

Text: Micah 5: 1-5
Title: Out of Broken Glass
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On a silent night, holy night,
when all was calm and all was bright,
and the little town of Bethlehem lay still, in a deep and dreamless sleep,
hundreds of tanks and armored vehicles,
burst through the city gates and laid siege to the city.

Bethlehem, in the Palestinian West Bank, is enclosed by an apartheid-like wall with a few gated checkpoints. On April 2, 2002, from five different directions, the Israeli Army invaded the city through those gates. The rationale was a suicide bombing that took place in Jerusalem a few days earlier, but the build-up of military might around Bethlehem had begun weeks and weeks earlier.

Bethlehem was besieged before first light.
Tanks rumbled through the streets,
Apache helicopters hovered overhead,
and there was the *tac....tac..tac,tac....tac.....tac* of automatic machine guns,
and the sporadic single shot response of Palestinian gunman,
and the whistle of rockets before buildings collapsed into rumble.

The army moved methodically. Block by block, street by street, door by door. Breaking in and breaking down. Families huddled in bomb shelters and back rooms. There was a scattered disorganized resistance.

But, a small band of armed Palestinian militants fleeing from the Israeli troops broke into the compound around the Church of the Nativity and took refuge or got ready for a fight. Almost 60 priests, monks, and nuns who live in the church compound were trapped inside along with other Palestinian civilians. All told there were approximately 200 people in the church compound.

The army positioned tanks in Manager Square, set up snipers on roof tops,
and used the "Palestinian Peace Center" as their logistical headquarters.

What unfolded was a tense, bloody, 39 day stand-off.

And this little town became the focus of the world's attention.

And the hopes and fears of all the years, gave way to fear.

And the weapons of war split the skies where the angels sang.

And place where the Prince of Peace was born became a killing ground.

And the sons of Abraham killed one another in Bethlehem.

Bethlehem is a backwater village, set on some insignificant scrub brush hills, about six miles southwest of Jerusalem. Bethlehem's significance in the Old Testament is substantial. The stories of Rachel, Ruth, Boaz, and David all run through Bethlehem. But, Micah is the only prophet to mention Bethlehem.

Most biblical scholars figure that Micah was written about 800 years before the birth of Jesus. Written during a time of instability and imminent invasion it is a short little book that long on prophetic rage about injustice to the poor, oppression by the rich, indifference of the rulers, and empty religious ritualism.

But, right in the middle of the gloom and doom of an impending destruction there is a fragrant whiff of hope ~ as if a window was pushed open. Micah announces that out of ragtag-good-for-nothing-Bethlehem there will come a ruler whose reach will be to the ends of the earth, and from the line of David there will come a king whose reign will be peace.

And, those few lines have been picked up as prophetic foreshadowing of the birth of Jesus. Matthew writes in his gospel that when Herod gathered together the chief priests and teachers of law to ask where their Messiah was to be born they quoted this little text in Micah. The Christ will come from Bethlehem.

Now, in some ways this text picks up a familiar theme: In God's economy there is a great reversal and that at which is insignificant will be exalted.

The poor will be rich,
the last will be first,
the servant will be king,
and the tables will be turned.

This text is another reminder that the ways of God are not the ways of humanity. From the places where you least expect it will come what you least expect. From the last and the least, from cradle and cross, from virgin womb and sealed tomb will come what you least expect. It is a tender and beautiful text in that regard.

But, there is a second, more substantial theme.....
Our translation reads:

And he will be our peace

The orthodox interpretation is that this coming Messiah will not just embody peace,
or inject peace,
or broker peace,
or teach peace,
or pray for peace,
but that the Christ will be our peace.

Underneath that reading is the assumption that we are estranged and at war ~ not just with one another ~ but with God.

Now, that sense of humanity's relationship with God is easily dismissed. It is archaic. It is unenlightened. It is rooted and gnarled in a life choking guilt....

Surely we're at least neutral before God,
or we hold a spark of God,
or we're chums with God,
or we're some part of God.

Or mostly, God is a mystery that we can't know and we're just good folks trying to lead good lives. Surely we're not at war with God.

But, a historically reformed (biblical) understanding is that we are alienated from God and from one another and the foul fruit of that alienation is found in our broken relationships, our twisted and troubled souls, and in the tanks of armies and the guns of terrorists

Listen to the way it is framed in the Belgic Confession:

We believe that by the disobedience of Adam original sin has been spread through the whole human race. It is a corruption of all nature-- an inherited depravity which even infects small infants in their mother's womb, and the root which produces in man every sort of sin. It is therefore so vile and enormous in God's sight that it is enough to condemn the human race, and it is not abolished or wholly uprooted even by baptism, seeing that sin constantly boils forth as though from a contaminated spring.

Gulp!

That will take the cheer out of the eggnog. (I have idea what that means.....)

That will sober up Santa Claus.

That harsh assessment of humanity has fallen on hard times. As the enlightenment project has developed other ways of defining human nature it has been brushed aside. As we have found modern and postmodern ways of framing the divine/human relationship, it has been brushed aside. And yet...

And yet, as it is true that we are alienated or at war with God than the gift of Christmas is that
in a time of occupation,
in this little backwater village,
in the crude comforts of stable,
in a heartbreakingly humble fashion,
unbidden and unexpected,
to a young mother and a bewildered father,
God slipped into the pool of humanity to be our peace.

The gift of Christmas is that God himself is our peace and there is therefore, nothing to fear.

We are reconciled to God.

The war is over.

Death is defeated.

And, the peace of God which transcends all understanding holds our hearts and minds....

Thanks be to God! Merry Christmas!

Maybe that is enough.

But, during my recent trip to Israel we went to Bethlehem. We passed through layers of security and went under armed turrets and got to the other side of the wall. Bethlehem is poor, predominately Muslim, and is being choked off, displaced, and abused. We navigated the

narrow passageway in the Church of Nativity down to the cave/stable where Jesus would have been born. Incidentally the sight is tensely and clumsily shared or managed by the Armenian Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Greek Orthodox Church. Each with its own entrance to the tiny cave where the tiny babe was born...

I sat in silence in the sanctuary where the Christmas Eve Midnight mass is held, and tried to listen for God, but truth be told I had had my fill of caves, and religious clutter, and churches as museums and pilgrimage sights. It all seemed so time trapped and distant and disconnected and dead. (Maybe it was just me.)

But, then we went to the International Center of Bethlehem ~ a Lutheran school, college, arts program, economic development project, worshipping church, health and wellness community center. And, for the first time in Israel I saw the church vibrant and alive.

During the siege of Bethlehem the Israeli Army positioned tanks in the Center and destroyed in 11 hours what had taken 7 years to build. But, out of that rubble, this church, "Christmas Lutheran Church" was rebuilding its life and ministry.

A bright young Palestinian woman gave us a tour. You wanted to bottle whatever joy it was that bubbled up in her. She couldn't talk without a smile and an easy laugh. And, in the heart of a place where children know the names of weapons and missiles by the sounds that they make, and where every day workers wait three or four hours to go through the gates to get to their jobs, and where you can't buy or bring back books

She said, that after 40 days of siege, when families had hid in their homes, and no one worked or walked the streets, and schools were destroyed, and water and food were in short supply....

She said, after 40 days of waiting and worrying and wondering about the boot that was pressing down on their throats....

She said, after 40 days of siege when the children came back to the Center....

Pastor Mitri Rahib said that rather than pick up rocks to throw at the tanks, and rather than pick up guns to kill in revenge, they would pick up broken glass. So, they went about the city and picked up the shards of shattered windows. And, then their artisans began to make stained glass angel ornaments out of the broken glass. And, today they have a thriving web-based gift shop that ships these tiny symbols of peace all over the world.

In Pastor Rahib's words:

*We choose to respond to the culture of violence with the power of culture....
....shaping new symbols for a new reality, transforming the symbols of destruction and war into symbols of hope and peace.*

Apache helicopters and angel ornaments out of broken glass.
Seems insignificant ~ doesn't it?

Dear friends, may it be so with us. Because Christ is our peace, may we take the broken glass of our lives ~ whatever gifts and shattered shards we hold ~ and use them for the *shalom* of others.

May our lives be marked not by revenge and greed and gluttony, but by forgiveness and mercy and giving. May our peace not be relegated to our souls but may it be that which prompts us to pursue reconciliation with friend and family, neighbor and enemy.

May we be artisans of broken glass because....

on a silent night, holy night,

when all was calm and all was bright,

and the little town of Bethlehem lay still, in a deep and dreamless sleep,

God slipped in as a baby, and the angels burst out in song:

Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace...

May the peace of Christ be with you.

Amen.