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Vision of Peace

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Texts: Isaiah 2:1-5; Matthew 21:1-11

Lori visited Hiroshima. An 18-year-old from Mount Zion Lutheran Church in Waterloo, she spent a year in Japan as an exchange student. With her classmates she visited Hiroshima, the first target of an atomic bomb on 6 August 1945. Some 250,000 people died there. Some were instantly evaporated. Others died of massive burns or were crushed in collapsed houses. Thousands died quickly or lingeringly from excessive radiation. Some are still dying of that today. Lori knew that before she went to Japan.

With her classmates she walked through the Peace Memorial Museum. "I remember my friends holding each other and sobbing as they filed past walls of pictures and burnt artifacts," she said. "It is impossible to describe the emptiness inside me as I comforted a crying friend. What could I say?"

Lori and her friends had prepared for the trip by making paper cranes, Japanese symbols of peace. She made 30 of them, and altogether they laid 1,000 symbols of peace at the foot of the cenotaph.

Remembrance Day that fall was different for Lori. "Remembrance Day before was listening to the older people talk about the war. Though it was sad, it wasn't real," she mused. "Now I cherish what I have, and hope for peace forever." She added thoughtfully, "It made me realize how a nuclear war would destroy the world."

In Hiroshima Lori discovered the reality and horror of war. I would think the grand vision of Isaiah has now become important to her: hammering swords into plowshares and spears

into pruning knives. Yes! For she shared war personally with her classmates: "Now I hope for peace forever. I realize how a nuclear war would destroy the world."

However, Lori also had another reaction to Hiroshima. Her parents went to Japan to visit her, and she took them to Hiroshima. This time her experience was quite different: "When I was with my friends there, I was seeing it from inside, and it was very emotional. But when I saw it with my parents, it was like looking at it from the outside."¹

Perhaps that double experience catches up our ambivalence regarding war and peace. From "inside" we see war in its horror. Nuclear war could wipe out life on Earth. Reeling back from that unspeakable reality we cry, "Peace at all costs!" From "outside" we see the unruliness of the nations, and resolve not to let ourselves be pushed around. Canada lies directly between the two superpowers and we cannot passively lie there: we need to exert our sovereignty in the Arctic, and establish our own foreign policy. And as we make such protestations, war and peace become less easily defined.

Indeed, sometimes force seems to be the only way open. Our Native Peoples have negotiated and negotiated with respect to their land rights and the inclusion of their aboriginal rights in the Constitution, but just when they seem to be getting somewhere the minister holding the portfolio of Indian Affairs and Northern Developments is moved to another department, or the talks founder in that no-man's land between Federal and Provincial jurisdiction. And in frustration they wonder if it is necessary to beat their plows into swords! Or if you were a Black South African living in SOWETO and saw a wall being built around your "homeland", would you not grit your teeth and fight the temptation to beat your pruning knife into a spear? Sometimes force seems to be the only option.

Besides all that, arms making and selling is big business. The world spends \$1.5 million on arms *every minute!* That represents a lot of jobs. Canada participates in that arms manufacture and through her military contingents in West Germany contributes significantly to the local economy. The West Germans may not like Canadian and American bases, but the presence of some 35,000 American military personnel in Nuernberg, for example, is a very nice economic shot in the arm!

Thus our ambivalence about war and peace. And as we watch the uncovering of official, sub-official, and clandestine arms trade networks linking the United States, Israel, Iran, and Central America, with tendrils reaching into Canada, we tend to despair: can anything be done at all to promote peace? Is Isaiah's vision merely wishful thinking?

Surely not! It is such a grand and noble vision. Jerusalem is become a global focus (not such an extravagant idea, considering it is the sacred center of three great world religions, and an east-west, north-south crossroads!). Much more, Jerusalem is the mount of revelation: the nations come together seeking a way to live. It is as though the nations come in humility and in bankruptcy of spirit, saying, "There must be a better way to live together." And isn't it just that plaintive, haunting thought that makes this vision of Isaiah so provocative? Surely there *must* be a better way to live together than this constant bickering and fighting! Surely there are alternatives to the use of force!

So we will not let this vision of Isaiah go.

What is God telling us with this vision?

God is telling us it is worthwhile having such a vision. You may be cynical about the nations ever making peace: "That'll be the day!" you say. You may be realistic and say, "Such a dream is a pipe-dream; we have to be strong." You may despair, and say, "What's the use? People are violent and will always be violent!" Nevertheless, it is worth having such a vision of universal peace. Just think what it would be like if *no one* held to the hope of peace!

And God is telling us, "This is my vision for the nations!" Because God is concerned about God's children. In my studies of the traditional spirituality and lifeways of the Native Peoples I am impressed again and again by their unfailing perspective, "What about our children?" The forest is there to be used... "But what about our children?" The waters are there to be drunk and played in... "But what about our children?" The Earth's bounties are for our livelihood... "But what about our children?" We white folk seem to have little thought for our children; we will cut down the last of the great forests for the sake of a few jobs and some lumber products with never a thought of the denuded land we leave for our children. We pour our effluent into the waters and shrug our shoulders and

make noises about the price of progress, seemingly unaware of the poisons we are leaving for our children. God, too, says, "What about my children? What about my creation? This vision of peace is *my* vision for *my* children." That makes it a sacred vision we ignore to our peril.

God is telling us something more: "I need you to bear witness to my vision for my children." "You see," God is saying, "there came a day when my Son stood at the gate of Jerusalem. And everyone seemed to hold their breath. What they wanted more than anything in the world was for him to turn his walking staff into a sword, mount a war-horse, and come charging into Jerusalem. Oh, they thought, then the very armies of heaven would come swooping down with trumpets blaring and banners flying. And out of the hovels, caves, back alleys, and secret hiding places guerilla forces would break into the open and with the war-cry of 'Son of David!' on their lips they would fall upon the Romans and set Israel free. Oh, it would be a slaughter! Roman blood would flow in the gutters; a Roman life would pay for every violation and atrocity, every insult and humiliation. The people wanted so much to be strong again, and to be seen as strong in the eyes of their neighbors.

"My Son knew all that. And for a moment I think the thought of power got to him. With a wave of his hand he could mobilize hundreds of people and start a revolution sweeping over the land like a grass fire. He would be a hero!

"Then he saw people begin to break branches off trees and strip off the leaves to make clubs. He saw the glint of sun on steel. For just a moment I think he regretted having sent his disciples for a *donkey*...

"He accepted the donkey. He rode it into the city. An animal not of war but of peace.... I was so proud of him!

"But he paid for it. People want military heroes. They want stories of war they can tell their grandchildren, stories of blood and valor. So finally my Son was killed. And oh! it was a day of judgment.... It exposed the huge violence in people. The mothers knew it was a day of judgment. Mothers know about war because mothers know about children.

"My Son bore witness to my vision of peace....

"Now I need *you* to bear witness to my vision of peace for my children. It is really not such an impossible vision. No more impossible than that my Son who was dead is alive again!

“Will you, like him, bear witness to my vision of peace for all my children?”

Let us pray:

O God of power and love, look in mercy upon our war-torn world, which still is your world.

You have made it; in it you delight to work; you have redeemed its people.

Grant reconciliation, we ask, between person and person, nation and nation, through the power of that great peace made by Jesus your Son.

May your servants not be troubled by wars and rumors of wars, but rather look up because their redemption draws near.

And when our King returns, may he find many waiting for him, and fighting with his weapons alone.

We ask this in the King's name, Jesus Christ your Son our Lord. Amen.²

Notes

- ¹ From an interview with Lori Main, *Waterloo Chronicle*, 19 November, 1986.
- ² Dick Williams, ed., *Prayers for Today's Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1977), 76f.