

The Rev. Kate Byrd
12/5/2021

Glimmers of Hope, Pointing to Peace

When I was in seminary I had the privilege to travel to Jerusalem. Which was one of the most beautiful and most challenging journeys I had ever made. In fact I barely even made it into the country. If you have ever traveled El Al (the Isareali airline) or are familiar with Israeli security screening you may know what I am talking about. As we waited in line to begin our pre-boarding check I vividly remember watching the El Al employees carefully set out a long row of black music stands, and wondering to myself “were they about to present us with a pre-flight concert”? A few moments later the same employees came out and stood behind the black stands. Quickly I realized they were not sharing a musical offering with us. But, instead screening us as a preventative measure against terrorism. As I came forward they began to question me. Who was I traveling with? What was I traveling for? What books was I bringing with me? I was so confused, and quickly my confusion turned to panic, which turned into suspicion (on their side). Before I knew it I was being escorted to a waiting area where I would be detained for the next hour. Thankfully, after a large man thoroughly rummaged through my luggage an El Al flight attendant led me to the plane and my seat, minutes before we took off for Tel Aviv.

When we finally arrived in Israel, and departed the plane we were greeted by teenagers with AK 47's, standing attention around the airport, ushering tour groups to their next destination, checking papers and maintaining order. These fully armed, doe eyed teens, were the Israeli soldiers, mandated to serve their country after the 18th birthday. That same day, as I walked through the Old City in Jerusalem I couldn't help but imagine and realize all of the bloodshed, wars, and various military powers that had come through these sacred walls, marching on this holy ground, all within this thin space. Each in honor of their own beloved religion all for the glory of the same God. Muslims, Christians, and Jews alike. No one's hands were clean in this fight, no one was blameless for the crimes committed against their neighbor in the name of God.

In our Gospel passage from Luke, we are introduced to John the Baptist by way of a seemingly peculiar, highly detailed and seemingly historically accurate list of political figures and military powers. As we just read, “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah...something about John the baptist.” I don't know about you, but that is pretty much what I just heard. A lot of this stuff in our passage feels fairly unrelatable, or at the very least insignificant to our modern day ears. Who cares about a bunch of ancient emperors and governors or the places where they held authority and rule. How am I supposed to know what was “written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah.” I mean I understand why John the Baptist is important to note. We hear of his significance Advent after Advent, as the one who comes to prepare the way. But, these other dudes, who cares, they don't have anything to do with our story. Do they?

While on my Holy Land pilgrimage, various organizations associated with the Anglican retreat center where we stayed (St. George's College) came to share the ways they worked to support the local communities, many of whom were plagued by unrest and violence. One of these was called Kids 4 Peace. In 2001, determined to give their youth a better future, as fear, distrust, and division turned to fighting, bombings, and general violence. A group of spiritually devoted parents in Jerusalem - Jewish, Christian, and Muslim - came together in hope for peace. These parents and teens, as faithful individuals, believed in their duty to take the first step towards reconciliation and restoration of their beloved Holy Land and its people. With support from the Anglican church in Jerusalem, and funding from our own Episcopal Church in the United States. Those first twelve Israeli and Palestinian youth traveled to Camp Allen in Houston for a two week summer camp with other youth from around the U.S. Focused on supporting and empowering our young people to be leaders in their communities, and

catalysts for change. Today the dream of those 12, in 2002, is a global initiative, and serves over 500 youth per year in countries experiencing division and fear. Kids 4 Peace is dedicated to creating safe spaces that allow young people to learn and experience the fact that as children of God we are much more alike than we are different. And, when we take time and make room to listen we can truly hear one another. As an organization Dedicated to remaining a sign of hope and a force for creating a more just and inclusive world, Kids 4 Peace teaches youth, during their most vulnerable years, the significance of leaning on our interpersonal relationships and experiences in the work for peace, justice, and equality in our world.

While the list of political figures and military powers of ancient Rome may seem inconsequential to how the Gospel applies to our lives today, I believe we would be remiss to simply gloss over them. And, chalk it up to ancient history. Because, for Luke, their inclusion in our story is an indicator of exactly how this is Good News. As we hear the list of names and their corresponding titles their power and authority within the context of that space and time is undeniable. But, as Luke states, “the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.” Here Luke reveals and solidifies for his readers who actually holds the true power and divine authority. That scraggly, long haired, hippie, in the woods, eating bugs off the ground, “who the Word of God came to.” This is the good news! Because, it reveals that God is doing something new, something completely counter cultural, and seemingly insane. (As God actually tends to do quite frequently in our Biblical narratives). God, is raising up that random recluse in the middle of nowhere as the one who will prepare the way for the Prince of Peace through a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. A baptism, Jewish tradition formerly reserved for new converts to the faith, but here is offered to ALL, greek or jew, slave or free, man or woman, saint or sinner, powerful or powerless. In order that we might ALL be restored, renewed, and transformed into a united people. Gathered together, working as one to prepare the way for the Prince of Peace, in the midst of the wilderness.

After spending time in Israel, walking the streets of the Old City, seeing both pain and beauty in Jerusalem, and hearing the stories of weary yet hopeful Israelis and Palestinians, I took away two things. First, our history forms who we are and how we live, it is as much a part of us as our DNA. Whether we acknowledge it or not it makes us who we are, and influences how we live and move and have our being. Second, fear and division can be as dangerous as a fast spreading virus. But, hope and the desire for peace are significantly more contagious and transformational. As the people came out to John in the wilderness they did so desiring a different way. Instead of Pax Romana they hoped for the Peace of Christ. In every age there have been times of violence and division spurred on by fear. But, there have also been times of peace and unity spurred on by hope. As Martin Luther King, Jr. brilliantly reminded us, “the moral arc of history is long, but it bends towards justice.” This Advent we are called to hold fast to our hope. A hope that encourages us to seek out the peace of Christ. Like those first twelve teens experienced at their camp 20 years ago. When we have hope that our faith is more than just wishful thinking, we can make lasting change in our world, even if just for a moment or just for a few individuals. Today on our second Sunday in Advent as we prepare the way for the Prince of Peace, in our lives and the world, how might we also go out into the wilderness? That space where we can take time and make room to listen and truly hear one another. That holy ground which calls us to repent and return to our creator, being reminded that we are ALL children of God. That wild and unpredictable land that requires us to lean on one another for our survival and our success, remembering that how I live affects how you live. Finding glimmers of hope that remind us we are all heirs of the kingdom of the Prince of Peace, who was, and is, and is to come.