

A LOVER'S QUARREL WITH AMERICA

In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised up above the hills. Peoples shall stream to it, ²and many nations shall come and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. ³He shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; ⁴but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken.

(Micah 4:1-4, NRSV)

I loved him. I hated him. Now I see him in his historical context, and while I do not approve of what he did, at least as an adult I understand it from a different perspective. He was the seventh President of the United States, Andrew Jackson. Growing up in Tennessee, I was taught to be proud of Andrew Jackson, "Old Hickory," a fellow Tennessean like me. He made up for his lack of formal education by studying on his own. He was rough and tough and once killed a man in a duel for insulting his wife. As a major general during the War of 1812, he gained national prominence for defeating the British at the Battle of New Orleans. In Tennessee we learned a little song about Jackson's victory.

*In 1814 we took a little trip
along with Colonel Jackson
down the mighty Mississip.
We took a little bacon and we took a little beans
and we fought the bloody British
in the town of New Orleans.*

As a boy, I admired Andrew Jackson and considered him a hero. This changed when I learned about the Trail of Tears. I was outraged because I have Cherokee ancestors. Like many Southerners of Scots-Irish decent, some of my forebears intermarried with the Cherokee back in the 18th and 19th centuries. The terrible Trail of Tears goes back to Andrew Jackson's Indian removal policy in the late 1830's. He forced the Cherokee nation to give up all of its land east of the Mississippi River. Instead the Cherokee were forced to migrate to present-day Oklahoma. "The Cherokee people called this journey the 'Trail of Tears,' because of its devastating effects. The migrants faced hunger, disease, and exhaustion on the forced march. Over 4,000 out of 15,000...Cherokees died" (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h1567.html>).

Did anybody stand up to oppose the Trail of Tears? What about the churches, what about the clergy, did anyone dare take on Jackson, or were they too timid, too afraid of defeat, too afraid of looking foolish, too afraid of being called unpatriotic or un-American?

The Trail of Tears was neither the first nor last atrocity committed by an American President or the American government. From the presence of slaves since the 1600's to one broken Indian treaty after another, from our silence during the Armenian Genocide to our delayed involvement in WW II, from our treatment of Japanese citizens during the war to our interminably slow progress on civil rights, which some would argue still have not been fully

granted to all American citizens including people who are gay or lesbian.

Why keep rehashing such things? Yes, our government has made plenty of mistakes but it has done significantly more right than wrong. Why dwell on past failures? Because most of us truly love America and know that those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it. It's what one of my heroes, the recently deceased Rev. William Sloane Coffin, prophet and conscience of liberal Protestantism for decades, would call his "lover's quarrel with America." Because we love this country, because we cherish the hard-won freedoms we've inherited, because we too "hold these truths to be self-evident, that all [people] are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." Yes we believe in these stirring words, this courageous declaration written by Thomas Jefferson and signed by brave colonists on July 4, 1776, 230 years ago.

We believe so strongly in the promises contained in the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution, and the Bill of Rights that we cannot sit idly by while injustice exists in our country or in places around the world where our government has influence.

Not only does our American citizenship stir us to act, but our Christian faith calls us to action as well. Today's scripture lesson from the Hebrew prophet Micah offers inspiration. These prophetic words of hope move me every time I read them: "[God] shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own

fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken” (Micah 4:3-4, NRSV adapted).

Not only do we find these words in the Book of Micah, but also in the Book of Isaiah (with the exception of the part about the fig trees). Many modern scholars believe that both Micah and Isaiah used the same independent source for these hope-filled words.

Micah is one of the twelve Minor Prophets in the Hebrew Bible. He may well have been a younger contemporary of Isaiah, prophesying in the late 8th century BC. These were turbulent days following the fall of the Northern Kingdom, Israel. At the same time, the Southern Kingdom, Judah, lived under the thumb of the Babylonians.

Rev. Jedidiah Mannis, a minister in Cambridge, Massachusetts, notes that Micah, “...called for faith in something unseen: the latter days. In this latter time, said Micah, the entire world will stand in relation to God as once Israel alone had stood...It marks the fulfillment of God’s intentions and purposes for the world. The latter days are the completion of our history, the end of the time between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet’ of the kingdom of God... Then into view will come that kingdom which is here and which we yet long to see, that place where God is with us, and we with God, where God will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning or crying or pain any more”

(<http://www.firstchurchcambridge.org/sermons/sermon20040808.html>).

And then Micah gives us this wonderful image, perfect for a lazy summer day, sitting at peace, unafraid under one’s fig tree. Rev. Mary Luti, also a minister in Cambridge, notes that, “To sit unafraid under your own tree, to rest peacefully under your own vine—in this single striking image, the prophet Micah crystallizes God’s great

vision of healing and wholeness for the creation...All the peoples of earth stream to God's mountain where God presides. God judges them with divine insight. God instructs them with divine wisdom. Thus they stop learning war. They dedicate themselves instead to the hot, hard and artful work of the blacksmith, pounding swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. And then, when fear is gone, when nothing can harm them, when they too do no harm to anything on God's holy mountain, they all sit beneath their own trees—their figs, their olives, their lemons—and rest under their vines. The fellowship, the well-being, the harmony, the presence of God is their shade. This, Micah implies, is God's great shalom”

(<http://www.firstchurchcambridge.org/sermons/sermon20030518.html>).

So when might such a beautiful dream become a concrete reality? Who knows, besides God? Is it a utopian dream only to be fulfilled in heaven or an ideal for which we strive today or both? While Micah believed that such a world was possible in the 8th century BC, we're not so sure in the 21st century AD. Looking at the world it is easy to be cynical and hopeless, and yet our situation is not nearly as dire as Micah's. We are not living in a has-been country, overthrown by a mightier nation. We are not living as vassals in our own land. On the contrary, we are citizens living in the richest, most powerful, most influential country on the planet, which just happens to be the oldest modern democracy. We are citizens called to follow the way of Jesus, who spoke up and worked tirelessly for the downtrodden, the oppressed, the “least of these.” We are believers in the King of Love who taught us to love our enemies. We are disciples of the Prince of Peace who said, “Blessed are the peacemakers.”

What are we called to do as children of God in 2006? Many of us hold this truth to be self-evident, that we cannot allow anyone to perpetrate torture in the name of America.

We hold this truth to be self-evident that the Geneva Convention, adopted in 1949, is still necessary for the protection of prisoners of war, enemy combatants, or whatever label prisoners are given. We hold this truth to be self-evident, that the lives of the young men and women in our armed forces are *not* expendable and should only be used as the very last resort when every diplomatic means has been sincerely attempted. We hold this truth to be self-evident that violence begets violence. We hold this truth to be self-evident that if we want peace we must work for justice, if we want less terrorism then we must decrease terror in the lives of others including those who go to sleep every night in terror from the violence of poverty, the assault of hunger pangs, the brutality of watching their children die from preventable diseases, and the cruelty of having no future and no hope.

God sent prophets of old like Micah and modern prophets like William Sloane Coffin to carry on a lover's quarrel with us. While time and time again we resort to violence, God quarrels with us, arguing that our world would be better off if we beat our swords into ploughshares. While time and time again we spend our children's future on more weaponry than we could ever use, God quarrels with us, arguing that our world would be better off beating our spears into pruning hooks.

What kind of world might we live in if people of every stripe, Democrats and Republicans, Israelis and Palestinians, South Koreans and North Koreans, Muslims and Hindus, Jews and yes, even Christians, beat a few swords into ploughshares? Without a doubt, that would be a world of fewer trails of tears and more love, joy, and peace. These too are "unalienable rights" "endowed by [our] Creator." AMEN.

Written by Rev. Jimmy Only

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The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)

PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal God, we thank you for our country and the many blessings we enjoy—freedom and justice, opportunity and privilege. We are painfully aware, O God, of the many places around our world where children go hungry because their parents are penniless, where the elderly starve because of famine, where young people are imprisoned for speaking their minds. Help us commit our lives to following Christ who offered food to the hungry, water to the thirsty, and compassion to the suffering. Use us, our lives and resources, to transform this world of yours, that our sisters and brothers might know plenty instead of want, and freedom instead of oppression. Inspire America's leaders to rearrange national priorities that those people who are the most vulnerable will be the top priority. Challenge us to risk beating some swords into ploughshares and amaze us with the bountiful results. Let there be peace on Earth, O God, and let it begin with us.

Through our brother Jesus we pray. AMEN.