidence the urgings of the Spirit in the critical and necessary works of peace: nuclear disarmament, feeding the hungry, and the appropriation of covenant-making/covenant-keeping skills. Prophetic ideology, however accurate it might be, produces guilt, inspires hatred, and does not help people work for peace with confidence.

I recommend this approach because I want us as preachers, legitimately committed to peace and justice, to remember the realism of the Bible on these issues, as well as the multiplicity of voices with which the Bible speaks. The Bible is hardly a pacifist book (though it can be argued that the New Testament Christian community was). The song of the angels about peace on earth becomes the lament of Jesus on the way to Jerusalem, as he pauses, weeping over the city, "Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace. But now they are hid from your eyes" (Luke 19:42). The contradiction was resolved on the cross. And we dare not forget that as preachers and teachers in the church, our most insightful and accurate prophesying will always be flawed by our own self-interest, and our most inspired words of comfort and grace still need the completing work of the Spirit in the minds and hearts of our hearers.

For the distance between the angel song and Jesus's cry of despair is not abridged by human initiative or human ingenuity, inspiring as they sometimes are. The distance is bridged and the conflict resolved by a word spoken to fearful disciples, certain they had been forsaken, who were hiding in an upper room. And the word was spoken by the Risen Lord: "Peace be with you . . . peace be with you. As the Father sent me so send I you" (John 20:19ff). Surely the peace of the resurrection is the same peace on earth of which the angel sang.

How to preach on peace during Advent and Christmastide? Carefully, and with great faith, expecting God to work in us and through us (even in our half-confident state) the wonders of his love.