

WARFARE IS OVER
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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Malachi 3:1-4

Behold, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger is coming, says the LORD of hosts.

And just what will the message be? According to ISIS the message is war and more war until all the infidels are destroyed and a universal sectarian caliphate is established.

ISIS dreams of the advent of a warrior messiah. Most Muslims, Christians and Jews no longer dream of such a messiah. Most of us now dream of a time when swords will be beaten into plowshares and nations will study war no more.

But ISIS hasn't gotten that message. Fear, ignorance and hatred rule their hearts. Fear, ignorance and hatred must not rule us.

Breathe in love; breathe out fear.

ISIS dreams of a messiah named in Islamic prophecies as the Mahdi, one who will suddenly appear and destroy the armies of the West in a final Armageddon type battle near the northern Syrian town of Dabiq. ISIS will soon get its wish. The armies of the West are on their way.

War and more war is not the message. Peace and universal kinship is. Universal kinship is a far more inspiring and compelling vision than theirs. But it cannot be conveyed on the point of a spear. It cannot be coerced. It must be conveyed by words—by preaching and teaching—and demonstrated by deeds.

The message is peace on earth, goodwill to all.

On December 16, 1969, a message suddenly appeared in gigantic letters on billboards in eleven major cities around the world. *WAR IS OVER: if you want it.* Signed *John and Yoko.*

That would be John Lennon and Yoko Ono. At the time, they were not exactly the most beloved or admired people in the world. In fact, they and their message annoyed a lot of people.

But not all.

Many rejoiced to see those words bubbling up from an old, old dream cuddled like a baby in the heart of humankind, the way Mary cuddled her baby on dark nights when the Empire's security forces were out sniffing about. Mary cuddled the dream of peace on earth against many a cold night the way we cuddle it around these two flickering Advent candles of hope and peace in the wake of yet another terrorist massacre.

We light these candles against the dark and listen for the voice of the Beloved: *Be not afraid. I am with you.*

In 1969 war was raging in Vietnam. Body counts mounted on both sides. War was far from over. Yet there was the message: *WAR IS OVER.*

John Lennon was a dreamer. He knew people thought that of him and so he put it in his song. *You may say I'm a dreamer but I'm not the only one.*

And he wasn't the only one. Not by several billions. No, he wasn't the only one or the first.

2500 years before those billboards popped up, the prophet Isaiah proclaimed a similar message to a terrified and bloodied nation. We hear its echo every Advent season. *Comfort, comfort you my people. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry unto her that her warfare is over.*

But warfare was not over. Not then; not now. Wars keep coming. At times it all seems futile. But still we cry out *for faith is more powerful than fear.*

Comfort, comfort you my people. Speak tenderly to San Bernardino, and cry unto her that her warfare is over. Speak tenderly to Paris, and cry unto her that her warfare is over. Speak tenderly to Mali, Somali, Nigeria, Libya and Egypt. Speak tenderly to Beirut, Baghdad, Damascus and Palestine, and cry unto them that their warfare is over. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem. Speak tenderly to the Islamic State, and cry unto her that her warfare is over.

But can we speak tenderly to each other?

Those who dream of a sectarian caliphate have drawn their swords and planted their bombs. We can kill those dreamers with bullets and bombs; but we can't kill their dream with such things. Violence cannot end violence; only non-violence can. Hate cannot end hate; only love can. Revenge cannot end revenge; only forgiveness can.

And that brings us to the gospel lesson for today. (Luke 3:1-6)

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee—in other words, during a time when fear and intimidation ruled—the word of God came to (the messenger) John son of Zechariah in the wilderness—which is to say, far from the centers of power, domination and violence.

John went into all the region around the Jordan—that would be the West Bank today—proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the prophet Isaiah: "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make the paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

Well, let's be clear: this is not about "mountain top removal." This is about removing obstacles in our lives—including resentments, fears, fences, walls, and prejudices—that keep us from each other and thus from God.

This past week I listened to a conversation between Krista Tippets, host of *On Being*, and the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Ticht Naht Hahn known for his devotion to non-violence during the Vietnam War and right up to the present. What can we do about terrorists, she asked? Communicate, he replied. Talk with each other.

But can we? Can we speak tenderly to each other?

Can we remove the mountains of fear and the valleys of resentment that keep us from each other? Can we straighten the crooked and deceitful talk and speak kindly to each other? Can we admit our cruel injustices against each other? Can we ask for forgiveness of each other and make amends? That's repentance. Repentance is returning to the path of compassion.

The vicious cycles of revenge can only end when the rule of fear and ignorance gives way to the rule of forgiveness, knowledge, wisdom and compassion. Imagine all the people living life in peace. It's not easy but we can try and try and try again.

Advent is a time to practice. It's a time to imagine no greed or hunger. It's a time to imagine universal kinship, all the people sharing all the world.

You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one. I hope someday you'll join us and the world will live as one.

That's John Lennon. And now here's our friend Pastor Steve:

Against the brutal urge only a mass of gentle people will be effective. Against the deep night only light will bring release. Against the lie that nothing can be done only people doing it anyway will prevail. Against our own despair only one who comes in love can defend us. Against the monstrous powers only the invitation to love the poor child will save us.