

Sermon: 'World Peace'

When I was maybe 10 years old, I started to pay a little closer attention to the news. My dad always had a copy of the Ottawa Citizen splayed out across the kitchen table when I woke up for school (this was one of the major papers that made it to people living in my small hometown in rural Ontario). And one day, in 1999, there was a headline across the front page that greatly troubled me, saying 'NATO had begun a bombing campaign in Kosovo'. It troubled me all day.

Back at home, sometime after dinner, my dad was watching the news, probably CNN; President Clinton was speaking to reporters, and those same words were there again, running along the bottom of the TV screen. Finally, I asked my dad the question that had been on my mind all day: 'will NATO bomb us?'

My dad explained to me that actually Canada was part of NATO. But I guess even then I could tell President Clinton, who I knew was American, was really making the decisions. So I asked my question differently: 'would America ever bomb us?' Again, my dad explained how the US and Canada were allies. We didn't always agree, but America was sort of like our big brother, they wouldn't bomb Canada.

I was able to go to sleep that night, and I didn't have any nightmares. But I think from that day on I had a very different idea about the world. I was now curious about Kosovo, for one. And I was now curious about Russia and China, who I learned had vetoed the US resolution in the UN Security Council, and so the newspapers also said that NATO was doing this bombing, rightly or wrongly, in violation of something called international law. I was curious how this all worked or didn't work.

Just two and half years later, 9/11 happened, and then the invasion of Afghanistan, and then Iraq. I was in high school by then, and President Bush was speaking of a world divided, either for or against us, telling a classic tale of good versus evil. In this same stretch of time, Katrina happened, the crash of 2008 happened. Obama came along in 2008, and I remember, in college, feeling so hopeful. Whatever the source of all this war and violence, abroad and at home in our schools

and in our cities, maybe this younger person who spoke about having hope and about the need for real change, who had opposed the war in Iraq as ‘a stupid war’ to use his words, really could end it. I wanted that so badly.

But, it turned out, I was as naive then as I was when I was 10. Old wars continued through the Obama years and disastrous new ones began on his watch in Libya, in Syria. A major study recently conducted by scholars at the Fletcher School’s Center for Strategic Studies found that the US has used its military to intervene in other countries 100 times in the last 30 years alone. Children in other places far away from these tranquil hills in Western Massachusetts or from rural Ontario do not have the luxury of waiting until they are 10 to learn about war; and our young servicemen and women, and their families, do not have the exorbitant privilege I had in college to be so willfully naive.

This is not about pointing the finger at America, by the way. Martin Luther King, Jr. famously did do that; during the Vietnam war he called America the greatest purveyor of violence in the world. This was when northern, liberal Americans had had quite enough of the young black prophet from the South. He was scolded in the pages of the New York Times for speaking out of turn, for getting out of his depth. He was told to stick to civil rights. He refused to; when he was killed, he was a poor and isolated man.

The world is a very different place today. But I think it is important to describe ourselves accurately. We are not a non-violent country. Our leaders do not believe in non-violence. Since this doesn’t really trouble us, is it any wonder that we have been at war constantly for nearly my entire life? Whereas during the Cold War, military interventions were justified as necessary to defeat the Soviet Union, in the last 30 years, without a single rival on the world stage, we have justified our many military interventions on the grounds of humanitarianism, acting out of a “responsibility to protect” those who cannot protect themselves. We no longer make war to win the West from indigenous peoples, like too many of our colonizing ancestors did, and we no longer wage war with cold calculation to win out over our rivals in the aftermath of the second

world war; now we make war out of the goodness of our hearts. Or at least that is how our leaders and media talk about war.

Which makes it difficult for us to talk about peace. And it makes it difficult for the world to talk about peace. Because, based on our actions as a country, we have to clarify, what exactly do we mean by peace? Do we mean intervention? Do we mean bombing campaigns? Russia went to war all on its own in Ukraine, but they've been paying attention. Their leaders also speak about 'liberating' Russian-speakers there, about going to war to protect those who cannot protect themselves, about intervening on humanitarian grounds. Like a former president of ours, Israeli leaders also speak about the existential threat of terrorism, and describe a classic tale of good versus evil. When we talk like this, there is only room for war; every problem can *only* be solved by force. Peace in this region or that one will come but only through the barrel of a gun, and through the humanitarianism and lofty ideals of the person who pulls the trigger.

This is how I can come to Peace Sunday, the Second Sunday of Advent, and feel exactly as the prophet does: I know that we should cry out, but *what shall we cry?* How do we get to that place and time of peace if we do not know where or when it is? How do we make real progress on behalf of all humanity when the paths that world leaders, including our own, have made are so crooked and jagged, so divisive and violent? We are lost in rough places.

But not for the first time. Our ancestors in faith were here also. And they heard the way leaders spoke. And the Lord GOD told them it was time to recover a different language. They remembered the high mountains and the pillars of fire and the whirlwinds from which a different One still also speaks. And even now, the One tells us, the way of peace will be clear and unencumbered, it will be level for all people, of all ages and all abilities. And it certainly will not be scarred and pot-marked from shells and shrapnel. And it will not be some narrow, temporary corridor; the way toward peace will be wide open to every nation and to all people.

There will always be people in this world who want war; and worse, people who talk of peace but mean war. So we need to recover the talk of God and the might of God. That is, we need to recover the talk of a parent who loves all their children equally. We must return to the image of God in this passage from Isaiah, who will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

This is an urgent task of churches everywhere. We actually must prepare the way. We have been doing this, we have to continue this work. We must reject war in the name of peace. We must repent or turn around, until our own headlines about our own actions trouble us as they do children. And troubled, we must move to forgive one another—nation to nation—and speak of a new beginning, a whole, new creation.

For better or worse, the time of the American century is ending. What we are living through now are the birth pangs of a new, cooperative life together. We have to get ourselves as Christians, as Jews, as Muslims, as people of faith or goodwill in the West and in the East, in the North and in the South, up to a high mountain, and herald the good tidings: even now, more than ever, the time of world peace is coming.

Alleluia and amen.