

“Who Do You Really Trust to Bring You Peace?”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
III Advent – 12 & 13 December 2015
Canticle 9 (Isaiah 12:2-6); Philippians 4:4-7

Right now, it can be hard to make sense of the world we live in. As we anticipate the birth of Jesus, described by the angels as the “Prince of Peace,” we are at war with an enemy who practices an almost unparalleled and incomprehensible cruelty. As the attacks mount up in places like San Bernardino and Paris, so does our rage and our fear and the feeling that we can no longer be safe anywhere anymore.

Both our enemy and our own political elite seek to exploit this sense of vulnerability, manipulating us toward radicalization of thought and action. Such radicalization could lead us to abandon our core values of compassion, tolerance, and freedom. Were we to sacrifice the very principals that make us great, then our enemy would gain the precise victory they desire: to make us just as hateful, just as bigoted, just as ruthless as they are; so that we might play their game by their rules, until the two sides become almost indistinguishable from each other. To our enemy, killing people is merely a means to an end. Their chief aim is to destroy what makes life meaningful and beautiful and good.

None of this denies the regrettable necessity to resist this evil with force, and in much greater measure than what has been exercised to this point, but this is also a pastoral and a prophetic warning that our attitudes and ideas and choices must be motivated by our faith, not by our fears; a faith founded in the love of God revealed in Christ Jesus, who was born humbly as a defenseless baby into a world where some very powerful people wanted him dead. This love bids us to forgive as we have been forgiven, to seek reconciliation and peace, no matter how

hopeless it seems or how long it takes, and to remember always the promise of God's salvation to people of faith in every generation who have endured hardship.

Earlier in worship, we uttered words from a Canticle called The First Song of Isaiah. "Surely, it is God who saves me; I will trust in him and not be afraid." To the people who first heard or read these words, Isaiah must have seemed totally unrealistic or completely out of his mind. These verses from chapter twelve stand in stark contradiction to the first ten chapters of Isaiah, an unrelenting indictment of a people doomed to judgment by their own injustice and idolatry. Isaiah's little glimmer of hope must have rang hollow to a people condemned to be conquered because of their iniquity, enslaved and led off into exile far away from home. Isaiah instructs those people to "give thanks" "with rejoicing" and "Sing the praises of the Lord," which must have seemed ridiculous to a people who had lost it all.

However, these words of hope, and many more like them, survived. They were preserved and regarded with reverence by some people determined and desperate enough to retain the single shred of dignity and security left to them: their identity as a people of faith who worshipped a God of both justice and mercy. In time, both parts of the prophecy were fulfilled, not just the first that dealt with wickedness and punishment. Redemption and renewal became reality when Israel received release and returned home from exile. Isaiah's idealistic hope, anchored in his faith, was vindicated, and those who thought the prophet foolish probably felt ashamed but grateful.

Likewise, with Paul, we see similar language in his Letter to the Philippians. "Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. Do not worry about anything." Quite contrary to what we might expect from an author imprisoned for his beliefs. Paul was on his way to Rome, where he planned to appeal to the Emperor for his freedom. It was a risky gambit. Paul's life

was at stake. Yet Paul went gladly, not so much concerned for either his liberty or his life. Instead, he was viewed this encounter with the Emperor as an opportunity to offer a witness of faith in Jesus Christ in front of the most powerful man in the world. Nothing else mattered. We don't know if Paul ever got the chance to share the story of Jesus with the Emperor. What we do know is that he died trying, executed, beheaded in pursuing his quest to spread the good news.

And the people Paul wrote in Philippi weren't much better off. In the first chapter of his letter, Paul wrote, "Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, . . . I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well – since you are having the same struggle" [1:27-30]

"For he has graciously granted you the privilege . . . of suffering for him." We don't know what exactly was happening to the Christians at Philippi. They were probably being harassed, perhaps deprived of property and civic privileges, with the imminent threat of much worse looming in their hearts and minds, and Paul told them to rejoice and not worry and not be intimidated and to show gentleness to everyone, not just to the people who left them alone or those who maybe tried to help them, but to everyone, because "For them this is evidence of their destruction."

If you want to kill a killer, send a bomb or a bullet, but be ready for somebody to take their place quickly. If you want to emerge victorious, quell the fear, and make a more peaceful world, kill the source of the enemy's power. Expose their perverse version of Islam, and be kind to a real Muslim, because their religion has been hi-jacked, and we know how that feels.

Even a cursory glance at history reveals how the teachings of Jesus have been twisted: witch burnings, forced conversion of Jews, the mutual slaughter of Protestants and Catholics that went on for the better part of two centuries. These episodes in our “Christian” history make Jesus sick, and we cannot pretend to be superior to ancestors, because in our own day, white supremacists and a host of other self-righteous, fundamentalist, extremist so-called Christian sects strive to sow the seeds of discord, fear, and violence in the name of a God they have forsaken and betrayed.

We live in a confusing, frightening age. As a father, I sometimes tremble to be raising children in it, but Isaiah and Paul and Jesus give me hope for the future. They help my trembling cease and bring me peace, not as much as I want, but enough to endure. Jesus asks of my anger and hatred, which burn fiercely against our enemy, “How do you glorify me, Anger? What purpose do you serve in my Kingdom, Hatred?” And I have no worthy answer.

The love of Christ alone will triumph. Jesus has commanded us – not asked or suggested but commanded us – to love others as we have been loved by him, without regard for whether a person deserves it or not, because none of us deserve God’s grace and mercy and love. To the extent that we genuinely try, to the extent we say with Isaiah, “I will trust in [God] and not be afraid,” even when we have every reason to be terrified, then grace will allow us to rejoice and give thanks and sing the praises of the Lord and not worry or be intimidated but have peace and be gentle. It is a season of gift-giving. Whatever we might receive, nothing can beat what God offers. Amen.

