

We Say No, Again

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1 Samuel 3:1-10

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It's been an intense week. Not so much busy, as in a crowded schedule—but intense, like the air is charged.

I remember, years ago, when Nancy, Jessica, and I were climbing East Spanish Peak in Colorado. We were near the top of that mountain when we suddenly realized that our hair was beginning to stand on end. The climb had begun under a cloudless sky, but now we realized a storm was about to roll over the peak. And we were in the path of a thunderstorm's lightning. Needless to say, we hustled back down.

I've had that feeling this week—like a storm is about to roll over the horizon, like my hair standing on end.

The lectionary text about Samuel is one of my favorite stories. It illustrates one of the most common themes of Scripture—of God reaching out to commission the most unlikely of folk. Samuel was just a boy. And a commoner, at that. He was not part of the priestly class. He was no celebrity child of royal blood. Yet here he was, bedded down in the temple room where the ark of God was housed. And when he was called, he had no idea at first who was doing the calling.

The story is full of irony. The text says it was an age when “The word of the Lord was rare; visions were not widespread.” (Sounds kind of like what we're facing in this election season.) The call came when “the lamp of God had not yet gone out,” which means in the dead of night, since the lamp burned from sundown to dawn.

The one who helps Samuel interpret and understand the call—the old priest Eli—was himself almost blind. And this call came despite the fact that Samuel “did not yet know the Lord.” What kind of employer reaches out to someone with no experience?

Remember this story, next time you're called to do something for which you have little training or experience.

Though it sounds odd, Martin Luther King got called well before his time. He's now such an icon to us that it's hard to comprehend how unprepared he was to assume the leadership of the most significant social movement in U.S. history. He was barely a year into his first pastoral assignment. He had a newborn in his Montgomery house. He'd recently finished his Boston University Ph.D., with a dissertation entitled “A Comparison of the Concept of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman.”

In my schooling, I spent a fair bit of time studying both those thinkers. I can report that neither of them said much about staring down police dogs, suffering numerous life threats and actual bombings, enduring prison cells and FBI harassment. Nor did their writing speak of Jesus' insistence that loving enemies is the only way to peace.

Martin Luther King's call was a steep learning curve. Sometimes ours are, too.

This past week I read James Cone's new book, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. It's an insightful book. It's also a very painful book to read.

In 1893 the screams of Henry Smith were recorded on gramophone as he was being lynched. Photographs of the crowd show about 10,000 people, who came in from around the region of Paris, Texas, to witness the spectacle. Photographs were taken and sold as postcards, with the caption “Wish You Were Here.” It got so bad that, in 1908, the U.S. Postal Service banned the mailing of such cards.

Of course, not all lynchings are in the distant past. In 1998 James Byrd was tied with chains to a pickup truck in Jasper, Texas, and dragged for three miles on a paved road. And not all victims are black. Also in 1998, Matthew Shepard, a gay white student at the University of Wyoming, was beaten and tortured and tied to a fence near Laramie.

Between 1832 and 1930, nearly 5,000 people were lynched in the United States, about 70 percent of them African Americans. Most lynchings occurred in the South, though they have taken place in nearly every state in the nation. In the summer of 1919 alone, 76 African Americans were strung up. In the '30s and '40s, the U.S. Senate repeatedly refused to pass anti-

lynching legislation, and it wasn't until 2005 that Congress issued a public apology for this failure. Saying you're sorry is not the same thing as doing justice.

The history of lynching is a ghastly legacy, and some think we should just leave it alone. Maybe it's best to let sleeping dogs lie, to accentuate the positive. Don't dwell on the past—let's just focus on shaping a new future.

There is indeed a new future to be shaped, and on my better days I can see it coming. On our better days we can go with King to the mountaintop, and we can see the Promised Land. But in order to get there, we have to confront the past. We have to tell the truth.

Furthermore, in order to comprehend what it means to follow Jesus, we have to know about the legacy of lynching if we are to understand the central image of our faith. As Cone wrote: "In the United States, the clearest image of the crucified Christ [is] the figure of an innocent black victim, dangling from a lynching tree." Or as Will Campbell said, talking about the scandal of the cross, "What if we were to start wearing around our necks miniature replicas of electric chairs?"—today's version of the cross, used to kill condemned prisoners. We need to let those thoughts sink in for a while.

I mentioned at the beginning that this has been an intense week. On Wednesday afternoon, I read about the assassination of a nuclear scientist in Iran. All of a sudden, a whole series of very recent events began to stand out. And the hair on my head stood on end.

Then I began remembering a similar series of events in late 2006 and early 2007. So I went back to find the statement this congregation unanimously approved the first Sunday of Lent five years ago. Many of you were here when we endorsed that document. What follows is an updated version of that document.

We Say No, Again.

On the first Sunday of Lent 2007, when tensions between the United States and Iran were escalating, Circle of Mercy Congregation unanimously adopted a statement entitled "We Say No: A Christian statement in opposition to war with Iran." With the recent assassination of another Iranian scientist—the fourth to be targeted in the past two years—tensions between our two countries are again at a boiling point. And we say *no*, again.

This is an appropriate time, on this observance of Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday, to revisit and reaffirm our earlier convictions. In particular, we need to hear again some of King's forgotten comments from his controversial "Beyond Vietnam" speech.

Virtually no one in the U.S. media, Congress, or administration is willing to speak of this recent assassination as an act of terrorism. In fact, given the political circus now under way, few people are even aware of a series of recent threats and counter-threats between the U.S. and Iran.

Can you imagine the outcry here if U.S. scientists were being targeted, if Iran's submarines were patrolling our coasts, if our nuclear program was the target of a cyber attack, if our energy exports and financial transactions were blockaded, or if Iranian political leaders were openly calling for "regime change" in the United States?

Indeed, most U.S. citizens would be shocked to learn that in 1953 our own government actively supported the overthrow of Iran's democratically elected government and installed a new authoritarian regime friendly to our interests.

No one denies that our two nations have real and substantial policy disagreements. What seems increasingly clear, however, is that the US is baiting Iran toward a dangerous retaliatory response.

The legacy that Dr. King bequeathed to us is more than a fanciful pipedream or fairytale. Revering the dreamer while reneging on the dream only hollows his memory. If Dr. King is to be more than a public souvenir, more than a national mascot, his commitment to nonviolent struggle—stemming from his vision of the Beloved Community—must become our commitment as well.

For that reason, the following convictions stated in our 2007 statement need reaffirming:

The Prophet Habakkuk wrote: *They are a law unto themselves and promote their own honor. Their own strength is their god. (1:7b, 11c)*

Despite assurances to the contrary, we believe our leaders *again* may be calculating the benefits and risks of attacking Iran. Our reading of this moment in history, in light of our commitments as citizens and our convictions as followers of Jesus, impels us to oppose such a move.

As with the ancient Chaldean empire described in the Prophet Habakkuk's oracle, our government is setting its "national interests" above international norms of justice. With a military budget already as large as all other nations combined, we seem to have established our own destructive threat as the source of national glory and honor.

The Psalmist complained: *Pride is their necklace; violence covers them as a garment. Their eyes swell out with fatness, their hearts overflow with follies. They scoff and speak with malice; loftily they threaten oppression. They set their mouths against heaven, and their tongues range over the earth. (73:6-9)*

It is not our habit to engage in partisanship on any political party's agenda. We believe in the separation of church and state. But not in the separation of values from public policy.

Not only are religious convictions suffering scandal; so, too, are the core values of this Republic's founding. It was Thomas Jefferson, in 1807, who asserted, "The spirit of this country is totally adverse to a large military force." Now, given our nation's 2002 "National Security Strategy" document, the U.S. claims justification for waging preemptive war. This policy undermines our democratic traditions, any and every theory of when war is "just," and the very foundation of international law itself. The contradiction is staggering.

Accordingly, should the United States preemptively attack Iran, we shall vigorously protest. For some of us, this commitment includes the willingness to engage in nonviolent civil disobedience.

In the same way, we also pledge vigorous support for any leaders willing to consider Iran's security concerns and national interests alongside those of our own. Competition in belligerent behavior carries catastrophic risks. The only enduring security is *mutual* security.

Another way is possible. Waging peace will require at least as much commitment—as much courage, pride, honor and ingenuity—as the pursuit of war.

We say *no* to war against Iran. It is both a contradiction of the Way of the Cross and a defamation of national honor. We say *yes* to the strategies of multilateral diplomacy and other nonviolent initiatives. We invite other Christians, other people of faith, and other people of conscience to deliberate these convictions and consider similar commitments.

Sisters and brothers, especially in the household of faith: the Apostle Paul's instruction—*overcome evil with good (Rom. 12:21b)*—is both a spiritual truth and the foundation for politically realistic strategies to transform conflict. The Way of the Cross leads home.

Amen

Quotes:

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