

## NUCLEAR HYPOCRISY

A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan  
University Public Worship  
Stanford Memorial Church  
January 18, 2004

"For Zion's sake I will not keep silent," says the prophet Isaiah in this morning's reading from the Hebrew Bible.<sup>i</sup> "For Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn." Today we honor a great modern prophet, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He also would not keep silent, nor rest, until the vindication of his people, of all people, shone forth like the dawn. He addressed the critical issues of his day: racism, economic injustice, war. "Let us be dissatisfied," he said, "until America will no longer have a high blood pressure of creeds and an anemia of deeds...Let us be dissatisfied until the dark yesterdays of segregated schools will be transformed into the bright tomorrows of quality, integrated education...Let us be dissatisfied until the tragic walls that separate the outer city of wealth and comfort, and the inner city of poverty and despair, shall be crushed by the battering rams of the forces of justice...Let us be dissatisfied until those that live on the outskirts of hope are brought into the metropolis of daily security."<sup>ii</sup>

The outskirts of hope. Hope is what Isaiah brought to the ancient Israelites trying to rebuild their society after years of exile. Hope is what Martin Luther King, Jr. brought to oppressed twentieth century Americans seeking freedom. Hope is the subtext of today's gospel lesson<sup>iii</sup> as well, where in a much simpler and more celebratory context, Jesus miraculously responds to a

wedding couple when their wine gives out at their reception.

Today, I want to address an issue that could put the human race itself beyond hope, if we don't take it very, very seriously. Today, I want to address an issue upon which every one of our lives depend. Today, I want to address a rising danger to which Dr. King pointed very clearly, but to which we seem to have fallen silent, fallen dumb, fallen asleep. He howled his hatred for nuclear war as the "most colossal of all evils."<sup>iv</sup> He exclaimed that "the church cannot remain silent while mankind faces the threat of being plunged into the abyss of nuclear annihilation."<sup>v</sup> He even challenged research on nuclear weapons, insisting that "the alternative to a greater suspension of nuclear tests...may well be [that] our earthly habitat would be transformed into an inferno that even the mind of Dante could not imagine."<sup>vi</sup>

Though the cold war is over, it does seem on one level as if we're in an era where there is nearly universal concern about weapons of mass destruction. We worry about nuclear arms falling into the hands of Osama Bin Laden or other major terrorists. We worry about their development by rogue nations like North Korea. We watch India and Pakistan with trepidation, praying that their precarious relationship doesn't deteriorate into nuclear attacks and counter attacks on each others' populations. Our American government opposes nuclear proliferation and threatens unilateral action wherever a new member of the nuclear club seems to be emerging. Our president led us into a war in Iraq, explaining in last year's State of the Union Address that "The international Atomic Energy Agency confirmed in the 1990's that Saddam Hussein had an advanced nuclear weapons development program, had a design for a nuclear weapon, and was working on five different methods of enriching uranium for a bomb...Saddam Hussein aids and

protects terrorists, including members of Al Qaida. Secretly, and without fingerprints, he could provide one of his hidden weapons to terrorists, or help them develop their own."<sup>vii</sup>

But then, astoundingly and hypocritically, last year the U.S. Congress, with the President's urging, reversed a 1993 ban on research and development of low-yield nuclear arms and authorized research on new kinds of battlefield nuclear weapons.<sup>viii</sup> These include both "mini-nukes" which would detonate above ground with the force of one-third, or less, of the Hiroshima bomb, and also underground nuclear bunker-busters with yields that could be much higher than Hiroshima.<sup>ix</sup> Congressional appropriations were included as well to refurbish the Nevada nuclear test site.<sup>x</sup> Amounts of money involved are small, and specific congressional approval is needed before actually producing the new weapons, but it seems as if the die has been cast.

What in the world is the rationale for an action that former Senator Sam Nunn has called "very damaging to America's security position because...it sets back our effort and our moral persuasion effectiveness in trying to move the world away from nuclear weapons?"<sup>xi</sup> The bunker busters would allegedly provide "a viable tool for threatening underground command bunkers and weapons storage facilities that are hard to attack by conventional means."<sup>xii</sup> The above-ground weapons could supposedly dissuade rogue nations from mounting nuclear or biological attacks on the United States, knowing that we would not have to make the unlikely choice to use one of our catastrophically large nuclear weapons in return, but could instead make the easier choice to use a nuclear weapon that would limit so-called collateral damage. Critics of course are worried that these weapons are not only more usable on the battlefield, but will be used before war as tools of

the new administration policy of preemptive attack.<sup>xiii</sup>

Hypocrisy! What's happened to us as a nation? Since Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 nuclear war has been unthinkable. We utilized a policy of deterrence called MAD -- "mutually assured destruction" -- If you attack us with nuclear weapons, we will utterly annihilate you, and probably the world as well. Hence, the use of nuclear weapons was unthinkable. Now we're apparently thinking hard about developing usable nuclear weapons, even as we're warning the rest of the world about the evils of weapons of mass destruction. Reduced collateral damage by these new weapons is estimated to mean that only tens of thousands of casualties and only small radioactive clouds -- nothing like our current weapons which can incinerate millions, immediately level more than a square mile of buildings, cause potentially lethal burns more than 30 miles away, and release huge clouds of radioactive poison.<sup>xiv</sup>

Great! I hope the lesser level of death and destruction makes you, and the world, feel safer and more secure. Presumably the planners can also assure us, that even though the nuclear genie would then be out of the bottle, and even though the nuclear taboo would then have been erased, there wouldn't be any possibility of nuclear retaliation, or use of nuclear weapons by any other powers for any reason anytime in the future, not to mention terrorists.

What's wrong with us? And why aren't lots of people talking about this? Why wasn't there a massive outcry against this congressional legislation? Senator Ted Kennedy is reported as having asked during the debate in Congress: "Is half a Hiroshima OK? Is a quarter Hiroshima OK? Is a little mushroom cloud OK?" And he concluded, "That's absurd. The issue is too important."<sup>xv</sup> (Let it be noted, though, before I sound too politically partisan, that this shift toward

development of a more flexible post-Cold War nuclear arsenal began during the Clinton administration).<sup>xvi</sup> The mayor of Hiroshima recently asked people to visit his city to "see with their own eyes what nuclear weapons have in store for humanity."<sup>xvii</sup> I visited myself more than 20 years ago, and spent a wrenching day at the memorial park and museum. Guest books were filled with somber entries like "Let us never forget," "Ban the Bomb Forever," "Pray for Peace," and "No more Hiroshimas." There were also some very angry visitors who had written things like "Bomb back New York," "I hate the USA," and "U.S.--next will be yours." Remember, we're the only country which has ever used atomic weapons, and now we're seriously talking about using them again.

The chief of the International Atomic Energy Agency has warned that this congressional action may encourage other countries that have nuclear weapons to violate the 1968 nuclear non-proliferation treaty, not to mention those that are not signatories to the treaty.<sup>xviii</sup> The Malaysian ambassador to the same agency has pointedly noted that "The U.S. follows a double standard that allows it to develop and threaten to use nuclear weapons, while denying them to smaller countries."<sup>xix</sup> Hypocrisy. Of course. As a Western diplomat in Vienna added, "If nuclear weapons are necessary for the sole surviving superpower, what hope does Iran or any number of other countries have without them?"<sup>xx</sup>

"I refuse to accept the cynical notion," declared Martin Luther King, Jr., "that nation after nation must spiral down a militaristic stairway into the hell of nuclear annihilation."<sup>xxi</sup> Moreover, he insisted on speaking "clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today: my own government."<sup>xxii</sup> Last week I spoke to one of my most wonderful mentors, my

university chaplain from Yale in the 1960's, the Rev. William Sloane Coffin, about this congressional vote on the new mini-nukes and nuclear bunker-busters. "Nuclear apartheid," he called it. "We're arrogating to ourselves the right to produce and use nuclear weapons, while denying it to everyone else. South Africa could not convince the world of the moral rectitude of its racial apartheid, nor will we convince anyone of the morality of our nuclear apartheid."

Hypocrisy, I would add. And hypocrisy always spells moral bankruptcy.

The Rev. William Sloane Coffin just wrote an article for the January 12 issue of the Nation, titled "Despair is not an Option." Among the positive signs he sees today are hundreds of members of something called the Clergy Leadership Network who, among other things, are for the global abolition of nuclear weapons. Such abolition appeared to be national policy when at the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference in the year 2000, all the nuclear weapon states who are party to the treaty, including the United States, pleaded "an unequivocal undertaking to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals."<sup>xxiii</sup> That's now looking like one step forward, followed, last year, by two steps back.

Yet, we must not despair. Nor, in Isaiah's words, may we keep silent, nor rest, until vindication shines out like the dawn. Isaiah's hope was that ancient Israel "no more be termed Forsaken, and your land...no more be termed Desolate." Surely desolation will be the result of pursuing the development and use of nuclear weapons -- of whatever size and description. Our land...the whole earth...forsaken and desolate. Instead, Isaiah's hope was that the land "shall be called My Delight is in Her."<sup>xxiv</sup> We must -- each of us must -- work tirelessly, with hope in our souls, to rid this world of the threat of nuclear annihilation. "Let us be dissatisfied, until those

who live on the outskirts of hope are brought into the metropolis of daily security." We must turn back, and forswear our foolish ways, now and forever. AMEN.

## NOTES

- 
- i. Isaiah 62: 1-5.
  - ii. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Where Do We Go From Here," in James Melvin Washington (ed.), A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), p. 251.
  - iii. John 2: 1-11.
  - iv. Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Social Organization of Nonviolence," in Washington, Testament of Hope, p. 34.
  - v. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," in Washington, Testament of Hope, pp. 39-40.
  - vi. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution," in Washington, Testament of Hope, p. 276.
  - vii. President George W. Bush, "State of the Union Address," January 29, 2003, <http://www.cnn.com/2003/ALLPOLITICS/01/28/sotu.transcript/>
  - viii. Douglas Frantz, "Observers Fault U.S. for Pursing Mini-Nukes," Los Angeles Times, December 23, 2003, p. 14A.
  - ix. "Ideas That Mattered in 2003: New Nukes in the Quiver?" Atlanta Journal-Constitution, December 28, 2003, p. 2G.
  - x. Daniel Sneider, "U.S. Leaps Back Into the Nuclear Arms Race," San Jose Mercury News, December 23, 2003.
  - xi. "Ideas," Atlanta Journal Constitution, p. 2G.
  - xii. Ian Hoffman, "Scientists Make Case for Mini-nukes," Tri-Valley Herald, November 8, 2003.
  - xiii. Ibid.
  - xiv. Ibid.



---

xv. Senator Edward Kennedy, as quoted by Molly Mechtenberg-Berrigan, WAMM Newsletter, December 2003-January 2004.

<http://www.worldwidewamm.org/newsletters/2003/1203/open.html>

xvi. Sneider, "U.S. Leaps."

xvii. Ranjit Devraj, "Nukes Back in Fashion, Hiroshima Mayor Warns," Inter Press Service, October 15, 2003.

xviii. Ibid.

xix. Frantz, "Observers Fault U.S.," p. 1.

xx. Ibid.

xxi. Martin Luther King, Jr., as quoted in "Remembering Martin Luther King, Jr.," a collection of quotations for Martin Luther King Day, observed January 19, 2004, on the Waging Peace Website of the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation [http://www.wagingpeace.org/articles/2003/12/23\\_remembering-mlk.htm](http://www.wagingpeace.org/articles/2003/12/23_remembering-mlk.htm)

xxii. Martin Luther King, as quoted by Clayborne Carson in "King on War and Peace: the Peace Race," at [http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/about\\_king/warandpeace/wpeacerace.htm](http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/about_king/warandpeace/wpeacerace.htm)

xxiii. David Krieger, "Nuclear Weapons Abolition," on the Waging Peace Website of the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, December 30, 2003, at [http://www.wagingpeace.org/articles/2003/12/30\\_krieger\\_nuclear-abolition.htm](http://www.wagingpeace.org/articles/2003/12/30_krieger_nuclear-abolition.htm)

xxiv. Isaiah 62: 4.