

Text: Luke 2:7-21, 25-32

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Peace is Possible

Peace: It's the watchword on this first Sunday of Advent. We began:

Comfort, comfort ye my people,
Speak ye peace, thus saith our God.
Comfort those who sit in darkness
Mourning 'neath their sorrows load

Speak ye to Jerusalem
of the peace that waits for them
Tell her that her sins I cover
And her warfare now is over...

In a crescendo through the service, "Peace" keeps being our spoken request. In Psalm 122, we read, "Peace be within your walls...I will say, 'Peace be within you.'"

And then from Isaiah, Anne read to us of this time:

When they shall [be able to]
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.

When there won't be gun ranges, like golf driving ranges, where people practice not hitting a small ball, but hitting an outline of another person, a bulls-eye to the heart.

As far back as antiquity, people have spoken of no longer needing to "learn war." It wasn't just in the 1960's that we sang that gospel song: "ain't gonna study war no more..."

Peace, it's the watchword for all our Old Testament Bible texts today, this first Sunday in Advent. It's why we lit a first candle for peace today on the Advent Wreath.

Don't we all yearn for it – peace in our world, peace in our families, peace within our own troubled hearts?

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The Message of Peace is also central to the New Testament writer, Luke. That's why his description of Jesus' birth centers on the themes of peace. Angels sing to the shepherds, "Peace on Earth!" And the old man Simeon sees the newborn in the Temple, and says, he now can die in peace.

Peace for all the world, peace within one yearning heart.

Two theologians of our time, John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg, posit that this opening to Luke's Gospel was very intentional.¹ Luke carefully crafted this birth narrative, focusing on peace, the way a fine symphonic composer writes the overture. Just as an overture sounds the themes that will be developed during the movements of the symphony that follow, Luke carefully describes elements of Jesus' birth with an eye towards salient themes of Jesus' message that Luke will develop in the remainder of his book.

Peace is at Luke's centerpiece, say Borg and Crossan, because those hearing Luke's gospel in the Roman Empire had two peace proposals to consider, two radically different and competing ideologies about how peace could be secured.

One was the *Pax Romana*, the peace of the Roman Empire, achieved by war and violence and secured by ongoing domination. The other was the Peace of Christ, achieved through non-violence, and secured by ongoing justice for all.

Pax Romana was real, an historic and long-lasting achievement, gratefully received by a people exhausted by warfare. Octavian secured the peace in 31 BCE after years of bloody civil war between warring Roman consuls: Julius Caesar battling Pompey; then Caesar's followers warring against his assassins; and finally Octavian, triumphing over Mark Antony and Cleopatra's Egypt.

When Octavian emerged victorious, about 25 years before Jesus' birth, Octavian was renamed Caesar Augustus: Latin for "One Who is Divine." His Greek title meant "One who is Worshipped." Because Augustus had brought peace to the whole Mediterranean and saved the Roman Empire, he was called Savior of the World and the Bringer of Peace. Because he was heir to the already divine Julius Caesar, Augustus was called Son of God.

Do these accolades sound familiar?

The titles given Augustus under *Pax Romana* – the new and lasting peace of the Roman Empire – are the same praises Luke's angels sing for Jesus' birth. The little baby is also acclaimed "Lord," "Son of God", Bringer of Peace, "Savior." And like the broadly reaching *Pax Romana*, the angels in Luke declare that the peace Jesus will bring shall also be for "all peoples."

So there were choices in Luke's time, say Borg and Crossan, with which readers of Luke's gospel would be wrestling. Which "program of peace" for all peoples was better: the Roman vision of an imperial kingdom, of peace through war and victory, or the Christian vision of God's kingdom lived on earth, brought about nonviolently, through justice for all?

Peace through violence or peace through justice.

The people of Luke's time had choices. So do we.

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Luke, of course, does offer a lovely picture: the peace for all, cradled in nonviolent justice. But is it more than an outdated dream? Or does history teach that war is inevitable? Should the lilting overture to the Gospel of Luke be relegated to a children's fairy tale – a tableau of costumed angels and shepherds that we smile upon in an annual Christmas pageant, but then pack away for the rest of the year, facing our cold January not as dreamy children, but as realistic adults, whose armaments are needed to protect the little ones?

Assessing Luke's story, we must ask two tough questions: Is peace without violence possible; and Why should we see our sworn enemies as people to be treated with dignity? Can we afford that?

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President Kennedy raised both of these questions six months before he died. In a speech hailed this year by the New York Times as one that changed history, Kennedy 50 years ago invited the country to see the world differently – to change the paradigm of what we deemed possible. ²

It was 1963, a time when we Americans wondered if we would wake to a nuclear holocaust caused by the mutual destruction of the US and the Soviet Union. At American University, Kennedy boldly asked us to consider peace. "We have no more urgent task!"³

Not a Pax Americana enforced on the world by American weapons of war...I am talking about genuine peace, the kind of peace that makes life on earth worth living, the kind that enables men and nations to grow, and to hope, and build better life for the children, not merely peace for Americans but peace for all men and women, not merely peace in our time but peace in all time. ...

Yes, the Soviets might need to shift *their* views. But, said Kennedy, "we [Americans] must [also] re-examine ours, as individuals and as a nation, for our attitude is as essential as theirs."

Kennedy asked Americans to reconsider the way we saw the Soviet people, our enemies, reminding us that they did not seek war either, having just lost at least 20 million people in WWII, more than any other country. Kennedy urged us not to fall into the same trap as the Soviets, not to see only a “distorted and desperate view of the other side.”

For in the final analysis, President Kennedy said, “our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children’s futures. And we are all mortal.”

Reconsider your views of your sworn enemies, our President was saying. See them like us, deserving dignity, wanting peace.

Kennedy also asked our country to

examine our attitudes towards peace itself. Too many of us think it is impossible. Too many think it is unreal. But that is a dangerous, defeatist belief. It leads to the conclusion that war is inevitable, that mankind is doomed, that we are gripped by forces we cannot control. We need not accept that view. Our problems are manmade; therefore, they can be solved by man. ...

Man’s reason and spirit have often solved the seemingly unsolvable, and we believe they can do it again....based not on a sudden revolution in human nature, but on a gradual evolution in human institutions.... Genuine peace must be the product of many nations, the sum of many acts....For peace is a process--- a way of solving problems.

“....History does not teach the inevitability of war,” Kennedy continued:

History teaches us that enmities between nations, as between individuals, do not last forever. ...So let us persevere. Peace need not be impracticable, and war need not be inevitable.... Confident and unafraid, we must labor on – not towards a strategy of annihilation but towards a strategy of peace.

Justice would underpin our efforts for peace:

We shall be prepared if others wish [war]...But we shall also do our part to build a world of peace where the weak are safe and the strong are just.

This speech by Kennedy was not popular with US military leaders. It was a surprise to the Pentagon and State Department, because Kennedy was convinced that had they seen it in advance, they would have undercut him, calling him weak.⁴

The speech did make a difference. With the public's support, the Senate shifted ground, and in a few months the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty with the Soviet Union was signed and went into effect.

Can we again imagine a world, as we did once, 50 years ago, where we treat one another with dignity, conscious of our differences, but committed to peace as the best, most effective strategy?

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Another man imagined the possibility of peace where none thought it possible.

Alec Reid died last week in Northern Ireland where he had served for years as a Catholic priest. Reid was instrumental in achieving the 1998 Good Friday Peace Accord that brought peace to Ireland after years of bloodshed between Catholic and Protestants.

Alec Reid first came into public awareness through what became an iconic photo published in 1988, ten years prior to the Peace Accords. The Northern Ireland "Troubles" had grown particularly violent. Two plain clothes British officers mistakenly drove among a funeral procession for an IRA man; the furious crowd pulled them from their car, stripped them, and despite Fr. Reid's efforts, executed the two. A photo showed the old, white haired priest kneeling beside the bloodied and pummeled bodies, giving them last rites, a dangerous and courageous step amid the seething mourners.⁵

Michael Higgins, president of Ireland, said Reid's "ministering of the last rites to the two British corporals brutally killed in 1988, offered us an image of decency struggling to assert itself amidst brutality."⁶

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How did Reid gain this courage? This willingness to value all? His father died when he was six, and his mother moved the young family back to live with her parents. As a student, he'd excelled at hurling, where he learned to win and lose, and to respect the opposite side. And he trusted the Holy Spirit. Recalling his hurling, Reid later said,

...if things were going badly with any of the negotiations between the various parties in the North, I would say, 'Well, we will have to put the Holy Spirit in goal' and if things were going well, the Holy Spirit was a centre forward.

You see, say Luke and Alec Reid, there's a Spirit that assists, so we can back off our own argument, and listen to the one who so angers us. Because of that, peace is possible where before there had only been warfare.

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What was not then known when Alec Reid appeared in the photo that flashed around the world, was that Alec Reid had already begun a shuttle diplomacy, trying to secure peace. Under his clothes, bloodied that day, was a letter he was carrying from the non-violent part of the Catholic movement to Gerry Adams, the beginning of a dialogue that eventually brought all factions together. According to Kevin Cullen of *The Boston Globe*, "if a date can be ascribed to the birth of the peace process in Northern Ireland," it was at a secret meeting at Fr. Reid's monastery, at the priest's urging, when two opponents first shook hands."⁷

Gerry Adams told the BBC: "What Alec Reid did was, he lived the gospel message." Against the prevalent opinion of what was wise or even possible, Reid "developed a view that there had to be dialogue, and he was tenacious."⁸

Former Irish President Mary McAleese told mourners:

In this world of people barricaded against each other by contempt, fear and hatred, there often seemed precious little space for a culture of Christian love to flourish, for we Christians had mostly decided to love only our own denomination and to remain estranged from those who were not our very own...

Into this tightly bound world of vanities where people refused to talk to other people because of a long list of because's, where violence sharpened tongues and hardened hearts, there came the rather quiet and humble figure of Al Reid.

He saw ways to soften hearts, he found words to persuade the estranged to talk, to take a chance on one another, to find common ground. He believed we were better than we had become.⁹

For Alec, said his Superior in the abbey, "respect for the dignity of each human person was a crucial attitude....When asked who he represented in the peace-making process, Fr. Alec would simply say that he represented the next person who was going to be killed or hurt in the conflict."¹⁰

In 2005, Alec Reid helped broker peace in the Basque region of Spain, another part of the globe where violence had erupted. "In the 1970's and 80's the IRA and ETA traded not just mutual expressions of revolutionary solidarity, but also training tips and tactics," said Cullen. "The car bombs that rocked the Spanish cities of Bilbao and Barcelona were perfected in Belfast."¹¹

So when peace was being explored in Spain, the Irish and Basque allies again conferred. As the South Africans had previously mentored the IRA, advising how to negotiate a fair and just settlement through a peaceful, political process, the IRA

now advised the Basque separatists. Another unconditional ceasefire was announced. And Fr. Reid was part of it, again.

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Do you see the power of peace at work? Rebels who believed only violent means could liberate them from powers seen as unjust and unyielding –in South Africa, in Northern Ireland, in Spain – found ways to negotiate a just peace, with the help of Christians determined to treat all sides with dignity, determined to insist on a just outcome.

There are TV channels dedicated to the *history* of war, the tactics, the strategies. When will the story of *peace* become better known? The truth of how *waging peace* can succeed: lives changed, people saved....

When Fr. Reid's death became known, one man on the streets of Ireland told the BBC, "He should have got a Nobel Peace Prize...But maybe he turned it down. The only prize he wanted was peace." One elderly woman, tears streaming down her face, said: "He should be remembered with respect. He was someone who children should aspire to be like."¹²

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What's the story we tell *our* children? Here we tell them about Jesus' way of peace. And we will keep telling them that peace is possible, when built upon justice and fairness. We'll keep telling the story, through Advent and beyond.

Because when courageously lived out, this story of peace can transform us and the world. It already has!

¹ The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Birth (Harper One, 2007), 56-65, 69, 93-96, 165. I rely on this text extensively in my four-part Advent Series, and will be leading a book group on this book in January 2014.

² Adam Clymer, "Remembering Two Seminal Kennedy Speeches," New York Times (June 9, 2013)
<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/09/us/remembering-two-seminal-kennedy-speeches.html>

³ John F. Kennedy, American University Commencement Address (June 10, 1963),
<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/jfkamericanuniversityaddress.html>

⁴ Clymer, above.

⁵ Kevin Cullen, "The Long Bloody Path to Irish Peace," The Boston Globe (April 19, 1998),
http://www.boston.com/globe/nation/packages/good_friday/archives_041998_path.htm

⁶ “Northern Ireland peace process priest Fr Alec Reid Dies, “
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-25051304>

⁷ Kevin Cullen, “The Long Bloody Path to Irish Peace,” The Boston Globe (April 19, 1998),
http://www.boston.com/globe/nation/packages/good_friday/archives_041998_path.htm

⁸ “Fr Alec Reid: Reaction to death of the Belfast priest,” (Nov. 22, 2013),
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-25054024>

⁹ “Troubles priest ‘artisan of peace,’” The Belfast Telegraph (November 27, 2013),
<http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/local-national/northern-ireland/troubles-priest-artisan-of-peace-29787862.html>

¹⁰ Fr. Kelleher, “FR. ALEC REID: SERVANT OF CHRIST IN A SITUATION OF CONFLICT: HOMILY AT HIS FUNERAL LITURGY, MARIANELLA DUBLIN NOVEMBER 25, 2013”, <http://redemptorists.ie/system/files/203/original/fr-alex-reid-homily.pdf?1385461248>

¹¹ Kevin Cullen. “Maintaining Belief in Peace Aided Northern Ireland Transformation,” The Boston Globe (Sept. 27, 2005),
http://www.boston.com/news/world/articles/2005/09/27/maintaining_belief_in_peace_aided_n_ireland_transformation/

¹² “Northern Ireland peace process priest Fr Alec Reid Dies, “
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-25051304>