



"Bethlehem Now"
Rev. Dr. Scott Field
Matthew 2: 13-23
May 26, 2019
9:15 AM Service

Originally the Memorial Day holiday, then called Decoration Day, was observed in something of a patchwork fashion by various communities to honor those who lost their lives in the Civil War. Waterloo, New York is recognized as holding the first Memorial Day observance in 1866. Eventually, though, after World War I, the focus shifted from those who lost their lives in the War Between the States to those who lost their lives in military conflict on behalf of the United States. There were and are parades, flag raising ceremonies, and military salutes of various sorts.

Others, since it is called a day of remembering those who have gone before us, visit the cemetery and place or plant flowers on the grave or graves of parents or grandparents or others who have had a significant impact on our lives.

For most, however, Memorial Day Weekend is traditionally the unofficial beginning of summer. Community swimming pools are opened, beaches are ready for the summer crowds, grilling out begins in earnest, and many retailers have a Memorial Day Sale.

As we have gathered today to worship the Prince of Peace, however, I'd like to set aside our other weekend plans for a few moments to point out again the high cost of military conflict as well as the high cost of peace. We are, as Christians, first and foremost, citizens of the Kingdom of God before we are citizens of any of the kingdoms, nations, political movements, or associations of this world.

There is no question in the United States we are drawn to that national purpose to pursue our own happiness, whatever that might mean; but the witness of the Scriptures calls us to much stiffer stuff. As Christ followers we are to pursue holiness, to become more and more like Jesus, and to seek justice, extend ourselves for mercy's sake, and, instead of setting ourselves apart by our accumulation of things and our drive for more and better and best, to live in humility, giving practical witness to the dependable, faithful grace of the Lord.

Our cultural default setting is to sit back with a cold beverage and consider how good it is that others have given themselves to secure our freedom. It's sort of like the Christian practice of counting our blessings. No question that today we should be grateful to live in the United States of America. But

today I also want to remind us we actually live in a world, and in many ways in a country, filled with conflict where we are commissioned, in Jesus' name, to be healers and peacemakers. And it has always been so -- from the birth of Jesus to the present day.

I was reminded of this recently when our group traveling to the Holy Land visited Bethlehem.

Bethlehem is located in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, behind the Israeli-built barrier, and a peace process that has been steadily deteriorating for nearly two decades.

In recent years, Bethlehem has been relatively peaceful. But its reputation, mainly due to the Palestinian intifadas, or uprisings, which once led to gun battles in the streets between Israelis and Palestinians, has stained the holy city and left many Westerners afraid of visiting the birthplace of Jesus.

<https://www.newsweek.com/bethlehem-easter-church-nativity-jesus-israel-palestinians-war-christians-584908>

Our group of Holy Land pilgrims from First Church certainly qualified as tourists. We stayed longer in Bethlehem than anticipated – mainly due to the large number of people seeking to visit the traditional birthplace of Jesus. And we had lunch in a restaurant there. And we bought stuff at an olive wood carving shop owned and staffed by Palestinian Christians. A number of us returned from Jerusalem in the evening to have dinner with Arab Christian families – during which we learned about the severe restrictions on them since they live in the West Bank, an area occupied by Israeli politics, administration, and military.

And when we visited Yad Vashem, Israel's official memorial to victims of the Holocaust, I observed what seemed to me a haunting parallelism between the German ghettoizing of Jews in Poland during the 1930's, for example, and the ghettoizing of Palestinians in Bethlehem today. I mentioned this to our guide, a retired Israeli Air Force pilot, who said that the difference is that so many Palestinians are terrorists. The primary breadwinner in the Palestinian Christian home where a few of us had dinner together was actually a banker.

But this is how the world is. This is how Bethlehem is. And, when Jesus was born, this is how Bethlehem was.

Most of us only run into Bethlehem on Christmas Eve. We sing, "O Little Town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie." The Bible won't actually let us get away with that. If you hang out at the God shop for even a little while all of the sentimentalized rosy-colored glasses, sugar-coated kind of Christmas gives way to the real world in which we live and into which Jesus was born.

¹⁶ Herod was furious when he realized that the wise men had outwitted him. He sent soldiers to kill all the boys in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under, based on the wise men's report of the star's first appearance. ¹⁷ Herod's brutal action fulfilled what God had spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

*18 "A cry was heard in Ramah—
weeping and great mourning.
Rachel weeps for her children,
refusing to be comforted,
for they are dead."
Matthew 2:16-18*

The way we do Christmas is inherently sentimental with an expectation that there is some sort of magic which transforms us from Ebenezer Scrooge look-alikes into the people who will do right by the likes of Tiny Tim. That there will be peace on earth and, in fact, it can begin with me. Out come the polar bears and the Coca-Cola and we'd like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony.

You can see from the Scripture text of Matthew, though, barely four verses after the birth of Jesus, what happens. Our cards and songs and traditions are intended to provoke some kind of charitable, generous, kind, and compassionate magic within us. But the gospel tells us that the birth of Jesus, this announcement of a king of the Jews, provoked King Herod the Great. Jesus threatened, baby Jesus we're talking about, threatened Herod's political alliance between Jewish authorities and the Romans. So, he decided to stand up and act like a king. He massacred all the boy babies in and around Bethlehem. Herod joins other great political leaders throughout history who don't mind a little injustice, a little murder, particularly of children, in order to advance a political agenda and maintain their power.

As good as the good news is about Jesus coming, it is set against the horror story of the way the world is. Matthew's Christmas pageant ends not with tinsel covered angels proclaiming goodwill but with Rachel weeping for her slaughtered babies. What those dumb shepherds might see is just a little baby, just a relative of King David. Herod, though, knew that the angels were right. Jesus was and is a threat to the ways of the world.

At the end of the story of the Nativity, after the angels go back to wherever they came from and after the shepherds go home and the wise men and the baby Jesus and his family head for Egypt as refugees, we hear the screams of mothers weeping for Jewish babies. And our nose gets rubbed in the politics of it all, and the blood and pain and sorrow, before the Bible will let us leave Bethlehem.

And even though this is not the story we want, it is the Christmas story we need, because any God who is unwilling to come to Bethlehem won't do us much good. If any God is going to save us, God will have to come down, down to where we are, because we can never save ourselves.

At Bethlehem we see a prelude to events that take place later at a place just up the road, called Calvary. The one called King of the Jews goes head to head with our kings and our kingdoms, our politics and our power; and there is pain and violence, and there is blood and death and weeping. Herod would get his way with Mary's baby, but Mary's baby would, amazingly, get his way over and beyond Herod and all powers of this world.

You may be wondering what all of this talk about Bethlehem has to do with Memorial Day. Good question. It is about bringing together the world in which we live, the reality of the Incarnation (God coming to our world as a human being), the victory of the resurrection, the hope of the new heaven and new earth, and the dream that inhabits our hearts day by day.

Jesus came to Bethlehem – gritty, occupied, torn and tossed Bethlehem. He came in fulfillment of God’s promise to redeem the world:

God’s Promise of Peace Through the Messiah (Isaiah 11:1-3; 6-10)

Out of the stump of David’s family will grow a shoot—
 yes, a new Branch bearing fruit from the old root.

² And the Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—
 the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
 the Spirit of counsel and might,
 the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

³ He will delight in obeying the Lord.

In that day the wolf and the lamb will live together;
 the leopard will lie down with the baby goat.
 The calf and the yearling will be safe with the lion,
 and a little child will lead them all.

⁷ The cow will graze near the bear.
 The cub and the calf will lie down together.
 The lion will eat hay like a cow.

⁸ The baby will play safely near the hole of a cobra.
 Yes, a little child will put its hand in a nest of deadly snakes without harm.

⁹ Nothing will hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain,
 for as the waters fill the sea,
 so the earth will be filled with people who know the Lord.

¹⁰ In that day the heir to David’s throne
 will be a banner of salvation to all the world.
 The nations will rally to him,
 and the land where he lives will be a glorious place.

The conflict between the kingdoms of this world and the Kingdom of God has been settled. The resurrection of Jesus is proof of where the future is headed. It is the justice and peace of God.

I am fully aware, and so are you, that the world in which we live is riddled with evil, injustice, oppression, and corruption. We still have plenty who will use their power to destroy the voiceless and powerless. And will use their power to hold to themselves all the privilege and prosperity which they

refuse to extend to others. I am fully aware that in some cases the use of lethal force will be necessary to confront the injustice and oppression, to defend the voiceless and powerless. And sometimes lethal force will be used to defend the injustice and oppression. Very, very messy and sometimes ambiguous.

However, our vision and calling is clear. Our feet may be planted in a particular place, but our hearts and hopes are aligned with a different Kingdom.

Jesus, known as both the Prince of Peace and the Suffering Servant, in what we call The Beatitudes, includes this direction on the way of blessing:

Blessed are the peacemakers, but they shall be called the children of God.
(Matthew 5:9)

I appreciate the New Living translation of this familiar verse:

God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God.



Pedro Reyes, an artist from Mexico City, transforms weapons discarded by the Mexican army for his project called "Disarm." So far, he has transformed 6,700 guns that were turned in or seized by the army and police into musical instruments. The guns came from Ciudad Juarez, a city of about 1.3 million people that averaged about 10 killings a day at the height of its drug violence. Reyes said that the guns he used are "just the tip of the iceberg of all the weapons that are seized every day and that the army has to destroy." But rather than succumb to the despair, Reyes

took the very instruments used for violence and created instruments for music.



Reyes already was known for a 2008 project called "Palas por Pistolas," or "Pistols to Shovels," in which he melted down 1,527 weapons to make the same number of shovels to plant the same number of trees. Reyes stresses that his work "is not just a protest, but a proposal." "To me at least," Reyes says, "the concept is about taking weapons that are destructive in nature and chaotic and trying to make them for something else. So instead of objects of destruction, they become objects of creation." Art, for Reyes, is about transformation. He takes objects of destruction and transforms them into objects of

creation. It is not by accident that Reyes' creative work hearkens back to the ancient vision of the prophet Isaiah when on the great day of the Lord "they will hammer their swords into plowshares."

Margaret Manning, "Reordering Darkness," A Slice of Infinity blog (10-4-16)

You might think that's interesting, but what does it have to do with you and me here and now?

We live in a highly conflicted time within our own country and culture. I am reminded of an observation made after the 2017 Super Bowl. That was the game when the New England Patriots engineered an amazing comeback to win the game. But even the advertising during the game became a flashpoint for controversy.

For example, an ad for Budweiser beer highlighted the company's founder, an immigrant from Germany. An article in the New Yorker magazine claimed, "Arriving, as it did, on the heels of a tumultuous week—after the Trump Administration issued a travel ban on all refugees and on visa holders from seven Muslim-majority countries, and an outraged portion of the country rose up against it—the ad was interpreted as making a clear political statement. Lines were quickly drawn: people either lauded it as a rousing celebration of immigrants in America or else derided it as an example of a brand sticking its nose where it didn't belong." A representative for Anheuser-Busch tried to do damage control by reminding people that "We believe beer should be bipartisan, and did not set out to create a piece of political commentary."

Then the New Yorker article argued (pointedly and sadly): "Despite what Budweiser wants us to believe, beer is not bipartisan. Right now, nothing is ... The nation's mood demands that lines be drawn, and that everyone from average citizens to celebrities to mostly faceless multinational conglomerates make a choice, announce where they stand and what they believe." <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-best-and-worst-2017-super-bowl-ads>

Our military and law enforcement personnel may indeed need to have access to lethal force to both serve and protect the nation and its communities in a violent and highly-conflicted world. But for most of us, most of the time in most situations, our calling will be to build bridges across the lines that have been drawn in order to offer peace and reconciliation for the future. That is the vision of the future planted in the hearts, minds, and imaginations of Jesus' followers.