

Looking for a Peacemaker!

Texts: Isaiah 11:1-9, Luke 3: 2b-20

Come with me for a moment. Let's go downtown. As we get off the Red Line at Washington and walk west we see a small band of brothers and sisters marching around City Hall. Familiar? A young woman with frizzy hair and floppy jacket is shouting into a bullhorn and the crowd joins her, "No justice, no peace; no brutal police. No justice no peace; no racist police." A few passers-by join the marchers; most just pass by. Then we hear a round of "Burge is a scourge" followed by "Make a lesson; end the pension". The crowd stops at the main entrance. A fired up preacher from the west side screams for justice for the documented torture of dozens, mostly black men, at the hands of Lieutenant Jon Burge and his underlings which took place at Unit 2 Police Headquarters on the South Side some 10 to 15 years ago. This torturer still lives free and comfortable on a Chicago police pension in far off Florida. No justice, no real peace in the 'hood' today.

As we journey to Bethlehem this year, beyond our decorating, lists and parties, we are looking for some answers, some solace and peace. In a time of strife and fear, of darkness and despair - which is Advent - we long for some Shalom and wholeness, some healing and calm in our lives, in our families and this congregation, in our city and in our world.

Today's Scripture offers us someone who preached the very same message I heard last summer downtown. "No justice, no peace." On the banks of the Jordan River in Palestine he shouted: "Repent; be forgiven". "Shape up, be at peace". It is one and the same message. Our guide toward the manger, in the year 2006 is none other than - John the Baptist. In the words of his father Zechariah "And you, Child, will be called Prophet of the Most High, preparing the way of the Lord, giving light to those who sit in darkness, and guiding our feet into the way of peace."

Today we lit the candle of Peace as we proceed along our journey, accompanied by John. Together we are searching for peace, for a peacemaker, for the realization of Isaiah's vision of a peaceable realm.

John was also looking and longing for the Anointed One, the Prince of Peace, one who would come after him offering a new Baptism, a new spirit, a new community of love and peace.

John's demand for repentance and righteousness was his way of preparing the people for the new day and the new realm. It was a radical, stern word: Repent and be forgiven! Bear fruits of repentance! In other words, shape up or ship out; put your repentance into making things right, dealing fairly, being honest.

More than that. John called for solidarity: share your cloak and your food with those in need. Engage in acts of justice, end corruption and graft, be faithful in marriage, be satisfied with your legitimate wages! John couldn't get more specific or down to earth. Apparently his message never reached Chicago's City Hall or Springfield's corridors of power, as we can see from the year in - year out investigations, indictments, convictions and appeals of elected and appointed officials at all levels from the precinct to the Governor's door.

John was so penetrating and charismatic, his followers began to ask him, "Are you the Messiah? Are you the Peacemaker? John emphatically denied it, pointing to one who would come after him, who would baptize with Holy Spirit and with fire!

Others have looked for peace on earth. I remember sitting in the Senate gallery in May, 1972, observing a vote to cut off funding the Vietnam War. When the Byrd Amendment lost 47 to 43, those of us with Clergy and Laity Concerned walked out and gathered in the Capitol rotunda, determined to continue our witness. The late preacher and prophet, William Sloane Coffin, led almost a 1000 of us in prayer, song and testimony. "Faith of our fathers living still" reverberated like a clarion chorus.

At closing time about 120 of us, women and men, continued to sing and testify, refusing to leave. We were then hauled off to the DC jail, led by Bill Coffin and Benjamin Spock. I remember the policeman leading me to the paddy wagon, head bowed, a tear trickling down his cheek. I turned to him and said, "It's OK, you'll be all right." Later, in the jail a few cells away from me, Coffin continued to lead the singing of old favorite hymns, spirituals and freedom songs with his booming cheerful baritone and incredible memory, well into the wee hours of the morning.

We are looking and longing for peace again today. Where are the peacemakers? the reconcilers? the prophets? Is it not time to cut off the

funding from another disastrous war? (*Applause*)

Let us take one another look at John. While in prison he heard about a certain carpenter-turned-preacher whom he had himself baptized just months before. John was curious about the rumors of crowds, healings, Kingdom preaching. So he sent a message to this Jesus of Nazareth, asking him, “Are you the One, or shall we look for another?” Jesus replied, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

So, we are guided into the way of peace when we engage in actions of justice and mercy! And we may perchance recognize down the road the peacemaker standing firmly but unarmed in the midst of chaos and violence; at the intersection of evil deed and innocent life. The peacemaker is the incarnation of God’s love and pain in the midst of human warfare and conflagration.

That young disheveled woman with the bullhorn at City Hall last summer was a peacemaker. Bill Coffin, leading worship in the Rotunda of the Capitol where the decision was made to continue the bombing and slaughter in far off Vietnam, was a peacemaker. Sadako, subject of our children’s talk earlier, was a peacemaker.

During the civil war in El Salvador, winter of 1980, Archbishop Oscar Romero preached directly to the military leadership sitting among the congregation before him in the San Salvador cathedral. He accused them of fomenting the conflict and demanded that they stop the violence. This peacemaker was assassinated just hours later while leading the Eucharist in a hospital chapel.

In the 1950s a presidential candidate took a prophetic if costly position in support of a Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. He continued to make efforts for peace as US Ambassador at the UN. After he died of a heart attack on a London street, 1965, Edith Lovejoy Pierce, an Evanston poet and former parishioner of mine wrote a touching poem about this peacemaker, entitled simply “Adlai Stevenson”. It is as though his feet guide us “into the way of peace.”

The man with a hole in his shoe
Dies on the sidewalk.
Keep going, keep going:
“All God’s chillun got shoes.”
Pharaohs are pinned under pyramids.
Princes and presidents
Are molded by mausoleums.
Keep walking, keep walking -
“Walk and not faint.”
Kings lie down in marble tombs,
And the bodies of generals
Are impacted in battlefields.
Keep walking, keep walking,
Man with the worn shoe.
Peace is still a long way off.

Now the nuclear club includes India, Pakistan, North Korea, and probably before long, Iran. Where is the Adlai Stevenson of our day, the peacemaker who will help us stop this insane proliferation?

Two years ago, Rachel Corrie stood firmly, unarmed and nonviolent, dying under an advancing bulldozer in the West Bank. Rachel was a peacemaker. Yitzhak Rabin was transformed from a military general to a peacemaker, for which he was assassinated.

Today we are looking for peacemakers in Iraq, in Washington D.C., in Darfur, Congo, Somalia, Kashmir, Afghanistan, Iran, North Korea, Zimbabwe, the Philippines, New Orleans and in the streets and bars of Chicago. We need peacemakers in our homes, in hospitals, in countless places struggling with bad water, hunger, hatred, AIDS, slavery, yes slavery still, and so much more. We are in the dark world of Advent, waiting, waiting for the One who is to come, and asking, “Are you the One, or should we look for another?”

The people were on the tiptoe of expectation, wondering if John was perhaps the Messiah. We are also on the tiptoe of expectation, wondering today if there is a peacemaker in the wings for our fragile world.

Yet there is peacemaking under this very roof! Several of you folks join the witness year after year to close down the U.S. Army’s School of the

Americas. Elaine tells me 20 of you joined the throng at Fort Benning, Georgia this fall. Each one of you is a peacemaker, standing against this symbol of tyranny, torture and empire. And then, name of names, the Christian Peacemaker Teams, supported by this congregation. Tom Fox gave his life as a Peacemaker in Iraq. The three surviving hostages continue to speak out against revenge and in favor of forgiveness for their captors. Did you know that at this moment 12 Peacemakers are protesting the production of deadly depleted uranium weapons at the ATK Rocket Center in West Virginia. “Blessed are the peacemakers.”

Others of you have been with Gary Cozette and the CRLN, Chicago Leadership Network for Latin America’s delegations to Colombia, Guatemala, Cuba or Washington D.C. You are all peacemakers!

Lucius Walker and IFCO lead Caravans for Peace across the US annually gathering medical supplies, medicines and other needed items which they drive to Mexico from which they are shipped to Cuba. Lucius and company are peacemakers.

Bangladeshi economist Muhammed Yunus, founded a bank in 1976 to help poor folk get loans beginning with just \$27 in his pocket. Today this bank has 6.6 million borrowers, 97% of them women. This Nobel Peace Prize winner is recognized as a peacemaker for doing justice, by putting resources into the lives of the poor and giving them a fair chance. “No justice, no peace.”

Kathy Kelly, who preached here two weeks ago, is a beloved peacemaker. She is currently in Iraq and seeking to enter Iran. Kathy, like John, is a voice in the wilderness, yet she perseveres with patience and gentleness. We are indebted to her for her self-giving witness to the Prince of Peace.

We have no shortage of models, do we. And yet we look and long for another Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day, Dag Hammarskjold, William Sloane Coffin, Rosa Parks. Let us not lose hope. We lit a candle today because we believe in peace.

As we come to Christmas Eve, to the Word made flesh, we await the angelic promise in the words of the Christmas carol: “O morning stars together, proclaim the holy birth, and praises sing to God the King, and peace to all on earth!

The message of Christmas is peace. My maternal grandmother was pregnant with the last of her nine children at the start of World War I. Grandfather asked the children to help him name the newborn infant girl born October 9th, 1914. When they began to argue over it he declared, "I will name her "Irene" (the Greek word for peace) because we here and the whole world need peace." True to her name my Aunt Irene lived a serene and peace-loving life.

We continue to look for a peacemaker. And that's OK. But the reality is that peacemaking is the task of each of us. While the task before us is monumental, given the realities in Washington D.C., remember, it starts with simple acts of justice and mercy. No justice, no peace. Let's hear it again, as if we were among the marchers at City Hall: "No justice, no peace." So, thank you John, locust eater and prophet of the Most High. You indeed 'guide our feet into the way of peace.'

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