"And Turn Transfixed by Faith"
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Wellington Avenue United Church of Christ
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The reading from this morning's lectionary follows a passage in Luke's gospel about famine, pestilence, earthquakes and terrible human discord. We can imagine that in numerous places of worship, this weekend, listeners hearing our passage from Luke's gospel might feel that this picture of environmental catastrophe seems increasingly plausible.

What a gift, though, to hear Larry Meacham sing "A Simple Song" and affirm with Allegra and April our belief that it's better to light one candle than curse the darkness, that the light shines amongst us and the darkness shall not overcome it.

I hope you'll indulge me this morning in a memory from my own celebration of the Advent season, when, growing up on the southwest side of Chicago, as a child much enamored by the lives of the saints and the lives of the nuns, I was particularly impressionable when we were counseled to resolve, during Lent and Advent, to make sacrifices. I had run out of things to give up, having forsworn TV, sweets, soda, and fighting with my sisters. Hairshirts weren't available. But somehow I convinced myself that the heavens would smile upon me if I knelt on my knuckles on the tiled bathroom floor. This I did, nightly, through at least two seasons of Lent and Advent, until finally one night my mom happened upon me, in the bathroom. I still remember her eyebrows arching as she blurted out, "How could you be so odd and be mine?"

Well. Being odd has some benefits, too, and I wonder if it isn't in our more offbeat moments that we find deepened understanding of the earliest disciples of Jesus who were called, essentially, to be odd, to be at odds with their society. They urged one another to hold onto their exceptional and counter cultural community by imagining, together, apocalyptic conditions, more or less all hell breaking loose, but an assurance that their steadfast love and faith would bind them to Jesus and to the vision he held forth.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King understood the value of being maladjusted. Here are his words from a commencement address at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania on June 6, 1961:

Certainly all of us want to live a well-adjusted life in order to avoid the neurotic personality. But I say to you, there are certain things within our social order to which I am proud to be maladjusted and to which I call upon all men of good will to be maladjusted.

If you will allow the preacher in me to come out now, let me say to you that I never did intend to adjust to the evils of segregation and discrimination. I never did intend to adjust myself to religious bigotry. I never did intend to adjust myself to economic conditions that will take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few. I never did intend to

adjust myself to the madness of militarism, and the self-defeating effects of physical violence. And I call upon all men of good will to be maladjusted because it may well be that the salvation of our world lies in the hands of the maladjusted.

How easily we grow adjusted to the madness of militarism and the self-defeating effects of physical violence. The madness seems distant, a subject for TV reports and internet exchanges. I find myself needing to revisit scenes from my own past wherein I walked away from the madness, --by pure accident of birth and history, I could come back to my safe and comfortable home, -- but I know that people who couldn't leave, who are trapped, and they try mightily not to find a way out.

Here is such a story:

In April of 2002, the Israeli Defense Forces were surrounding towns in the West Bank. A new round of peace talks had been shelved after a Palestinian suicide bomber had attacked an Israeli home for people with disabilities. The Israelis insisted that the suicide bombers were being trained in West Bank villages and then imposed a collective punishment through curfews, attacks, mass arrests, bombardment, and then ransacking of civilian homes. The International Solidarity Movement issued a call for U.S. people to join other internationals in an effort to enter villages under siege and to explain what we had seen and heard.

Days after reading the urgent message, several of us found ourselves 13 miles outside of the Jenin Camp, where many people who were already displaced from homes they once lived in inside the city of Jenin were now again forced to flee from their homes. We had heard that there were still civilians living in Jenin. Five of us determined to attempt entering the Jenin camp, although our hosts in a town 13 miles uphill from the Jenin camp assured us it was impossible. We thanked them for the hospitality, borrowed a broom pole and a pillow case, and very early in the morning began walking toward Jenin.

Not surprisingly, Israeli Defense Force soldiers stopped us. An officer told us he'd have to arrest us, and so we promptly sat down; but it turned out that without a woman officer present, under Israeli law, he couldn't arrest women. Our two male companions were arrested, but the officer, Offal, sat down for a long and fascinating conversation with me and my two women companions. Eventually, he gave us handi-wipes, pastries, and bottled water. "I don't know what else to do with you," he said. "Try to be careful."

Once our male companions were booked and released, they hastened up one mountainside and then headed downhill. By 3:00 p.m., we were reunited and carrying on, although nearly every military vehicle that passed us stopped to briefly tell us we were crazy and that we would never be allowed to proceed. Occasionally, soldiers would stop for longer conversations. They were curious. Reliably, the conversations ended amicably. At the bottom of the hill, we faced a large IDF encampment. Soldiers spotted us and hastened to tell us we couldn't go any further. Again the exchanges were friendly. We talked about Scriptures, about music, about novels. I remember a tender, troubling moment when a young soldier told me, "Ma'am, I'm not responsible,--I'm only doing my

job," and an older soldier and I exchanged glances, knowing that he had inadvertently quoted lines repeated so often in the Nuremberg trials.

Whatever chemistry was working that day is hard to identify, but again and again one or more soldiers advised us about how go to forward: cross that onion field, turn right at the tomato field, and you'll find a way to enter the city. We took off like a band of Monty Python players. Similarly, the next morning, approaching checkpoints outside the Jenin Camp area, a soldier let us through and even gave us directions.

At almost every stop along the way, soldiers had assured us that there were no women and children inside the camp.

Once inside, one of the first sounds we heard was that of an old woman moaning. A pickup truck filled with journalists had entered the camp at the same time, and they were driving directly toward the place where a family was trying to ease their grandmother through an opening in their destroyed home. I'm not sure what demon of righteous political correctness seized me, but I hung back, feeling disapproval, thinking that we shouldn't join voyeuristic journalists pouncing on a good photo-op. But Jeff heard only the cries of the old woman and when he drew near he saw that the grandmother was terrified. He learned that she was paralyzed from the waist down, suffered from asthma and had heart failure. They were anxious to get her to a hospital, but knew they would risk being shot if they emerged from the rubble of what was once their home. Jeff thought the journalists might be able to take the woman, but then sniper shots rang out and the journalists instantly disappeared. So, Jeff and Andreas took the old woman, and tried to carry her, but she was very heavy, and they were stumbling badly over the rubble, causing even more anxiety for the frightened woman. By that time I'd set aside my snit and caught up. "Kathy," said Jeff, "you'll have to run and get a stretcher." We had passed a hospital on our way into the camp. I peeled off in that direction. Three Israeli Defense Soldiers ran toward me, with their guns pointed. At times it's good to have been a high school study teacher. "Put those guns down now," I said. And they did. "And tell me which entrance to the hospital I can use." They politely pointed me in the right direction.

The workers inside the hospital could not come out. They too would be at risk of being killed by snipers. They gave me a stretcher and, balancing it on my head, I ran back to where I'd left Jeff, Andreas and the old woman. Jeff was crouching over the woman, waving his passport, and shouting "American!" Coming closer, I realized that soldiers ransacking an apartment just above them were throwing plates, cups, and glasses down on the terrified old woman.

This is what war does to people. I want to emphasize the likeability of the soldiers with whom we'd met every step of the way the previous day and earlier that morning.

Terrorism thrives in abstractions. When people don't see real people but rather an abstract "enemy"one that might threaten the security and safety of their loved ones, -- when the kill or be killed rage is activated, -- people adjust to inhumane cruelty.

I just told a story that occurred four years ago in the West Bank, but it continues to play out in wars that range in Afghanistan, in Iraq. Just a quick snapshot: when we first met Marines who had entered Baghdad as an invading army that bombed and shot and sniped their way through cities and towns, the first conversation I had with a U.S. marine started with these words: "Hi, my name's Tom. This here is Jerry. We're from Indiana. You could call us Hoosiers. Hey, you wanna' see a picture of my kids?" And then moments later: "We feel real bad about what's happened to these people. I sure wish we could be part of helping them rebuild." And another snapshot: A friend who fled Baghdad with a death threat, last spring, upon seeing me in Amman, pulled out a cell phone and a camera,--"can I show you pictures of my children?" he asked. And there followed at least one hundred pictures, --I felt bewildered after an hour of looking at so many photos, - pictures of his children at play in the remote home he'd found for them, seeking safety, pictures of Noor playing with sheep, pictures of Ahmed trying to help his father dig a latrine, and then a photo that finally clued me in as to why all these pictures were so vitally important: my friend showed me his own father, holding his son, the grandfather reunited with the grandson after a three month absence. "You can see," said my friend, "here my father, he is crying because he was away from Ahmed for three months." My friend would seek political asylum and might not see these children for many years.

Jeff, my friend who couldn't back away from the old woman's cries, today holds his baby in his lap while he knocks himself out, day after day, trying to publish the cries of people in Iraq through a website called electroniciraq.net. He's still seized by those cries, and although he and his wife struggle to provide for their own baby, they choose a lifestyle faithful to those agonized cries.

The common denominator is simple. The answer to the question, "you wanna see a picture of my kids" is a resounding yes. If we want to see the children safe and secure, then we can't escape the demand to put an end to war.

But the warmakers don't want us to put an end to their weapon making profits. Now you can read pundits in the paper who argue that while the war in Iraq may have been a debacle, we shouldn't throw the baby out with the bath water. The baby, in this view, is "the global war on terror."

How can we tell them that war is not our baby? How can we tell them that we don't want to become an imperial menace, manufacturing more and more weapons in an economy that demands wars to sustain the war profiteers?

The catastrophe is compounded because we're at war against our own environment as we continually pour money and resources and ingenuity into making weapons when these resources are crucially needed to address the catastrophe created by our over consumptive and dangerously wasteful lifestyles.

Bill McKibben, a renowned environmentalist writing in the New York Review of Books, last month, said "the testimony of organized science makes it very clear that it would be

the wisest possible investment to spend large sums of money to hasten the transition to solar power. Where should the money come from? One obvious candidate is the Pentagon budget, now devoted to defending us against dangers considerably less threatening than climate change." He concludes his article saying that the technology we need most badly is "the technology of community, the knowledge about how to cooperate to get things done."

Earliest followers of Jesus entered an extraordinary experiment in the technology of community. They risked their lives to follow Jesus in rejecting the idea that there are only two options: they wouldn't be part of zealous and violent revolutions, and they wouldn't collaborate with violent oppressors. "Neither victims nor executioners," was the phrase Albert Camus used to point toward a third choice, a choice that opposes ideological forces dividing the world into us and them, a choice that honestly asks what are the grievances of people opposed to us, a choice that recognizes others having cares and concerns not so far from our own, particularly when you pare down to the basics of what we most want.

Their beloved friend and mentor, the charismatic one whom they couldn't always follow but couldn't ever leave, died on a cross amid mockery and scorn. But in Luke's gospel, Jesus whose strength belonged with those who were weakest cried out in his last words: "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit." Into whose hands? We might be tempted to hear Cecil B. DeMille background music and see a triumphant shaft of light, but the message of the gospels doesn't let us go down that tantalizing route. Those who follow Jesus commit their spirits into the outstretched hands of the neediest and most overlooked. The hands of a grandmother whose currency as a story disappears when the snipers shoot at the journalists, the hands of children reaching for absent parents in places of war, the hands of mother earth groaning with the burden of our excess and folly as we deplete resources and contaminate our home.

We are in a fix. All too plausible are the words in this morning's gospel: and there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and upon the earth distress of nations in perplexity at the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear and foreboding of what is coming on the world, but Jesus offers the parable of the fig tree and of all trees, the bare branches will sprout leaves, we can look for the signs of rebirth.

Here again the words of Dr. King:
And I call upon all men of good will to be maladjusted because it may well be that the salvation of our world lies in the hands of the maladjusted.
This advent, let us look for those signs in our own capacity to be maladjusted, our refusal to adjust to war and greed. One definition for the word transfixed is to be fixed as at the end of a sword. But a second definition says "to make motionless by amazement." Let us approach the communion table ready to be transfixed by faith and then to move with community and resolve, motivated by belief in the beloved community, an embrace that says everybody in, nobody out, one that claims we are all part of one another.