

**May 22, 2022**

**Micah 4:1-5**

**Longing for Peace**

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Listen, children, to a story  
That was written long ago  
'Bout a kingdom on a mountain  
And the valley-folk below  
On the mountain was a treasure  
Buried deep beneath the stone  
And the valley-people swore  
They'd have it for their very own

So the people of the valley  
Sent a message up the hill  
Asking for the buried treasure  
Tons of gold for which they'd kill  
It came an answer from the mountain  
With our brothers we will share  
All the secrets of our mountain  
All the riches buried there

Now the valley cried with anger  
"Mount your horses! Draw your sword!"  
And they killed the mountain-people  
So they won their just reward  
Now they stood beside the treasure  
On the mountain, dark and red  
Turned the stone and looked beneath it  
"Peace on Earth" was all it said

Songwriters: Brian Potter / Dennis Earle Lambert  
One Tin Soldier lyrics © Universal Music Publishing Group

Released in 1969, "One Tin Soldier" became a popular song during the Vietnam War and was heard then as an anti-war anthem. Written by the songwriting team of Brian Potter and Dennis Lambert, "One Tin Soldier" tells the tale of two

neighboring tribes: the warlike Valley Folk and the peace-loving people in the Mountain Kingdom.

The Mountain People possessed a great treasure and the Valley Folk wanted it. So, they sent a message demanding the buried treasure and the Mountain People responded, saying they would share the treasure and all the secrets of the mountain with the Valley Folk. However, sharing was not what the Valley Folk had in mind. They instead invaded and killed the Mountain People. Once triumphant, the Valley Folk turned the stone and looked underneath it; they found nothing, but the words "Peace on Earth" inscribed on the underside of the stone.

And here's the chorus: "Go ahead and hate your neighbor. Go ahead and cheat a friend. Do it in the name of heaven. You can justify it in the end. There won't be any trumpets blowin'. Come the judgment day on the bloody mornin' after, one tin soldier rides away."

The message: war is futile.

What treasure could possibly be more important than living in peace with one another? What could be so valuable the Valley Folk were willing to kill all the Mountain People to possess? The events recorded in this song aren't so hard for us to imagine, are they? History tells us that very often human beings are willing to trade other people's lives for things like oil, land, revenge, religion. And the sad truth is, after all the violence and all the killing, the ones who claim victory lose too. If you don't believe me, spend some time in a VA Clinic talking to veterans who have returned home from war. Their lives will forever be impacted by the trauma they experienced. They have seen things and been told to do things no human should have to. It is traumatic because we were not created to kill each other.

When we inflict violence on others, we give away the peace our souls long for. As we watch in horror as the war in Ukraine goes on and as we mourn with the people of Buffalo, NY in the aftermath of a terrorist's hatred, the world, and our lives seem anything but peaceful. But I long for peace...I wonder if you do too. Do you long for a world in which killing other human beings is never an option? Do you long for a world in which the ways of love, justice, and compassion are the norm, instead of the exception? Here's what the Valley Folk didn't know, the peace we long for begins with us, in our hearts and homes, in our words, and our actions.

I like to talk about peace around Memorial Day, which is already next week. The day which has been set aside to remember and honor the soldiers killed in American wars. I'm embarrassed to say that I just recently learned that the earliest recorded observance of Memorial Day was in 1865. It took place at the Washington Racecourse and Jockey Club in Charleston, South Carolina. In the late stages of the Civil War, the Confederate army transformed the formerly posh country club into a makeshift prison for Union captives. More than 260 Union soldiers died from disease and exposure while being held in the racetrack's open-air infield. Their bodies were hastily buried in a mass grave behind the grandstands.

When Charleston fell and Confederate troops evacuated the badly damaged city, Black people freed from enslavement were left behind. One of the first things those brave human beings did was give the fallen Union prisoners a proper burial. They exhumed the mass grave and reinterred the bodies in a new cemetery. The fence around it was inscribed with the words: "Martyrs of the Racecourse." On May 1, 1865, a crowd of 10,000 people, mostly Black, staged a parade around the racetrack. Schoolchildren carried armloads of roses and were followed by hundreds of Black women carrying baskets of flowers, wreaths, and crosses. Members of the famed 54th Massachusetts and other Black Union regiments were in attendance as well.

This story of the origin of Memorial Day, which had been previously unknown to me, collided in my heart with the news of the act of racially motivated, hate fueled terrorism in Buffalo last Saturday. As I set the compassionate acts of the Black community in Charleston 157 years ago side by side with the ways in which Black people have been and are treated in this country today, I felt shame. I feel ashamed because, while I was not present when Black bodies were sold to the highest bidder, I am here now, participating in systems that continue to dehumanize not only Black people, but brown people, indigenous people, anyone "other" than white people. Friends, we are not responsible for what happened then, but what's happening now, which is rooted in the same "othering" of human beings, is on us. Acts of violence and war are allowed to happen because one side is always "the other."

I don't want you to misunderstand me. I do believe every single soldier who has been killed fighting for this country deserves to be honored and remembered and

their graves adorned with flowers and flags. But the truth is, the very best way to honor their lives and their sacrifice is to stop sending more soldiers to fight and to be the people and the nation they fought for, where there is “liberty and justice for all.” We must be about the work of creating a world in which war is no longer an option on the table at all, where acts of violence and killing human beings are not a part of everyday life.

That world is hard to imagine when, every day, we turn on our televisions or fire up our computers and see bombs being dropped and blood on our neighbors’ streets and we see black bodies dead in a grocery store and we learn that once again, the attack was motivated by the evil of racism. The author of the New Testament book Hebrews wrote, “...faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. As people of faith, we are called to keep hope alive, even though a world at peace is something we have never seen. So today, as we prepare for our Memorial Day pilgrimages to cemeteries, family picnics, and the launch into summertime that next weekend will bring, I would like us to reflect on the words of 8<sup>th</sup> century prophet, Micah, who offers us some imagery for that world we have not seen; one in which all people would acknowledge the ways of God, there would be no need for weapons of war, and each person would have the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of peace. This is Micah 4:1-5:

In days to come

the mountain of the Lord’s temple  
shall be established as the highest of the mountains  
and shall be raised up above the hills.

Peoples shall stream to it,

<sup>2</sup> and many nations shall come and say:

“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,  
to the house of the God of Jacob,  
that God may teach us God’s ways  
and that we may walk in God’s paths.”

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,  
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

<sup>3</sup> God shall judge between many peoples  
and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away;  
they shall beat their swords into plowshares  
and their spears into pruning hooks;

nation shall not lift up sword against nation;  
neither shall they learn war anymore;  
<sup>4</sup> but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees,  
and no one shall make them afraid,  
for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken.  
<sup>5</sup> For all the peoples walk,  
each in the name of its god,  
but we will walk in the name of the Lord our God  
forever and ever.

This text was either written around the time of the Israelites' Babylonian exile or a bit later, in response to the threatened invasion of Israel by the Assyrians. It was a much needed word of hope amid a time of intense suffering for the people of Israel. On the heels of the previous three chapters, in which the prophet pronounced judgement on the people for turning from the ways of their God, this chapter paints a picture of a world yet to be, absent of war, a world in which all people can enjoy the fruits of peace. In this text, we can hear the prophet's longing for relief from oppression, a return of all that has been lost, a recognition that the ways of God will prevail. Man, God's people have sure been longing for these things for a very long time.

Yet, here we are, still living in a world where violence is commonplace, maybe even celebrated. Our children play video games that hinge on violence. We pay money to watch movies in which the plots depend on people hurting or killing other people. We allow our government to kill, on our behalf, human beings convicted of crimes, even while we know our justice system doesn't work for Black and brown people and people who are poor. When the person responsible for the Buffalo tragedy last week was arrested without being killed, many were angry because the nation has watched so many encounters between law enforcement and Black people that ended with the Black person dead. That's where we are...we get mad that a human being didn't die.

It's like we have been desensitized to the point that the idea of snuffing out a life doesn't seem like a big deal. I think this attitude is possible because we see certain human beings as "other." They are "other" because they have committed a crime, speak a different language, stand in the way of what we want, don't believe what we believe, do not share our skin color, and the list goes on and on.

And if we can keep ourselves convinced that there are, indeed, “others,” than we can excuse our tolerance for violence that affects *them*.

The problem is war and violence doesn't just affect them; it affects all of us. The war in Ukraine, which has actually been blessed by some Christian leaders in Russia, affects all of us. Ukrainians are being displaced from their homes. Allies are spending billions of dollars, not only on refugee assistance, but on supplies to fight the war. Nations in Africa, dependent on Ukrainian grain, are in dire need because the ships carrying grain can't leave Ukrainian ports. The world is struggling to figure out what to do without Russian energy. And every day, more people are killed, and we are watching it in real time. That alone will have a lasting effect on all of us.

It isn't just Ukraine though. In the United States, since May 13<sup>th</sup>, 17 people have been killed and 79 people injured in mass shootings, which are defined as 4 or people shot in a single incident.

<https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/reports/mass-shooting>

That statistic ought to break our hearts. We are a nation at war with one another in a world at war with itself. Micah's vision seems so far afield from what our imaginations can fathom we have to wonder if anything we do or say matters. The dust from one war or one act of violence doesn't have time to settle before the next happens.

As I read the news these days, I find myself thinking about something physician and anthropologist, Dr. Paul Farmer said (I've probably shared this quote before), “The idea that some lives matter less is the root of all that is wrong with the world.” In 2018, Dr. Farmer was interviewed by Alvin Powell of the Harvard Gazette. In the interview, talking about his now famous quote, Dr. Farmer said, “Someone told me recently, ‘I just love your quotation: ‘The idea that some lives matter less is the root of all that's wrong with the world.’ And I thought what I always do: Wait, didn't Jesus say that? And just about every minor Jewish prophet?” He was right.

For me, every time I use this quote, I test it and try to think of a case in which valuing some lives less than others is not the root of the evil that happened. I have yet to think of one.

Dr. Farmer died a couple months ago while working in Rwanda. He was the co-founder of an organization called Partners in Health which provided medical care to impoverished countries, including Haiti, Rwanda, Peru, and Russia. In his own way, he worked for peace by recognizing the worth of every single human being. Dr. Farmer got it right. Every bullet shot, every bomb dropped, every system designed to oppress, every law or policy that adversely affects Black and brown people, women, people with disabilities, and the LGBTQ+ community, is rooted in the lie that some lives matter more than others. We cannot accept the world as it is because, quite frankly, for many people, the world is getting more and more dangerous.

Nothing we do will bring all war and violence to an end today. The world has not become what it is overnight and will not change overnight either. However, I believe that every time we refuse to accept that some lives are worth less than others, we create pockets of peace in our lives and in the world. If Micah's vision is a vision we can embrace, one in which our weapons of violence are turned into tools that create abundance, what might that look like?

I imagine it will look a bit like what's happening now as military cargo planes are used to transport millions of bottles of baby formula, rather than using the planes to transport weapons of war.

I imagine it will mean governments spending less money on military might and more money forgiving student loans, supporting people with mental health care, caring for the very young and the very old, and finding humane, dignified solutions for immigrants at our southern border. Their lives do not matter less than ours. They just don't.

I imagine it will look a lot like people of God becoming aware of how we participate in the "othering" of our neighbors and us being willing to change. It will be asking people which pronouns they use and then using them. It will be helping all people access the healthcare they need.

So, here is my challenge to all of us. Make a list of the tools you have at your disposal. Things like social media, money, time, etc. And then consider how you might use them to bring about life and abundance. What does social media look like for someone who is focused on those things? What does how we spend our time and money look like if we are really interested in peace? We do not have to do more things; we just have to do them differently.

My hope is that we will be a community of people that creates pockets of peace by using our voices to stand with the ones who are vulnerable, by making space for the ones who have been left out, by being willing to change the way we do things so that someone else can experience the abundance of God. This week, let us honor the ones who sacrificed for this country by being peacemakers. Peace is the treasure for the whole world to share. Share some peace this week, dear ones. Amen.