

# **Broken Arrow**

**“Do the things that make for peace.”**

**Psalm 46**

*The Gods Must be Crazy: Faith for troubled times #3*

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## **Pacifism**

A number of years ago Laura and I attended a Mennonite church in Fairview, a small town near her parents' home. Mennonites believe in pacifism. Their members are expected to be conscientious objectors in times of war.

The congregation happened to be celebrating their 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary, so the service was long and interesting, filled with stories of years-gone-by. One of the older members took to the pulpit and recounted the events of the church's life during the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, when the United States became involved in World War I, when our freedom and security were threatened and Americans were expected to pull together for the war effort.

Mennonites refused to fight. They spoke out against the war; and in response, they were considered un-American. The man in the pulpit described those days, about their witness, and about the band of citizens from Mio who marched up the road one night, and burned their church to the ground.

Sometimes it's costly to stand for peace. No matter which way you work for it. A few days ago we had a funeral service for Don Shepard, a long-time member of our church. 95 years old; a gentle, quiet man; for years a familiar face in the lobby of our church handing out bulletins for worship and ushering people to their seats: no one knew that he was a hero among us. When The United States was attacked at Pearl Harbor he was among the first to enlist, though he was already old enough to be exempt from the draft. He was one of the Marines who fought in the early days of World War II at the battle of Guadalcanal. He was the only one of his small platoon to survive. It was horrific. He never spoke of it until the last few months of his life; I can't imagine the sacrifice he gave in the thick of violence.

And it was for peace. I'm told that every time since then that the United States went to war he grieved. He said that he had hoped that World War II was going to put an end of all wars.

It didn't. So I think of these two very different responses: willingness to engage in the struggle of a war that's hoped to end wars; and determination to resist engaging in the struggle at all. And I see two things very clearly that perhaps you can see too: first, there truly is within most of us a deep desire for lasting peace with justice; and second, that there is something that's still needed in the historical quest for a better way to live.

### **God's Hope**

In ancient Israel the psalmist wrote about a different kind of victory when he said, "(God) makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire." The symbol of fire in the Old Testament referred to the actual Presence of God. The writer was picturing the very presence of God doing away with instruments of war. So the psalmist concluded by saying, "Be still and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth. The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge." That's what I want. Yet, in every age it's seemed so unrealistic: a goal and a prayer we are willing to pray; an ideal that comes back to judge us. But if it is, indeed, a promise of God, then when will it come, and why is it taking so long to get here?

This isn't a statement on current policy. It isn't a question about whether we should have a military. But I believe God does want us to weigh the merits of American involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, or an analysis of Israeli and Palestinian rights and complaints. This is also our responsibility as citizens. There's a place for that kind of discussion, even a place for it in church groups; but not this morning. Right now with two wars raging, some of our loved ones in harms way, North Korea and Iran rattling sabers and Israel threatening to do something about Iran, it seems like the gods must be crazy. And people are asking where God is in a time such as this, and does our faith have anything to say about it.

Those are the fundamental questions. What can we say in the face of today's violent world?

The words of the psalm might say it best. Other words, like those of the prophet Isaiah do as well when he says that God will work things out for many peoples and "they shall beat their swords into plowshares and the spears into pruning hooks; and nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."<sup>1</sup> The Bible has plenty about Israel's policies in other places. Yet, these are the passages people remember best; and notice, they are not a negative word. They are positive, filled with hope and faith.

Maybe that's because their picture is of God already at work fashioning a world at peace. That's not only hope. It's faith. It's a conviction that something is already happening.

Ask most folks to name a favorite Bible verse and they're apt to say, "For God so loved the *world* he gave his only son." And if that's true it means that God's love will not give up on us. *World* redemption is what God has in mind and nothing short of it.

Peace: the Hebrew word for it is *Shalom*, something far more encompassing than the absence of violence. *Shalom* is wholeness and justice where you and everyone else live in the center of God's love. God is driving for shalom to *encompass* the world.<sup>2</sup>

The prophet really believes that. So does the psalmist. Nations shall not learn war any more; he makes wars cease to the end of the earth. This is not a picture of the end of the world, only *the end of the world as we know it*. And God will work with us to bring about shalom, and people will look to God to sort out differences and resolve conflict. War as we know it will be obsolete: the economy will be based on feeding and caring for the people of the world instead of arming every country to the teeth.<sup>3</sup> The psalm goes, "*Be still and know that I am God.*" Present tense. May you really believe in the new world God is making, and live into it, work like mad for it – *present tense*.

Consider Jesus. What did Jesus say to do? He said, "Love your enemies:" he didn't just say tolerate them. He didn't tell us to ignore them. He said, "Love them:" sacrifice for their well-being, invest the time and exercise unearned acts of kindness, work for their shalom. He said that if a Roman legion tried to bully you and made you carry his belongings for a mile, then freely carry it a second mile. If someone asks for your jacket, give away your coat as well. Practice that kind of defiance.

Then Jesus practiced what he preached at every turn. He didn't avoid conflict. He spoke his mind and pressed for justice; and at the same time blessed others to win them over with God's love.

From the very beginning of creation, God intended shalom for the world. I, for one, am convinced that the power of Jesus' love is sufficient to win this world over, not sometime far off, but now.

Today, if Jesus were asked what he thought of the war on terror I think he might be more concerned with what we are doing about the conditions that gave terrorism an

opportunity in the first place. He would never excuse acts of terrorism, but he might well ask why so many people are inclined to follow people like bin Laden. Jesus, like the prophet before him, might well tell us that even while leaders may wage war as they see fit to defend their people, God's people must be about winning over the world with justice and love.

A few years ago, the Director of Secretary of Homeland Security was interviewed radio and said, "The larger question is what we do about the increased radicalization of some people into an ideology of terrorism and hatred." He said, "Intelligence and policing continues to be of high concern; but that psychology that makes a person convert from an ordinary individual to a suicide bomber is at the core of a long-term strategy to winning here. Clearly at the end of the day we've got to eliminate that pool of people who are susceptible to becoming killers.<sup>4</sup> If that's so, then how else to you win them over, than by doing the things that make for peace? In other words, how else to you help them be in a place where they aren't desperate and aren't interested unless you address their poverty and their hunger, their need for education and help them find hope for the future? How else unless you help them find and enjoy justice? How else unless someone is working like mad for peace?"

What if the church were about bringing sides together? It's said that the Five Nations of the Iroquois break an arrow as a sign of peace. Then, they bind five arrows together to show how while they may bend under pressure, together they do not break. Strength comes when sides come together, breaking the arrow of struggle against each other, and binding themselves into one common bond.

Broken arrow. The church is for bringing sides together. When we are still enough to know that God is God, and then live like it by doing the things that make for peace: perhaps that's when the sacrifices made by Mennonites who speak for pacifism, and the sacrifices of those like Don Shepard's who struggled hoping that would be the last time, will finally realize highest dream. Then maybe the world can be still and know that God is God.

### **Living the Promise**

Orville Hubbard, Mayor of Dearborn while I was growing up, is known most for a bigotry which I would never excuse. Yet, he was also a champion for developing places and programs for children and adults to constructively spend their time. Even today the town is dotted with parks staffed by attendants who are armed with a daily program of crafts and activities, swimming pools and the like. Hubbard liked to say, "Every dollar spent on recreation is a dollar that does not need to be spent on police."

Perhaps that was something he had right. Maybe it's that kind of agenda that breaks the arrow and binds the arrows together. Do the things that make for peace and the world will have less time and less reason for war any more.

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## References

- [1] Isaiah 2:4 (*New Revised Standard Version*).
- [2] Bruce C Birch, "Old Testament Foundations for Peacemaking in the Nuclear Era," *The Christian Century*, © December 4, 1985, pp1115-1119.
- [3] Gene M. Tucker, "Isaiah". *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VI. Nashville, Tennessee, © 2001. pp 66-68.
- [4] "All Things Considered", © National Public Radio. August 11, 2006.
- [5] Jeffrey Sachs, *The End of Poverty*. New York: The Penguin Press. © 2005. p 25. See also Sach's discussion on addressing terrorism, pp 214-216.