

THE POWERS OF HELL
Randall Tremba
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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Once upon a time ancient Israel lived under the threat of terror. Babylon, today's Iraq, was coming to brutally crush Jerusalem. It was a time of despair and foreboding. And then the prophet Jeremiah spoke.

Jeremiah 33:14-16

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety.

That was 2500 years ago. That day has yet to come. Many Jews and Christians are still waiting for a messiah to save them—as are many Muslims.

Two thousand years ago, the Roman Empire was on the verge of brutally crushing Jerusalem and slaughtering the Jewish people. And then Jesus spoke. It's the gospel lesson for today.

Luke 21:25-36

"In those days there will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves—["sea and waves" is a metaphor for nations and empires.] People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken."

That was then. The Roman army did come with a vengeance. It was a blood bath. One world ended.

Time and time again worlds collapsed violently. It's as though the sun and moon are falling from the heavens and the powers of hell are unleashed.

And that brings us once again to ISIS and the shaken people of France, Belgium, Lebanon, Mali and virtually every nation on earth distressed by the roaring of the sea and the waves. ISIS and its barbaric associates have unleashed the powers of hell on earth, wave after wave of death and destruction. We don't have to believe in a literal Hell to know hell on earth.

And we don't have to stand on the ground in Syria or Iraq to know that those people know the powers of hell have been unleashed on them, as bombs by the thousands, wave after wave, aimed at ISIS, are killing, maiming, and terrifying countless children and civilians who can't escape. Bodies are ripped asunder daily.

The world is at war.

War is hell.

No one wins. Everybody loses. For even the enemy we kill is still our brother or sister. We mustn't gloat ever. We will weep instead unless we have succumbed to the same pathological dualism that fuels ISIS. Us against Them. The Righteous against the Unrighteous. Good versus Evil. Humans against Sub-human monsters.

Dualism like that is convenient, comforting and dead wrong. It's a kind of religion. But it's not ours. We believe we are kin to one another.

Still, brothers and sisters do kill each other. So, we keep armed forces and police forces ready. We hang on to our swords. But we hold them sadly and reluctantly until the day when all swords will be turned into pruning hooks and none shall study war anymore.

War is hell.

Only love can vanquish hell. But loving our enemies doesn't mean allowing them to kill us. It does, however, mean examining our family histories to understand their madness, to learn how we may have contributed to their rage.

To better understand our brothers and sisters of ISIS, I've been reading *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* by Michael Weiss and *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* by William McCants.

In case you hadn't heard, the core ideology of ISIS is apocalyptic. Its self-proclaimed strategy is to entice the armies of the West to northern Syria where an obscure Islamic prophecy will be fulfilled at a final Armageddon-type battle of good against evil, the *holy*, meaning them, against the *unholy* meaning us. The Muslim Messiah, known as the Mahdi, will appear and lead them to victory on the Day of Judgment.

ISIS can be destroyed by the allied forces of the West and the Middle East, not in the name of God but in the name of humanity and by an overwhelming superior military force. War can bring peace for a spell. But only for a spell. It's a first step. It provides time and space to establish political solutions.

Violence can destroy ISIS. But violence cannot destroy its toxic ideology. Nor can its adherents be pacified with the comforts, pleasures and promises of materialism. They are fighting to remake the world, not to own a Fiat or a flat-screen TV. Only a stronger idea, a more compelling and inspiring vision can satisfy the longing in their hearts.

Is there a universal vision in the heart of humankind more compelling and inspiring than their sectarian caliphate? I think there is. But it can't be delivered on the point of a sword. It must be conveyed by words—through preaching and teaching—and demonstrated by actions.

Universal kinship is the vision that leads to a new and just world. We are more akin than not. Love is more powerful than hate; reconciliation more powerful than retaliation. Hearts of stone can be transformed by the power of love.

We too want to remake the world. But the way of Jesus is as much about the means and methods as it is about the goal.

"There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man—the one who stands for all that is humane—coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. When these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

That's a poetic vision portrayed in classic apocalyptic images. But we get it. In the darkest night, light will arise. Humanity will appear. Be awake. Be watchful. Keep hope alive. Not just against ISIS, but against the powers of hell that are breathing down your neck or gripping your life or the lives of your children.

This is the season of Advent. But it's more than a season on the calendar. It's a practice befitting any time of year. Which raises the question: what are we waiting for?