

THE SWORD OR THE SHOVEL?

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, ²during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, ‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. ⁵Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; ⁶and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”’ (Luke 3:1-6, NRSV)

How could anybody take this guy seriously? Based on appearances alone, John the Baptist, John the Baptizer, cousin of Jesus, looked certifiably crazy. One look at this guy and I would’ve rolled my eyes and thought “lunatic fringe.” I mean come on John, God’s talking to you? You’ve got no seminary degree. You’ve got no priestly robes, wandering around in the wilderness wearing itchy old camel’s hair. No offense John, but uncouth comes to mind when I consider your diet, eating bugs and organic honey that most certainly did not come from Whole Foods. I suppose we could overlook your eccentric appearance and unusual appetite if you could improve your people skills a bit. Seriously, back off John, nobody likes to be told to repent, turn around, change their ways. Nobody likes to be

told “Get right with God.” Get right, get ready or else. Get ready for what? Get ready for whom? God sent Moses and Joshua. God used David and Solomon. God spoke through Elijah and Amos. Don’t tell me God’s time is going to be wasted on the likes of you. In my humble opinion, John, you’re the one who needs help.

And yet, if it was the truth we wanted to hear 2,000 years ago before Jesus burst on the scene, John the Baptist thundered God’s truth like nobody else. The voice of one crying in the wilderness, that was John. Not only did he literally live in the wilderness, he was out there all by himself when it came to his message too. This, as far as the author of the Gospel of Luke was concerned, put him in good company with the likes of the prophet Isaiah, who said: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make the paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

Martin Luther King, Jr., was fond of quoting these words from Isaiah. They rang a hard yet hopeful truth in Isaiah’s time, in John’s time, in King’s time, and yes, they ring a hard yet hopeful truth in our time. If it’s the will of God we want to do, if it’s the path of Jesus we hope to follow, we need to get out our shovels and begin filling in the valleys of inequity and despair, leveling off the mountains of greed and selfishness. We need to work on making this crooked world straight. We need to find those places where our world’s veered off the path of sisterhood and brotherhood and get it back on the right track. We need to do something about those rough places. We need to smoothe out the sharp rocks in the road. We need to make life better for our sisters and brothers living in rusted out Flint, Michigan and the still devastated Gulf Coast region.

We need to help solve the problems of homelessness in New York City and the lack of affordable housing on Long Island.

And on this Second Sunday of Advent, the Sunday of Peace, we need to find a way to stop the violence and make peace in Darfur, Palestine, Afghanistan, and Iraq. With the report published this week by the bipartisan 10-member Iraq Study Group, headed by former Secretary of State, James Baker, and former Congressman, Lee Hamilton, our country has a much needed starting point for dialogue about reversing the cycle of violence in Iraq. Why bring this up in church on Sunday and make the congregation worry that the well-meaning minister will step on a political landmine and offend someone in the congregation? Because on this Sunday of Peace, we must remember that the one whose birth we prepare to celebrate on Christmas was a man who lived and taught love and peace.

On the night when the Prince of Peace was born in Bethlehem, a choir of angels sang out to the shepherds, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth *peace*, good will to all people.” In the Beatitudes Jesus said, “Blessed are the *peacemakers* for they will be called the children of God.” Later in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught us to *love* our enemies. Following his betrayal in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus told Peter to put away his sword “for those who live by the sword die by the sword.”

Speaking of peacemakers, in August 1967, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke on the topic, “Where do we go from here,” an apt title for our own moment in history. King said, “Through violence you may murder a murderer, but you can’t murder murder. Through violence you may murder a liar, but you can’t establish truth. Through violence you may murder a hater, but you can’t murder hate. Darkness cannot put out darkness. Only light can do that....Difficult and painful as it is, we must walk on in the

days ahead with an audacious faith in the future. When our days become dreary with low-hovering clouds of despair, and when our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, let us remember that there is a creative force in this universe, working to pull down the gigantic mountains of evil, a power that is able to make a way out of no way and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows. Let us realize the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”¹

Here on this Second Sunday of Advent, we need to keep the faith that the “arc of the moral universe” does indeed “bend toward justice.” If we trace the path of this arc back it bends sharply toward an animal feeding trough in a dilapidated Bethlehem stable—this the first advent or appearance of Christ. If we trace the path of this arc forward we will see it bend sharply again toward the second advent or appearance of Christ when we are all reunited with God at the last.

In the meantime, let’s prepare the way of the Lord, and make the paths straight. Let’s fill in every valley and level out every mountain. Let’s straighten out every crooked path and smooth out all the rough places. When we put away our swords and take out our shovels we might be closer to heaven than we ever thought possible while still on this earth.

A samurai warrior traveled to the distant home of an old monk. On arriving he burst through the door and demanded, “Monk, tell me! What is the difference between heaven and hell?” The monk sat still for a moment on the floor. Then he turned and looked up at the warrior. “You call yourself a samurai warrior, but, look at you. You’re hardly a real man at all.” “What?” cried the samurai, as he reached for his sword. “See,” said the monk, “You reach for your sword yet I doubt you could cut the head off a fly with that.” The

samurai was so angry that he could restrain himself no longer. He pulled his sword from its sheath and positioned it to cut off the old monk's head. At this the monk looked up and said, "That, my son, is the gate to hell." Realizing that the monk had risked his life to teach this lesson, the samurai slowly lowered his sword and put it back into the sheath. He bowed low to the monk in thanks for this teaching. "My friend," said the monk, "That is the gate to heaven."²
AMEN.

Written by Rev. Jimmy Only

Advent II

December 10, 2006

The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)

PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving God, Ruler of both the light and the darkness, send your Holy Spirit upon our preparations for Christmas: we who have so much to do seek quiet spaces to hear your voice each day; we who are anxious over many things look forward to your coming among us; we who are blessed in so many ways long for the complete joy of your kingdom; we whose hearts are heavy seek the joy of your presence; we are your people, walking in darkness, yet seeking the light. To you we say, "Come Lord Jesus!"

We remember this day all who need your help. For the hungry on Long Island and the millions starving in Africa we pray. We pray that local, national, and international leaders, as well as concerned citizens, might willingly get involved to make a difference.

Thank you, O God, for this Advent season, may our hearts be readied to meet you in friend and stranger alike. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.

Portions of this prayer were adapted from a prayer by Henri Nouwen found at www.cin.org/liter/advnouw.html

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http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/publications/speeches/Where_do_we_go_from_here.html

² http://www.healingstory.org/peace_tales/hsa_peace_stories.html