

Guide Our Feet
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December 8, 2024

Do you enjoy musicals? My three favorite musicals are Les Mis and Evita and the version of Jesus Christ Superstar with John Legend. What's special about musicals is that, at any moment, the characters might break out into song!

There are traditions within the scripture like this, too. After the crossing of the Red Sea, Moses and the Israelites and Miriam begin to sing with joy. When Hannah gives birth to Samuel, a long awaited child, she, too sings praise to God. Here, in Luke 1, we have the song of Mary – known as the Magnificat (from her words, “my soul magnifies the Lord” – and the song of Zechariah, at the birth of his son, who became John the Baptist.

This song of Zechariah's is the scripture we heard this morning, and like the other songs, he celebrates God coming to the rescue of the whole people. The close of his song brings up the hope of peace among people, which we hear throughout the story of Jesus' birth – we can think of the angels' words to the shepherds that we see everywhere during Christmas – “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace.” Zechariah says:

Because of the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to shine upon those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.

There is an African-American spiritual, one of my favorite, that echoes this, “Guide my feet, Lord, while I run this race.”

Our other text this morning is the scripture that breathes life into the image we know so well of the Lion who lays down with the Lamb, the classic portrait of peace:

The wolf shall live with the lamb;
the leopard shall lie down with the kid;
the calf and the lion will feed together,
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze;
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

...

They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain.

As you heard me share with the children earlier, this promise of peace is stunning because it announces and claims the *impossible* reconciliation. The most hardened of enemies shall sleep in trust together. It rests upon a foundation of hope in God and God's grace for reconciliation that exceeds our human powers of diplomacy or friendship.

When we pray for peace on earth, we acknowledge that what we long for is far beyond our possible making, and yet, recognizing the elusiveness of the goal will not stand in our way of *trying to make it so*, with God's help. For every step toward the goal, every smaller peace, is in part, reaching it and is eternally worthwhile.

When I think about peace, especially in this time of interminable wars, I come back to my first chaplaincy in Chicago in the summer of 2001. A divinity student, I was serving at Christ Medical Center to the southwest of the city, and it was one of the few Level One Trauma Centers in the area. For that reason, our ER was extremely busy, and we received many of the gunshot wounds from the southside of Chicago.

During the week, I was assigned to the Medical/Surgical floor, which meant that, after surgery, these young people with gunshot wounds came upstairs to my floor. I made daily rounds and would stay and talk or pray with anyone who needed to.

Meeting these young people and listening to their stories has been one of the most impactful experiences of my life; in many ways, their stories set the course for me. They were young people, between 18 and 24 mostly, and mostly young men, although a few were women. Almost all felt trapped into gang affiliation, because they couldn't find any alternatives to navigate their neighborhoods.

One young man told me that every man he knew was either in a gang, in jail, or dead. He didn't know what other kind of life to picture for himself. As I stood in their hospital rooms, almost every single one of these patients said the same thing: that they wanted to get away from the violence. They wanted to stay alive and find another path. They were scared, and they weren't sure what choices they had, but they didn't want to live in fear of dying any longer.

But, there was one young man who was different, whom I will never forget. He said the opposite. He was unapologetically full of rage and bent on revenge: "As soon as I get out of the hospital, I'm going to go back and find that guy who shot me and kill him."

I think, if we are telling the truth, each of us can recognize within ourselves from time to time an impulse toward revenge. (Even if it's as passive as, "I'm not going to be the one to text first" or as ineffective as beating on the horn.) We have a God-given desire for justice, but we have a choice: to use this urge for justice as a weapon (revenge) or as a tool for healing, for extending justice to all.

The lion and the lamb scripture comes from Isaiah 11, and earlier in Isaiah, in the second chapter, we find another scripture that most of us have heard before, primarily through the music of the Civil Rights Movement:

He shall judge between the nations
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
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.

The plowshare is the sharp blade on the bottom of the plow. The pruning hook is a curved blade with a long handle. Both are tools for farming and cultivating the earth. Tools for feeding hungry people. When war is over, the precious metal and sharpened blades of swords

and spears can be better used as tools than as weapons, and so when the people begin to pound their swords into plowshares, it is a sign that they feel secure in peace.

The story of Jesus' birth and the scriptures of the prophets are woven through with promises of peace. Our hearts resonate – we yearn for there to be peace on Earth. Although we often feel overwhelmed by the larger forces at work, we have a crucial role.

We have a crucial role as citizens to speak for peace and peaceful resolutions. And we must also give attention to a reorientation of our own hearts from sword to plowshare; individually, spiritually, we are called to set down the impulse for revenge, to allow ourselves to become reconcilers instead.

If, as individuals, we took all the energy we spent within ourselves nursing thoughts of tiny revenges and repurposed it toward anything constructive, what could we then have? Could one lion lay down with one lamb?

Or if as nation-states, we took all the energy we spent enacting revenge on our “enemies” and repurposed that energy as a tool for growth and productivity and creativity, what could we then have? What if our justice system kept at the forefront the mission of rehabilitation and restoration rather than revenge?

Jesus came, Zechariah says, “by the tender mercy of our God,” “to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” Guide our feet, Lord, guide our feet.

Amen.