



ALL SAINTS CHURCH
PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

We Need To Expect More

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Edwin Bacon, Jr.
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There once was an old preacher who used to say, “There are some religious folks who are so heavenly-minded that they aren’t any earthly good.”

In the gospel lesson just read (Luke 3:7-18) you heard John the Baptist speak about those types of folks—people who are not compassionate to those around them in need. John the Baptist was speaking passionately of making sure that when you and I have a transformation in our lives from being anxious to compassionate that we understand that life is not a matter of trying to get to heaven, but life is about trying to bring heaven to earth. He says, “The world as you have known it is coming to an end. This person, Jesus, “God-made-tangible” is on the way – here and in our history – in this life. You don’t have to wait to get to heaven for your life to change. This life is going to change. But don’t even think about coming to have your sins washed away in this baptism if you are going to hold on to your old ways, old fears and the absence of compassion. Rather, bear practical fruit of your conversion in the here and now in this history. Bear practical fruit of your turning around. Bear practical fruit of your change by doing something compassionate and magnanimous toward those who right now are experiencing discrimination, poverty, injustice, violence.” One of his illustrations is this: “If you have two coats, share with the person who has no coat.”

In the fourth century a bishop preached on this text on this very Advent III Sunday. He told the folks who had gathered for worship that if they wanted to be signs of God’s presence in the world, if they wanted to be signs of God’s joy in the world, then they had a responsibility to make other people joyful. Then, taking his cue from John the Baptist, the bishop told those who were gathered that if they had more coats in their closets than they wore on their back while poor people around them were shivering in the cold, then the coats in their closets were “**sin-coats**” and they needed to go home from church that day, clean out their closets and give their surplus coats to the poor.

As you know, on this third Sunday of Advent (called Joy Sunday) while we have the pink candle lit on the Advent wreath, we read this very passage from John every three years. Three years ago we people of All Saints Church, after I told that story, did exactly what the 4th century bishop called his people to do. We all went home, emptied our closets of coats that we didn’t wear and everybody brought them to my office. We piled them up and took them to Dolores Mission in East L.A. as well as to shelters here in Pasadena. Dolores Mission is a Roman Catholic Church, where every night they take out the chairs in that church and they bring in cots and mattresses and men, mostly immigrant brothers from the streets sleep inside the church. With our current cold weather they had and now have a shortage of men’s coats for these brothers and they have called us to bring our coats again this year.

So I ask you today to do the same with your coat closet. This year, sadly, we need children's coats as well as coats for adults. There are more and more children living on the streets. And a good number of these coats need to be new coats as well. Some people went out and bought coats and brought them last time. In John the Baptist's words, now is the time to make tangible your conversion to compassion. If you now pledge allegiance to compassion, do something about it. Bring in compassion coats this week and we will again distribute them to men, women, and children who this night are cold.

Remember: the measure of a healthy church is not whether the people who go to church there have better lives but whether the people who don't go to church there have better lives because of the people who do go to church there. Healthy religion is about knowing how beloved you are and taking practical steps to make sure that other people know how beloved they are.

I always greet this Sunday in Advent with anticipation in that at least in one of the readings appointed for consideration there is going to be a focus on Joy. Joy is one of the fruits of the Spirit. Joy is one of the signs of God's presence. If you see someone joyful you know that the spirit of God is in them. It's one of the characteristics of Jesus's ministry. Save me from joyless Christians. It is as if this Sunday, which gets us closer and closer to the day with the longest night, December 21, is saying to us that the roots of joy take place actually in the darkest parts of life.

St. Paul says in this morning's lesson appointed from Philippians (4:4-7), "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, be joyful. Let your gentleness be known to everyone (almost as if it is a couplet. Joy and gentleness. Gentleness can be translated generosity and compassion). The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

William Sloane Coffin knew a great deal about both joy and sorrow. He often noted from his personal experience that divine joy unites with human pain. He says, "Try to recall in your own life some moment of great pain or terrible confusion, a moment that had intense suffering, perhaps. You know that at such moments there is nothing more important than the presence of another person who cares. That someone does not have to say anything. In fact, not to speak is often better. Advice, or any attempt to cheer you up, is generally experienced as a refusal to enter into your pain and suffering." (William Sloane Coffin, "Joy," *The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin; The Riverside Years, Volume 2*, p. 220)

Dr. Coffin recalls how one early morning in 1982, he received word that his son, in his early twenties, had been killed in a horrible automobile accident. Friends, also notified, came to his apartment in Manhattan and he said, "I can hardly remember a word of what was said, but I'll never forget the facial expressions. I'll never forget the arms around me. The fact that friends came at all at four in the morning helped prevent despair."

He rushes to say, "Always remembered this: Just as all the water in the sea cannot sink a boat unless the water gets inside; so all the despair in the world cannot bring you under unless it seeps into your soul." (Ibid, p. 219) "The mere presence of friends helped prevent despair – not from seeping, but from flooding my soul, downing me in grief."

One of the charming things about Dr. Coffin (who was a friend of this parish; I have a voicemail message from him he left me just before he died talking about how proud he was of us in standing up to the IRS) was that at one point in his life he had been a musician. He had thought about being a concert pianist before becoming the chaplain at Yale University and later the pastor of Riverside Church in New York City. With music as an ever present touchstone in all of his thinking and all of his preaching, he, in talking about joy, thought about one of the most famous Christmas carols, “Joy to the World.” He says, “As all the joy of Christmas comes from on high, it is only proper that ‘Joy to the world, the Lord is come’ begins on high D, and gradually works its way down the scale until it finally reaches us a full octave lower. Then, our proper response is to rise and sing right back up the scale, ‘let earth receive her King,’ but starting on the fifth because God’s loving care has already levitated us that far.” [laughter]

What fuels our joy is Presence – being present to the Divine Light that John’s gospel says is inside every human being (God dwells in you) and being present with other people in their darkest of nights, and knowing that Emmanuel, “God with us,” “is not a memory but a presence, a constant caring presence of unbelievable, undying sensitive caring compassion for every human being. (Ibid, p. 220).

Now, in this last section of my sermon I want to recall that this Joy Sunday always comes after December 10, which is the anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is also the day on which the Nobel Peace Prize is awarded annually in Oslo.

In a moment like this, in a sermon like this, I want to be very careful to speak confessionally to you with words like, “I think and I feel,” for the pulpit of All Saints Church is not speaking for All Saints Church but to the worshippers of All Saints Church. I certainly do not expect everyone here this morning to agree with me and I certainly ask that no one applaud (or “Boo”) after the following words.

Confessionally speaking, I had deep and mixed emotions listening to President Obama’s speech receiving the Nobel Peace Prize this past week. In that speech he talked more about war than he did about peace. In many ways the speech at its heart was a justification of war. I salute his putting some important distance between his policies and the torture, Guantanamo Bay and pre-emptive war theory of President Bush. Many people say he got the award simply because he was not President Bush. It needs to be said that President Bush’s assistants applauded the speech. At the same time President Obama gave a complex and nuanced justification for the escalation of troops in Afghanistan that he had announced just nine days before. From my perspective the escalation of troops in Afghanistan by President Obama is a decision that is neither strategically nor morally tenable, simply because our occupation in an Arab country, trying to make it into a Western democracy, is a recruiting instrument for terrorists. As James Carroll has said, our American military presence there is the terrorists’ strength. President Obama’s perspective was that of a head of state, continuing to a large degree a position of American Exceptionalism, which I think is a morally bankrupt notion.

As a person who has invested time and money and my life working in the peace movement since I became a conscientious objector during the Vietnam war, I wanted this brilliant man whom I love, Barack Obama, to apply those thrilling intellectual gifts of his to restating his belief in a mutually interconnected interdependent world. This value of human interconnectedness is, I think, the moral foundation of the president’s thinking, of his true self.

Based on that moral cornerstone of our mutually interconnected interdependence I had hoped that our president would show that even a head of state in the 21st century must, rather than promote American Exceptionalism, must lead the nations of the world to peace without the use of war.

I am not an ideological pacifist. I do believe that there are places for military action to intervene in humanitarian crises, in genocides and certainly in defending oneself. The problem with war is that it brings a people down when all nations need to be shown how to bring all their citizens up, especially women and children – up to dignity, freedom, education, and health care. In war there is always a defeated party or people, which means that in some future day the defeated party or people will give tangible witness to their resentments in a new form of violence. Dr. King was correct when he said that violence always breeds more violence and one war always is the preparation ground for the next war.¹ Certain ideas need to be defeated, but not people or nations. Ideas are not defeated by war. Most destructive ideas and practices (again, the exception here is genocides) are defeated by making human rights and education tangible, sometimes protected by military peacemakers.

I wanted my President to confess a new troubling face of war – that is the use of drones in combat which is effectively turning war into a video game. In his book *Wired for War*, author Pete Singer speculates that the new use of drones are harbingers of a new era of "cost-free war".

"It's an historic change," said Singer, speaking of using these unmanned or unstaffed planes that bomb villages and noncombatants. "Going to war has meant the same thing for 5,000 years, but now going to war means sitting in front of a computer screen for twelve hours. Then you go home and talk to your kids about their homework." ⁱⁱ

Drones are being used this very hour to try to wipe out al-Qaeda in Pakistan. There are more drones that have been used during President Obama's eleven months in the presidency than in all of President Bush's presidency.

"Press reports suggest that over the last three years drone strikes have killed about 14 terrorist leaders. But, according to Pakistani sources, they have also killed some 700 civilians. This is 50 civilians for every militant killed. And every one of these dead non-combatants represents an alienated family, a new desire for revenge and more recruits for a military militant movement that has grown exponentially even as drone strikes have increased—bare the fruits of repentance." ⁱⁱⁱ

I wanted President Obama to speak of the expense of this war not only in the bloodshed of our soldiers and combatants and non-combatants in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but also in money. The White House recently reported that it costs one million dollars each year for every one soldier deployed today.

I wanted him to recall the spirit of Dwight David Eisenhower who in 1953 said, "Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, a theft from those who are cold and not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. This is not a way of life at all in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron." ^{iv}

The Afghan War and the Iraq war-occupation-already directly costing a trillion dollars—are costing the American people every time Washington says there is not enough money for neonatal care, occupational disease prevention, cleaner drinking water systems, safer hospitals, prosecution of corporate criminals, cleaner air or upgrading and repairing key public facilities.”^v And God help those citizens who need a universal health care system.

I wanted my President not simply to refer uncritically to Reinhold Niebuhr’s philosophy of Christian Realism, in that section of his speech when he talked about the reality of evil. Of course, evil is reality and should never be ignored or denied. But Dr. King read Reinhold Niebuhr in graduate school and critiqued his thinking by saying, “I came to see that Reinhold Niebuhr had overemphasized the corruption of human nature. His pessimism concerning human nature was not balanced by an optimism concerning divine nature. He was so involved in diagnosing man’s sickness of sin that he overlooked the cure of grace.”^{vi} Yes, evil is real, but so is grace, so is God, so is hope, and when people nonviolently come together they can decrease the power of evil.

When a country is turned in on itself, when a human being is turned in on itself, when a church is turned in on itself, there is no smaller package in the world. (cf. Coffin, William Sloane, *Credo*, p. 24) And when any of us is turned in on ourselves as a person, a family, a church, or a nation then our expectations are too small. We need to expect more. We expect too little of ourselves, too little of our church, too little of our nation, and too little of God when we are turned in on violently trying to protect our security.

Joy has come to my sadness. Thich Nhat Hanh the great Buddhist monk was speaking to a gathering of people where a friend of mine was in New York City on the day after Barack Obama was told that he was going to be the next Nobel Peace Prize winner. Thich Nhat Hanh who was a friend of Martin King and a student of Gandhi said something along these lines: Those two leaders of peace could not have given to the world their practical architecture for how to turn oppression and evil into peace and love if it hadn’t been for their beloved community surrounding them—their beloved community. Then Thich Nhat Hanh told those people gathered in New York City, “Barack Obama needs us to be his beloved community. Barack Obama cannot earn the Nobel Peace Prize in spirit unless he has us as his beloved community.”

Peace, my friends, is up to us. Joy is up to our opening ourselves to God’s presence working within us. Joy is a sign of God’s presence in our deepest hour. So focus not this Advent on whether this is your deepest hour, focus on who else is in their deepest hour. A brother or a sister or a child cold in the streets of Pasadena or East Los Angeles, someone who has just been told of the death of a loved one, someone who lives in fear of a drone attack, someone who fights in harm’s way. And then ask if our lives are making any practical compassionate impact on their lives—that is the question of Advent. Am I being an instrument of peace and joy in the life of someone who is vulnerable?

And then pray, pray as a member of the beloved community for our President, Barack Obama.

Amen.

ⁱ “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness in a descending spiral of destruction ... The chain reaction of evil — hate begetting hate, wars producing more wars — must be broken, or we shall be plunged into the dark abyss of annihilation. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love* (1963)

“I am not unmindful of the fact that violence often brings about momentary results. Nations have frequently won their independence in battle. But in spite of temporary victories, violence never brings permanent peace. It solves no social problem: it merely creates new and more complicated ones. Violence is impractical because it is a descending spiral ending in destruction for all. It is immoral because it seeks to humiliate the opponent rather than win his understanding; it seeks to annihilate rather than convert. Violence is immoral because it thrives on hatred rather than love. It destroys community and makes brotherhood impossible. It leaves society in monologue rather than dialogue. Violence ends up defeating itself. It creates bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers.” Martin Luther King Jr. received The Nobel Peace Prize on December 10, 1964. This quotation is from his Nobel Lecture given in Oslo the next day, December 11, 1964.

ⁱⁱ Edward Helmore, “U.S. Trains more drone operators than pilots; Unmanned fighters and bombers are the future, believe military chiefs,” *The Observer*, Sunday 23 August 2009

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ⁱⁱⁱ DAVID KILCULLEN and ANDREW McDONALD EXUM, OP-ED CONTRIBUTORS, “Death From Above, Outrage Down Below,” *The New York Times*, May 17, 2009

^{iv} [Dwight D. Eisenhower](#), *34th president of US 1953-1961 (1890 - 1969) From a speech before the American Society of Newspaper Editors, April 16, 1953*

^v Ralph Nader, “‘Just War’ Is Just Words,” [CommonDreams.org](#), **December 12, 2009**

^{vi} Martin Luther King, jr., *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by Clayborne Carson, p. 31