

HOPE IN A TIME OF TERROR

A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
December 8, 2002

"Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."ⁱ Advent is the great season of hope: hope that light will shine forth amidst the gathering darkness of the season, hope that new life can arise amidst the ashes of the world, hope that the Holy Spirit will come in all its power through Jesus the Christ. We Americans are living in dark days of terror in this advent season. Starting for many of us with the events of September 11, 2001, there has seemingly been nowhere to hide from the spectre of imminent and random death and destruction. Events in Bali night clubs and a Kenyan hotel remind us that there are no holidays, no vacations, no escape from terror. Meanwhile, much of the world has long lived in terror, from the mideast to Northern Ireland, from Sri Lanka to Central America, from virtually each and every corner of the world to the other.

As I listen to the lessons from Markⁱⁱ and Isaiahⁱⁱⁱ this morning, I find myself searching for bedrock. "John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."^{iv} What exactly is sin? Or put positively, what is it that should and must draw all of us human creatures together in common affirmation? Isaiah promises that "The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together."^v What should and must we all say without a doubt? What finally separates civilization from barbarity? What common pledge should and must we all make to each other, and back it up with action, especially when some of our fellow human beings violate it?

As a pacifist, I'd like the world to take this one of the Ten Commandments to be an absolute: "Thou shalt not kill." To me that means: Thou shalt not kill, ever. Yet, I know too well how many of us, people I deeply respect, believe there are exceptions to that commandment, like self defense, lethal law enforcement, just war, and capital punishment. So then, I'd like to say, "Let no innocent blood ever be shed." Yet, again I know too well how many of us believe that there are tragic circumstances which inevitably, necessarily and excusably accompany those exceptions to the commandment not to kill -- times when innocent blood will be shed in conscientiously exercising one's right to self defense, in even the most careful law enforcement, in so-called "collateral damage" in waging a just war, and in mistakenly executing those who didn't commit the capital crimes of which they're accused. So, I'm left with this: Never intentionally target the innocent.

Of course, that immediately begs the question of who is innocent. But as a starter, perhaps all of us could agree that newborn babies are innocent. What could they possibly have done for which they should be intentionally targeted? Under what conceivable circumstances can a moral claim be made that they should be ripped from their parents' arms and killed? Of course, the Christmas story raises that very issue, because at the time of Jesus' birth, King Herod kills "all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under,"^{vi} in an attempt to prevent the Messiah from coming. Mary and Joseph escape with their baby by night to Egypt and stay there until the death of Herod.^{vii} We all instinctively recoil at Herod's cruelty and inhumanity, as we do later at Hitler's extermination of six million people of all ages, simply because they are Jews, or as we do at the American massacre of 347 unarmed civilians at My Lai during the Vietnam War.^{viii}

Condemnation of Herod's actions, and of the twentieth century Holocaust, and of My Lai should and must be universal, if we're not to descend into total brutality and lose any possible claim to humanity. So also with modern terrorism. Let there be no doubt that there is no excuse, no justification, no moral claim whatsoever for terrorism under any circumstances -- including any and all sins that may have been committed by any part of the West against any part of the East, so-called, or vice-versa.

I define modern terrorism, with the Encyclopedia Britannica, as intentionally targeting innocent civilians, picked at random, in order to create a climate of fear by which to obtain a political objective.^{ix} One of the ways that Immanuel Kant defined his categorical imperative, which he claimed to be absolute moral law grounded universally in reason and religion, is that no person should ever be treated as a means to an end, but always as an end in himself or herself.^x Therefore, no human life may ever be taken as political expedient to achieve a particular end. Genesis teaches that all human beings are made in God's image, and respect for the inherent worth and dignity of each individual has always been central to the Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions. Indeed that concept was enshrined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted unanimously by all nations of the world, save eight who abstained from the vote.^{xi} The Declaration, and the United Nations Charter, recognize the "inherent dignity and worth of the human person" as well as the inalienable right of "everyone...to life, liberty and the security of person."^{xii}

Some of you may be wondering now: Isn't he just stating the obvious and the platitudinous? "Never intentionally target the innocent." After all, that's enshrined too in the 1949 Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, not to mention Christian just war theory that goes back at least to the time of St. Augustine in the Fourth Century. Well, first of all, I'm concerned that we don't often enough express our conscientious, and visceral, outrage at terrorist acts from the destruction of the World Trade Center to a suicide bombing of a Kenyan Hotel to wholesale massacres of Muslim populations in Bosnia and Kosovo. Instead, we start trying to understand motives on the one hand and how to protect

ourselves and our friends on the other. Yet, terrorism as I have defined it is always wrong, profoundly wrong, whenever and wherever it occurs. It must always be directly condemned, and never even indirectly justified or excused, if we're to avoid plummeting into barbarity and fundamental inhumanity, and if the human race is to have any real hope for a future.

Then, secondly, I'm concerned that we may be tempted to fight fire with fire and descend into the same barbarity ourselves. State terrorism is particularly pernicious, whether it's the way it was practiced in Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia, or dictatorial Latin America -- in the last case often with United States support. Many have begun to question the State of Israel's methods of responding to Palestinian terrorism. There was a deeply disturbing article in the New Yorker last month describing the massive Allied devastation of German cities and the death of 600,000 of their civilian populations at the end of World War II -- often by area firebombing as in Dresden, Hamburg and Cologne.^{xiii} I assume Hitler's nightly bombing of the civilian population of London helped in the later formulation of a British governmental decision to area bomb German cities in order [quote] "to destroy the morale of the enemy civilian population and, in particular, of the industrial workers."^{xiv} I had many arguments with my veteran father growing up about how the U.S. atomic incineration of the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki could possibly be justified, even to prevent Allied military casualties and to end the war earlier than would otherwise have been possible.

Now we're talking about going to war against Iraq, and I was disturbed to see how President Bush's senior White House adviser, Karl Rove, recently answered a question about whether he was concerned that a war in Iraq might kill 200,000 innocent Iraqis, women and children among them. His response was simply, "I'm more concerned about the 3,000 people who died on September 11."^{xv} Opposed as I am to a war against Iraq, before Karl Rove's response I'd been pleased by President Bush's expressed public concern to attack only legitimate military targets and minimize any collateral civilian deaths in Afghanistan and Iraq. Yet, past history, our nation's and other's, demonstrates how easily modern warfare can become a slippery slope to intentionally targeting the innocent. And our outrage and our outcry to outlaw all such barbarity, no matter what we think of the justice of the war, must be strong and clear and quick. We may feel that we still need to put men and women in uniform all across the earth to kill each other, but intentionally killing our babies and other civilians means the light of hope will go out for good and the Advent that leads to Christmas will be no more.

When the First World War began with a political assassination in Bosnia, the British Foreign Secretary prophesied that "the lamps are going out over Europe; we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime."^{xvi} Yet, after a horrendous war which included the use of chemical weapons, the lamps were lit again. By 1928 in the Kellogg-Briand Pact, sixty-three countries had even renounced war as an instrument of national policy.^{xvii} The lamps went out again in the Second World War, marked by massive genocide, area firebombing of cities, and the use of atomic weapons. The lamps have flickered on and off ever since through the Cold War, regional wars,

guerilla wars, and the current so-called war on terrorism.

In this era, we are confronted with the possible use of weapons of mass destruction by small states and individual terrorists -- a suitcase nuclear device blowing up in the center of New York City, deadly chemicals released in an urban water system, a small pox epidemic racing across the country and around the globe. The best national defense system may no longer work under these circumstances. Now the only true defense in our decentralized and fragmented world may be the hearts and minds of the world's peoples. That means never allowing ourselves intentionally to target innocent people, and making sure the so-called collateral damage to newborn babies and others is absolutely minimized. That means making it unthinkable, despicable, abhorrent, and detestable to engage in terrorism, as an individual, a group or a nation-state. Remember, terrorism involves treating a fellow human being as a mere means to an end, rather than as a sacred end in herself or himself. That's never permissible, under any legitimate moral theory in any religion or philosophy, and we should all be outraged whenever it's even contemplated, much less acted upon.

In the Christian tradition, Advent is the time we hope -- against the darkness, against the spectre of sinfulness and death -- we hope that Christ will be born again in our lives. This is the Christ who was called the Prince of Peace^{xviii} and who was surrounded at birth by a multitude of the heavenly host exclaiming "Peace on earth."^{xix} This is the Christ who taught that peacemakers are blessed, and that we should turn the other cheek, and that we should love our enemies.^{xx} "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together."^{xxi} Amen.

NOTES

-
- i. Mark 1:3, quoting Isaiah 40:3.
 - ii. Mark 1:1-8.
 - iii. Isaiah 40:1-11.
 - iv. Mark 1:4.
 - v. Isaiah 40:5.
 - vi. Matthew 2:16.
 - vii. Matthew 2:1-18.
 - viii. The Concise Columbia Encyclopedia (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 575.
 - ix. New Encyclopedia Britannica (Chicago, 1998), Volume 11, p. 650.
 - x. Tom L. Beauchamp and Norman E. Bowie, Ethical Theory and Business (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1997), p. 28.
 - xi. New Encyclopedia Britannica (1978), Volume X, p. 278.
 - xii. "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" (1948), as reproduced in the New Encyclopedia Britannica (1978), p. 1049.
 - xiii. W. G. Sebald, "A Natural History of Destruction," The New Yorker, November 4, 2001, pp. 66-77.
 - xiv. Ibid., p. 69.
 - xv. Richard Reeves, "Economic Numbers May Become GOP's Downfall," San Jose Mercury News, November 14, 2002.
 - xvi. Edward Grey (1914) as quoted in Mary C. Grey, The Outrageous Pursuit of Hope (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2001), p. 1.
 - xvii. New Encyclopedia Britannica (1978), Vol. 19, p. 539.
 - xviii. Isaiah 9:6

xix. Luke 2:14

xx. Matthew 5: 9, 39, 44

xxi. Isaiah 40:3-5