

Our Story

Second Sunday in Advent: Peace

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What's up with Zechariah? Granted, he and Elizabeth had been waiting a long time for Elizabeth to be with child. She was "getting on in years". But he knew all of the stories of the faith of old women getting pregnant, like Sarah, Hannah. He taught these stories to the people, stories about hope and new life and big changes on the horizon, stories about how nothing is impossible with God. He knew the stories like the back of his hand. He was a priest. He was the son of a priest. Grandson too. And his wife was also from a priestly line. Can you imagine *those* family get together? And the people seem to love his teaching. They were waiting that day for him to come out of the sanctuary, waiting for a new word that would help them keep their eyes on the prize of God's coming reign. Oh, yes, give us the word Zechariah!

So what's up with Zechariah? When an angel comes to him with good news, he can't receive it. After all these years of living inside God's story.... It is as though this story-- God's story, the one that shapes how he sees the world, his worldview—suddenly, while in the sanctuary no less, the story suddenly leaves him or he suddenly abandons the story.

Could it be that Zechariah has become cynical? Disbelieving that new life really can break into the world, suspecting that there really is no hope that goodness might take hold and spread in this world. Could it be that another story has supplanted God's story? That the story of God's creating and redeeming, in the past, present, future holy verb tense, has been pushed out by the imperial story line. That Zechariah's mind and imagination and empathy is no longer expanded by God's story but rather is constricted and controlled by the imperial story. Nothing new is going to happen. Nothing really new. Say good bye to God's longing for the people. That was a fairy tale. Don't be a fool.

The times Zechariah lived in were so hard. The Jewish homeland was a colony of the Roman Empire. They lived under Pax Romana which means "Roman Peace". It was a façade of peace. This so called peace was a peace through victory, violent force and control. A peace through militarization. Not a peace through justice. This so called peace bred appalling inequity. Consider the taxes. Always consider the taxes with a militaristic budget.... They paid ¼ to Roman tribute. 1/10 to Herod, the puppet king. 1/3 to the landowner. Which left only 1/3 for bread for today and seed for tomorrow's crop. The people revolted. Of course they did. And they were badly beaten. The temple destroyed. The military tightened its grip.

And so Zechariah had a hard time believing the good news of the angel, that something new was stirring... He's become cynical. God's story line left him. He's rendered mute.

What's so sad about this is those people waiting for him to come out of the sanctuary. They so needed to hear from God through Zechariah. They needed it so bad, to hear that this Pax Romana is doomed, to be reminded of God's longing for their wellbeing, for peace with justice, and how they must prepare the way, the way for the future God is planning. They so needed to hear God's word of hope. But Zechariah could not speak.

Oh Zechariah, what's up with you?!

Speaking of Zechariah, what's up with us? Have we lost the story line of our faith? Have we become cynical? It's the second Sunday in Advent when we sing and pray for peace. Are there any prophets crying out in the wilderness against Pax Americana? Is anyone listening? Does anyone, do you, really believe change can happen?

We heard about the times Zechariah lived in. Our time is eerily similar. Only we are Rome. *We* are the Roman Empire. *We* are the militaristic empire. It is not Pax Romana. It is Pax Americana. But it is eerily similar. "Peace through strength." And it is our taxes, our hard earned money, that pays for the largest military budget in the world. American tax payers pay almost 50% of the world's military spending. The United States spends more on its military than the next seven countries in the world combined, including China and Russia.

Did you hear what I just said? Did you really hear it? Or did it go into that space in your brain where you kind of go... "yea I know... that's the way it is... not so surprising".... Could it be that *that* reaction is a form of cynicism, that flattening out response, over simplifying, not appreciating the difference in scale, being inured against shock... that this is a kind imperial passivity? And this is not a democrat or republican thing. This is a bi partisan thing. Our minds are controlled somehow by this Pax Americana militarism. The imperial story is shaping how we see reality and is dulling our responsiveness to such an astonishing fact as this: The United States spends more on its military than the next seven countries in the world combined.

It hasn't always been this way...this dulled responsiveness... I remember as child, in the 60s, in Sunday school and around the dinner time, two faith formation hot spots, talking about the words of our American Christian prophet Martin Luther King Jr. and spreading the message that our military budget was bloated and wrong and must change. But somehow, it feels like, with few exceptions, like Jack Nelson Pallmayer, this storyline has been all but silenced. Since 9-11 our military spending has increased 50%, adjusting for inflation. Who's talking about this? This massive defense budget, this permanent war? The federal government has proved unmovable on tax policy and spending priorities. Don't budgets tell the truth about the soul of a country?

So preacher, you may be thinking, what does all this Pax romana and pax Americana have to do with our Advent bible stories of quickening and birth, the births of John and Jesus....

I'll tell you....

When a baby is born, you are brought to a thin place, a liminal place. There's a star over that place. And everything is clarified somehow. It's not just because you are sleep deprived. It's more than that. You are in a state of awe. So close to God, to the meaning of it all. And the imperial story, is left way outside this little world you find yourself in. And you so want this baby to live in a world that makes sense, a just peaceful world. You are in touch with God's deepest longing. Why God created the world in the first place.

There is a reason why two of the most radical songs in the bible are sung at the time of quickening or birth. Mary's song, often called the Magnificat, is about the revolutionary turning of the haves and have nots, about God's justice. And Zechariah's song, what we heard this morning, often called the Benedictus, is about preparing the way for the messiah who will guide our feet into the way of peace. These songs, the Magnificat and the Benedictus, are not lullabies. They are courageous, anti-imperial wake up songs of justice and peace.

When Zechariah first held his son, it came back to him... God's story. The story of the ancestors, the words of the prophets of the past preparing the way for the future, through the present body of this baby and his father.... He got his voice back. His identity back. He knew his role... in helping to prepare the way.... And the word spread... and the hope spread.... "His mouth opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Awe came over all their neighbors, and these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea... All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will the child become? For indeed, the hand of God was with him."” Someone said: "Ideas are contagious; emotions are contagious, hope is contagious, courage is contagious..." (Solnit) The people were stirred as they listened to Zechariah saying:

And you child will be called the prophet of the most high for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people... by the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

To guide our feet into the way of peace. It is our turn now, to continue the story, our story. We are to prepare the way. To not be silenced. To not let the imperial story hijack our mind, our heart, our imagination. We must feed off the inspired words of the Hebrew

prophets and Jesus and of the prophets of our land. Make their words live through us into the future.

Knowing our American history can make us hopeful. When it seems that something failed miserably, you realize that actually the seeds were sown, and they germinate and they often come to fruition later, sometimes much later. The long story of securing equal rights for women, the battles throughout two centuries.... so much struggle, so many failures... who would ever have predicted the powerful, swiftly moving "me too movement"? Stranger things have happened. "To know history is to be able to see beyond the present; to remember the past gives you the capacity to look forward as well, to see that everything changes and the most dramatic changes are often the most unforeseen." (Solnit) Foucault said: "People know what they do; frequently they know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what what they do does."

Who knows what affects what? Who knows what prepares the way for the new? *What if* an historian writes a book These Truths: a History of the United States *and* she includes in her book these remarkable words by an American president, *and* readers across the country mark this passage and share it widely...*and* preachers across the country read this book and include these words in their sermons and congregants hear these words and are moved (they are not just dead words of the past but they come alive) *and* the people carry these words from the sanctuary out into the world ... to more people and to people in power,... *and* the silence is broken (about our militaristic budget)and things start to move, to shift.... What if?! Stranger things have happened.... Might these words, like seeds planted over 50 years ago, germinate, and come to life now and inspire us?

These words of a republican president, a General no less, but he was raised by deeply religious pacifist parents...his faith formed early and clung tenaciously even though he had to make real politic decisions, often painful to himself and others But still, in his first major address as president, delivered on April 16, 1953, Dwight Eisenhower reckoned the cost of arms. "Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies in the final sense a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and not clothed," he said. "The world in arms is not spending money alone; it is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children." He said "This is not a way of life at all in any true sense." (Lepore, page 570)

Is now the time?! For us to help prepare the way for real peace? To live out OUR story? Will it be Pax Americana forever? Peace through strength? Or God's peace. Peace with justice???

Ideas are contagious. Hope is contagious.

By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

May it be so. May we make it so.

Sources

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From Women Against Military Madness

With 5% of the world's population, U.S. taxpayers pay for almost 50% of the world's military spending.

56% of Fiscal Year 2018 discretionary budget goes to the Department of Defense--21 departments split the rest (dept of education is next with 6%, Health and Human Services 6, Justice 2, Labor 1.

The U.S. spends more on the military than the next nine countries combined. FY2018 US 639 billion, next is china with 216 billion, next is russia with 69 billion.

