

On Peace (excerpted highlights)

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March 2, 2008

Reading:

Market Street, an essay from Anne Lamott's collection "*Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*"

On the February 2003 march down Market Street in San Francisco. On a day when peace marches happened all over the world:

The sea of people looked like a great heartbroken circus, wild living art, motley and stylish, old and young, lots of Buddhists, people from unions and churches and temples, punks and rabbis and aging hippies and nuns and veterans ... strewn together on the asphalt lawn of Market Street.

The "I" turned into "we." You shuffled along with your friends, moving at the pace of the whole organization, moving to the heartbeat of the percussion. ...The goodwill gave you a feeling of safety in this mob, a fizzy euphoria despite the grim reality of these times.

Two things carried the day: regular people saying no to power, and glorious camaraderie. We were sad and afraid, and we had done the most radical thing of all: we had shown up, not knowing what else to do, and without much hope. This was like going on a huge picnic at the edge of the fog, hoping you would walk through to something warmer. The mantra you could hear in our voices and our footsteps was "I have a good feeling!" The undermutter was silent, spoken with a sort of Jewish shrug – "What good will it do to do nothing?"

Wow: that's the prayer I said the morning after the peace march:
Wow. I felt buoyed by all those people walking slowly together down Market Street.

What good is it if we say we have faith but do not have works? Can faith save us? Show me your faith apart from your works and I by my works will show you my faith.

(James 2)

Sermon:

This sermon is about peace. It is the seventh sermon I have preached on peace since the start of the war in 2003. I worked very hard to achieve and maintain a sense of balance in the six sermons that preceded this one. The topic is delicate, after all. Our congregations were battered during the war in Vietnam. We're told that the same was true during World War I. So, I've walked the line.

Lately I've been thinking about the concept of prophecy, as in "prophetic." I was interested in reading Paul Rasor's essay in the recent issue of the *UU World* where he describes a theology of war and peace that he senses may resonate with Unitarian Universalists. He names his idea "prophetic nonviolence." ...[In this congregation] Social justice is one of our glowing commitments and to work toward systemic change is to engage all aspects of who we are as a thinking, feeling, faithful people. I believe that this approach will bring us closer to finding our prophetic voices. And I'm beginning to think that "balance" may not be the most prophetic strategy. Especially when there is little room for it as we enter into the fifth year of this war.

Many of you know that I serve on the steering committee of Reclaiming the Prophetic Voice. *Reclaiming* is comprised of people of faith, faithfully raising our liberal religious voices against the powers that have battered the soul of our nation. These same powers would likely identify our message as unpatriotic, when in fact the way that democracy works is through a system of checks and balances.

Yes, I've been thinking about what it means to be prophetic. I've been pushing myself to consider stepping outside the circle of my comfort and say some things that will perhaps make me uncomfortable and perhaps make you feel uncomfortable in my saying it. I may not achieve that delicate balance as I'm not sure that it's morally appropriate any longer.

But I have to ask myself as I ask you - are you *comfortable* now on the eve of the fifth anniversary of this war? Are you feeling a *sense of balance* through this debacle? I'm not. I'm not comfortable and increasingly experiencing a sense of imbalance. I am prepared to begin pushing myself beyond the pale. I look to the prophets. I look to them for inspiration and wisdom and I imagine them looking back at me and asking, "Girl, are you now and finally ready to turn up the volume?" Because I'm sure that's what these sainted giants of our tradition and others would say.

In this seventh sermon, there can be no putting together a string of ideas and wrapping them in poetry to produce a sense of balance. Another attempt at an

elegant, well constructed, sermon just feels *wrong*. Perhaps that sermon would have helped us feel like we're faithfully engaged in the issue. But we need to do more than engage in ideas. We are way beyond the point where engaging in ideas alone is acceptable. We need to turn up the volume. We need to take our place in the prophetic tradition we honor. We need to join our minds and hearts and *do something*.

We are not working hard enough to stop this war, Friends. I am not doing enough and you are not doing enough. By our works we must speak truth to power. *We must do something*.

What good is it if we say we have faith but do not have works? Can faith save us? Show me your faith apart from your works and I by my works will show you my faith. James 2

I have been inspired by the prophetic voice of Frederick Douglass who said:

Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet deprecate agitation, are people who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning; they want the ocean without the awful roar of its waters. This struggle may be a moral one; or it may be both moral and physical; but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand; it never did and it never will. Find out what people will submit to, and you have found out the exact amount of injustice which will be imposed upon them. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress.

How much are we willing to endure? How may we – regular people - set down our limits? How may we – regular people - say, “No?” Finally. *No*.

Citizens have said no throughout our country's history and when they have, our leaders often responded accordingly.

I have been inspired by the prophetic voice of historian Howard Zinn who wrote:

Historically, government, whether in the hands of Republicans or Democrats, conservatives or liberals, has failed its responsibilities, until forced to by direct action: sit-ins and Freedom Rides for the right of black people, strikes and boycotts for the rights of workers, mutinies and desertions of soldiers in order to stop a war.

Voting is easy and marginally useful, but it is a poor substitute for democracy, which requires direct action by concerned citizens.

(-- From the March issue of *The Progressive*)

Why march together? Stand together? Pray together? Strategize, vigil, and sing together? Because when we do, the Iraq War – and its twin in Afghanistan – receives attention that reminds us that we are in the midst of the most costly war of all time, costly on multiple fronts. We are reminded of the economic impact and how our taxes increase to support the war while social services are being eliminated. Monies once earmarked for social services – the Homeless Hospitality Center for one – are now being cut to close the budget gaps. We are reminded of the social impact of the war – its affect on families, and communities here in the states – here in our very own congregation! - to say nothing of its affect on the Iraqi people whose country, it's landscape, its infrastructure, to say nothing of its people, is now effectively decimated. We are reminded of the dead and injured soldiers – how their families are coping in the aftermath.

Consider this: if you didn't hear their names during our service each week would you hear their names?

Several years ago, during the build up to the war in Iraq, I was participating in peace marches. Protest marches. Peace demonstrations. Vigils. Rallies. Peace witnesses. These are all fine terms for this hallmark of democracy that may also be named as a hallmark of a prophetically engaged faith.

At that time I spoke with an old friend with whom I had attended marches on Washington in support of women's reproductive health and rights. She had not attended any of the peace marches that were taking place where she lived. She lamented that marching did no good. She was clearly hopeless. I countered that to march / protest / witness is to conjure a real sense of hope. Had she forgotten?

Had my friend forgotten the beauty of "The sea of people that look like a great heartbroken circus?" Had she forgotten how the "I" turns into "we" when we shuffle along with friends, moving at the pace of the whole organization?" Had she forgotten how the goodwill gives you a feeling of safety ... a fizzy euphoria despite grim reality?"

Have you forgotten?

I am inspired by the prophetic voice of journalist and radio host of *Democracy Now* Amy Goodman who when asked, "Do you ever get discouraged by your work?" answered:

The more difficult the issue, the more amazing people are in dealing with it. There's where I find the hope. ... there are a lot of hopeful people who think that things can be better. We need to broadcast those voices. The most hopeless, cynical voices are those we hear or watch on television. And that can be very depressing. It generates apathy.

(-- February issue of *The Progressive*)

This morning, I extend a personal invitation to all of you. On March 19th, the fifth anniversary of this deplorable war, I invite you to use your prophetic voice to join in a chorus of the faithful who will prayerfully endeavor to say, “*We’re gonna lay down our swords and shields. We ain’t gonna study war no more.*”

I invite you to interrupt your routine on March 19th, to interrupt your life for one day, *an afternoon, really*, and join me in Hartford for a peace witness to mark this most devastating anniversary. Come to Hartford on March 19th when Reclaiming the Prophetic Voice is organizing people of faith and all citizens to, yes, raise our voices for peace. I know that it’s far but that’s where we must go. We’ll car pool. We’ll have exquisite directions. There’s information in the March newsletter. Ask me about it as I’m working very hard on this witness. Come to Hartford.

If, after you’ve thought long and hard you decide that you really can’t go to Hartford, than the next question to pose to yourself is, “What *will I* do? What will I do to create peace? What will I do to nurture and use my faithful and prophetic voice?” Because faith alone cannot save us from the sad, ugly truth that a war rages on in our names, and will continue on with our consent.

What good is it if we say we have faith but do not have works? Can faith save us? Show me your faith apart from your works and I by my works will show you my faith.

Dona nobis pacem.

Amen.