

PEACE ON EARTH
A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
Stanford Memorial Church
Christmas Eve, 2011

"Peace on earth!" proclaims a multitude of the heavenly host.ⁱ The angel of God has just told shepherds in the fields about the birth of Jesus, and they're soon to travel to Bethlehem to meet him.ⁱⁱ "Peace on earth," it's proclaimed, when the Roman Empire continues to occupy and oppress ancient Israel. Before the first century A.D. is over the Romans will have destroyed the Jewish temple in Jerusalem and extended Roman territory by conquest to nearly its greatest extent, from central Europe through Asia Minor to all of Mesopotamia (what is now Iraq).ⁱⁱⁱ Our lectionary reading from the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible for this Christmas Eve^{iv} also prophesizes endless peace to come with the birth of one named Wonderful Counselor and Prince of Peace. It speaks from the eighth century B.C., immediately following the Syro-Ephraimitic war.^v However, ancient Israel continued thereafter to experience conquest and exile at the hands of the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, and Greeks, before the Romans.^{vi}

Christmas is a time of hope, despite the odds and despite the historical record: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light."^{vii} Christmas is a time of celebration: "I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people."^{viii} And Christmas is a time of peace: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace."^{ix}

One of my predecessors as Dean of the Chapel here at Stanford, Robert McAfee Brown, stood in this very pulpit on Christmas Eve almost forty years ago, in 1972, having hoped that a peace treaty would have been signed by then to end the Vietnam War, but instead confronting the fact that the United States had just begun a massive series of B-52 bombing raids on Hanoi. As a result, he abandoned his prepared sermon on Christmas gift giving and preached powerfully instead on God's judgment in relation to violence.^x He compared King Herod's wrath -- killing

all male children under two years of age in and around Bethlehem after Mary and Joseph fled the country to Egypt with their newborn, Jesus^{xi} -- to the American slaughter of innocent civilians in Hanoi, eventually numbering over 1600 men, women and children in the capital of North Vietnam, far from the lines of battle to the south.^{xii} "The Christmas story confronts us with an emphatic either/or," he exclaimed. Either Christ or Herod. Either the power represented by a baby's birth or the power represented by military might. Either/or. You can't have it both ways." He went on, "You can't say, 'We really believe that the Prince of Peace is in that manger,' and then argue that you are pursuing the way of peace by indiscriminately destroying not only two year olds but [also] women, children, the aged, embassies, hospitals, and POW's, with a rain of terror from the sky."^{xiii}

We know something more about terrorism now, ten years after September 11, 2001. We've experienced a rain of terror from the sky in our own country at the World Trade Center buildings, at the Pentagon, in the fields of Pennsylvania. We've lived through the responses of President George W. Bush until 2008 and now for almost three years the responses of President Barack Obama. Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya have become what Yale Law Professor Stephen Carter, in a book all entering Stanford freshmen were asked to read last summer, called "America's Wars in the Age of Obama."^{xiv}

But there's some good news here, and that's what I'd like to emphasize on this Christmas Eve, in contrast to Christmas Eve in 1972. America's long war in Iraq has finally ended with the withdrawal of all American troops before the close of this year, as promised by President Bush and implemented by President Obama.^{xv} The war in Libya has ended.^{xvi} And President Obama has promised that American troops will be out of Afghanistan before the end of 2014.^{xvii} America of course now has the greatest military force on the face of the earth, with a military budget larger than the next 17 countries combined.^{xviii} America is arguably the world's pre-

eminent empire now, capable of occupying other countries, re-creating their governments, affecting the number of civilian deaths there, and shaping the definitions of preventive war, torture, lawful combatants, assassination, and collateral damage.^{xix} But America is ending its wars and seems less likely now to begin new ones.

This is indeed good news for the biblical hope of "peace on earth." But even better news, I submit, is that from reputable scholars at American University and Harvard, who describe how war and armed conflict in the world have actually dramatically declined since the mid-twentieth century. Joshua Goldstein and Stephen Pinker both had books published this fall^{xx} making this claim and backing it up with extensive evidence. For example, the annual rate of battle deaths worldwide has fallen from almost 300 per 100,000 of world population during World War II, to almost 30 during the Korean War, to the low teens during Vietnam, to single digits in the late 1970's and 1980's, to fewer than 1 per 100,000 in the twenty-first century wars. Wars between countries are quite rare now. Civil wars have also become fewer in number, smaller and more localized. Most of them are closer to organized crime than traditional war: "Armed militias -- really gangs of thugs -- monopolize resources like cocaine in Colombia or coltan [for electronic devices] in Congo, or terrorize the locals into paying tribute ... as in Somalia, Nigeria and the Philippines."^{xxi} The ratio of civilian to military deaths, contrary to popular belief, has not gotten worse, but has remained stable since World War I, at about 50-50.

In a *New York Times* opinion piece last week, these two authors explain that conquest has become largely obsolete: "Since shortly after World War II, virtually no borders have changed by force, and no member of the United Nations has disappeared through conquest...The futility of conquest is part of the emergence of an international community regulated by norms and taboos and wielding more effective tools for managing conflicts [like United Nations peacekeepers]."^{xxii} The authors also explain how war declines as trade between countries grows,

and globalization means more such trade now than ever. There's also a growing repugnance worldwide toward institutionalized violence, such that many brutal activities that have been commonplace throughout history have now been largely abolished: cannibalism, human sacrifice, heretic burning, chattel slavery, punitive mutilation, and sadistic executions.^{xxiii}

Of course, our human capacity to kill each other in large numbers is greater than ever in an age of nuclear weapons. But there is cause for hope here as well. The United States and Russia, with by far the greatest number of nuclear weapons in the world, got close to negotiating, through their Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev in Reykjavik, Iceland, in 1986, total elimination of their nuclear arsenals.^{xxiv} Recently in this country two Republican and two Democratic secretaries of state and defense and chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee -- George Schultz, Henry Kissinger, William Perry, and Sam Nunn -- have called for the complete abolition of nuclear weapons in a series of op-eds in the *Wall Street Journal*.^{xxv} President Obama likewise made an historic pledge in 2009 to seek a world entirely free of nuclear weapons^{xxvi} and then chaired a UN Security Council Summit that year which also committed the Security Council to the same pledge.^{xxvii} I think there's real Christmas Eve hope for peace on earth in these words of our current President addressed to other countries at the UN: "We harbor no illusions about the difficulty of bringing about a world without nuclear weapons. We know there are plenty of cynics, and that there will be setbacks to prove their point. But there will also be days...that push us forward – days that tell a different story. It is the story of a world that understands that no difference or division is worth destroying all that we have built and all that we love."^{xxviii}

Robert McAfee Brown stood in this pulpit almost forty years ago and asked his Christmas Eve congregation to affirm the truly important things that the Christmas story talks about: love, and hope, and joy, choosing Christ over Herod. May we all do so tonight, with renewed vision and commitment to glorifying God and helping to bring about endless peace on earth.

NOTES

ⁱ Luke 2:14.

ⁱⁱ See the lectionary gospel reading for December 24, 2011: Luke 2: 1-14.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Rome, Ancient," *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Chicago: 1978), Vol. VIII, p. 656.

^{iv} Isaiah 9:2-7.

^v *New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001), Vol. VI, p. 121.

^{vi} See Addison G. Wright, Roland E. Murphy, and Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "A History of Israel," in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968), pp.671-702.

^{vii} Isaiah 9:2.

^{viii} Luke 2:10.

^{ix} Luke 2:14.

^x Robert McAfee Brown, "Judgment and Joy: A Christmas Eve Sermon During the Bombing of Hanoi," in Brown, *Speaking of Christianity: Practical Compassion, Social Justice, and Other Wonders* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), pp. 97-103.

^{xi} Matthew 2: 16-18.

^{xii} Pamela Feltus, "Linebacker II Bombing Raids, U.S. Centennial of Flight Commission, http://www.centennialofflight.gov/essay/Air_Power/Linebacker/AP41.htm.

^{xiii} Brown, "Judgment and Joy," p. 99.

^{xiv} Stephen L. Carter, *The Violence of Peace: America's Wars in the Age of Obama* (New York: Beast Books, 2011).

^{xv} David Zucchino, "Last American Soldiers Leave Iraq," *San Jose Mercury News* (December 19, 2011), p. A4.

^{xvi} Thom Shanker and Liam Stack, "Panetta Is First U.S. Defense Secretary to Visit Libya," *New York Times*, December 17, 2011.

^{xvii} Mark Landler, "Iraq, a War Obama Didn't Want, Shaped His Foreign Policy," *The New York Times*, December 18, 2011, p. 18.

^{xviii} "Defense Costs," *The Economist*, June 8, 2011,

www.economist.com/blogs/dailychart/2011/06/military-spending

^{xix} See Daniel H. Nexon and Thomas Wright, "What's at stake in the American Empire Debate," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 101, No. 2 (May, 2007).

^{xx} Joshua S. Goldstein, *Winning the War on War: The Decline of Armed Conflict Worldwide* (New York: Dutton, 2011) and Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Viking, 2011).

^{xxi} Joshua S. Goldstein and Steven Pinker, "War Really Is Going Out of Style," *The New York Times*, December 18, 2011, p. 4.

^{xxii} Ibid.

^{xxiii} Ibid.

^{xxiv} Lawrence S. Wittner, "Reagan and Nuclear Disarmament", *Boston Review* (April/May, 2000).

^{xxv} See the *Wall Street Journal* for January 4, 2007, January 10, 2010, and February 2, 2011.

^{xxvi} President Barack Obama, Prague speech of April 5, 2009; see also, joint press conference of President Barack Obama and Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama, November 13, 2009.

^{xxvii} The White House, "Fact Sheet on the United Nations Security Council Summit on Nuclear Nonproliferation and Nuclear Disarmament, UNSC Resolution 1887," September 24, 2009.

^{xxviii} Ibid.