

Peace on Earth: Preparing for Peace
Isaiah 2:1-5
Romans 13:11-14
First Sunday of Advent
November 28, 2010
Rev. Heather Leslie Hammer

Our country is on alert against terrorism. We are presently at an "elevated" terror alert. From green (low risk) to red (severe risk), we are at the yellow, or elevated risk, what's called "significant" risk of attack. Does knowing this make you ready? Are you on the alert?

If you have been traveling by plane in the past couple of weeks, you know all about the new security measures using full-body scanning machines and personally invasive pat-downs. Do these measures make us feel any safer? Do they prepare us against the risk of terrorist threat?

Of course, that's the goal: to be ready.

Advent is the time of getting ready. But I hope it's not about preparing for terrorist attack. I hope it's more about preparing for peace.

I'd like to talk first about peacemaking on a personal level and then peacemaking on an international level.

You may have had a very peaceful Thanksgiving, everyone smiling around the table just like in a Norman Rockwell painting. Or maybe there was some tension. First of all, maybe some members of the family refused to come because you may not be talking to each other right now. Or perhaps they came but brought up conflicts and disagreements around the table. For example:

Uncle Todd wants to take a vacation but lets the entire table know that he can't afford it because he lent money to his cousin John, who is still unemployed after a year. Cousin John has yet to pay Todd back.

According to marriage and family counselors, if John is there, here's what he should say at the dinner table in response: "It's true. I haven't found a job yet. From the outside, it probably looks like I'm not trying hard, but I am, and I'm actually going through a tough emotional time. I'm putting on a good face to pretend that I'm doing well." Do you see how this response might diffuse Todd's resentment?

Another table conversation: Every year, Jane criticizes her daughter-in-law Ann about her cooking. This holiday, the turkey was dry, the stuffing soggy, and the yams were bland, she said. Naturally, *she* would have done a better job. What should Ann say, sitting there listening to all this? (Of course, she could storm out of the room.) But the counselors say, she should reply, "It's disappointing that my cooking doesn't match your standards, but

based on my skills and time, this is the best I could do." There's not a lot more Jane can complain about after that.

One more scenario: Jack is lecturing his brother Tim about Tim's son Kerry's 5-year college plan, criticizing him for staying in college that long and not graduating on time. What should Tim say? The counselors advise him to say: "You're right. It's been a challenge for Kerry. With all the budget cutbacks, kids can't get the classes they need. So, many are forced to extend their college years. I appreciate your concern."

What do you hear in these non-argumentative responses? There seems to be a readiness to hear the other person without getting defensive. The responding person needs to be ready to speak in such a way that the peace is kept. So—John admits that he's having a hard time while looking for a job. Maybe his family will be a little more sympathetic. And Ann is ready for her mother-in-law's criticism about her cooking (after all, it's nothing new), so she is honest and brief in her response: "I'm doing the best I can." And Tim recognizes the truth in what his brother is saying about his son's extended time in college, so rather than say, "It's not *your business!*" he says instead, "I appreciate your concern" ("Peaceable Feasting," by Jessica Yadegaran in *Contra Costa Times*, Nov. 15, 2010).

We prepare for peace by being ready to listen to the other side and to respond in a way that lessens tension, while still being honest with our feelings. Prepare to listen, reduce tension, and speak with honesty.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could always do that?

Wouldn't it be wonderful if nations of the world could do that? Prepare to listen, reduce tension, and speak with honesty.

I have attended several meetings about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the past month. In one interfaith gathering where Jews and Palestinian Christians were present, people lashed out with verbal attacks, and one person stood up and threatened to walk out. I'm not sure that the angry participants *were* listening, or trying to reduce tension, nor were they always speaking with honesty.

At another meeting, I heard the Palestinian pastor of the Lutheran Church in Bethlehem speak. The church is called the Christmas Lutheran Church. The pastor, Dr. Mitri Raheb, spoke about the oppression he experiences every day living in Israeli-occupied Palestine. He spoke of the failure of the leaders to keep peace after trying dialogue for 17 years—which hasn't worked—and engaging in an arms struggle—which hasn't worked. He proposes a third alternative. It is to raise the Christian voice in the Holy Land. Most people speak of Arab-Israeli conflict, meaning Muslims and Jews, being at odds. But Dr. Raheb reminded us that there are also Christians still living in the birthplace of Jesus! The Christian clergy of Palestine got together a year ago and wrote and signed a document, called the Kairos Document. It was modeled after the Kairos Document that pastors signed in South Africa in 1985, to work together to end Apartheid.

The Kairos Palestine Document condemns the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. It pleads for a just peace. Now, there is no peace, with a wall that separates Palestinians from free travel to work, to school, and to the hospital. Now, there is no peace while settlements of Israelis are being built on Palestinian land. The Palestinians are tired of waiting, yet they insist that because they believe in one God, a God of many peoples, they will keep hoping for peace. But they will not wait passively. They defy the Israeli belief that a Holy War can be ordained by God, instead they wish for peace. The Document calls for resistance "with love as its logic." It advocates for divestment from any support of the Israeli occupation. And for this reason, the Document is controversial. The United States buys weapons for Israel, and American companies invest in the building of the wall that denies Palestinians their freedom. The pastors of Christian churches ask: "Let us resist evil together, the evil of occupation and the infernal cycle of violence." And, of course, both sides have caused this cycle of violence. The pastors say that the problem is largely a problem of mutual trust
(<http://www.oikoumene.org/gr/resources/documents/other-ecumenical-bodies/kairos-palestine-document.html>).

The Prophet Isaiah says:

""[God] shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; 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"" (2: 2-5).

This is an anti-war message. I don't know how you can read it any other way.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if both Israelis and Palestinians would prepare for peace, not for conflict? Wouldn't it be wonderful if both Israelis and Palestinians would listen, reduce tension, and act with honesty?

This Palestinian pastor, Dr. Mitri Raheb, is trying to do just that. He identifies with Jesus, who was a Palestinian, one who suffered under the Roman occupation and who gave his life as a sacrifice when he was executed by an occupying government. In his book *Bethlehem Besieged*, Raheb has included a photo of a painting called "The Christ in the Palestinian Context." It was one of many paintings submitted by Palestinian artists to the art center that Raheb runs as part of his church. A competition was held during the 2002 siege of Bethlehem. Israeli soldiers broke into the art center with machine guns and damaged the gallery. While Bethlehem was under forced curfew, the church people rebuilt and displayed this painting of the crucified Palestinian Christ in the gallery when it opened again. This painting shows Jesus, a Palestinian, with hands nailed to the cross and a crown of barbed wire, in the midst of 21st-century suffering of Palestinians. We can find Jesus in every time of history where there is suffering.

When we were in Chicago, I visited the Art Institute and was captivated with a painting by Chagall, called "White Crucifixion." Chagall was a Jewish artist, so it seems odd that he would paint a crucifix. But Chagall's point is to show Jesus as a suffering Jew. He created this painting in 1938, as Hitler was taking over Germany and invading surrounding countries, forcing Jews to live in ghettos and then deporting them to extermination camps.

Jesus in this painting is draped in a Jewish prayer shawl and all around the cross of suffering are scenes of pogroms where Jews are being persecuted. Chagall's painting shows Jesus, a Jew, in the midst of 20th century suffering. We can find Jesus in every time of history where there is suffering.

These two paintings remind me that Jesus is in the midst of all suffering. Israeli Jews suffer when they fear Palestinian suicide bombs. Palestinians suffer when they do not have access to their land and to human rights.

Today in Bethlehem, we have a United Methodist missionary, Janet Lahr Lewis, who advocates for peace with justice in the town we sing about, "O little town of Bethlehem," where Jesus was born, a town so plagued with tension and violence. Janet spoke to clergy last week at a Conference at Mt. Hermon, and I came away with a deep hope for peace in Bethlehem. Janet had made a tourist trip to the Holy Land some years ago, and when she returned to the U.S., she recognized in herself a call, actually a strong "push," she calls it, to return first to Galilee, then to Bethlehem, to help United Methodists understand the oppression that Palestinians face under occupation in the West Bank and Gaza.

Both Israelis and Palestinians need to believe in peace. They both need to believe in hope and prepare to practice peace. They need to see things not just from their own point of view, but also from their neighbor's. Jews, Christians, and Muslims have been neighbors for generations in the Holy Land, God's Land. It is time they acted like neighbors, with a new vision of how to live together. It is time that countries around the world work with Israel-Palestine for peace.

Dr. Raheb of Bethlehem, says, "Holding to a hopeful vision in the context of war gives hope a new meaning. It is no longer something we see but rather something we practice, something we live, something we advocate, something we plant. At times when we feel as if the world must be coming to an end tomorrow, our call is not to wait, not to cry, nor to surrender. Rather, our only hopeful vision is to go out today into our garden, into our society, and plant olive trees. If we don't plant any trees today, there will be nothing tomorrow. But if we plant a tree today, there will be shade for the children to play in, there will be oil to heal the wounds, and there will be olive branches to wave when peace arrives" (*Bethlehem Besieged*, 157). This is preparing for peace.

When Paul wrote to the early Christian church in Rome, there was probably both personal dissention and political unrest. Christians, who were first Jews, didn't get along with Christians, who were gentiles, never having been Jews. There was argument about whether you had to be circumcised to be a Christian, whether you could eat certain foods, or live a certain way. And there was certainly political turmoil. Christians were being arrested and detained and martyred in Rome. It must have been hard just to wait and pray. In this time of suffering and unrest, Paul wrote a pastoral letter. He said to live honorably and to set aside the works of darkness, and instead to put on "the armor of light." He said, in other passages, "to put on Christ," and let him be the armor. We need to "put on the armor of Christ," to listen, reduce tension when we can, and vow to speak and live in

honesty. I hope we can prepare for peace in our families and in our world. "Let us walk in the light of the Lord."

There is always another chance. If you are at odds with a family member, maybe you will dare to say, "I don't want to live like this any more." Give peace a chance. I hope in the world, too, we will give peace a chance.