

Ain't Gonna Study War No More
1st Sunday of Advent (1Dec19)
Isaiah2:1-5; Psalm122; Matt24:36-44

I ain't gonna study war no more.

It's a line from an old antebellum spiritual. That neat word "antebellum" is just Latin for "before the war." This song of not studying war was sung before the Civil War, our biggest domestic study in war. But for the depth of that study, I'm not sure how much we find that struggle edifying. What did we learn?

Yet the insistence of these notes—I ain't gonna study!—with the cheery jangle propelling us away from war, is a song that echoes on, harmonizing words from our 1st reading where the prophet Isaiah envisioned the coming day when "neither shall they learn war anymore."

We continue waiting and hoping for when we and all nations shall walk together in the paths of peace. I ain't gonna study war no more.

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This morning we practice putting those words in our mouths, and go on to speak peace, to proclaim peace, to offer the good news of peace. As the children lead us, we'll hear and receive that declaration of peace. And shalom. And salaam.

Along with the maybe more familiar Hebrew word, the Arabic is kept in our mouths because it often seems muffled, choked back. Where shalom is announced as God's intention for the world, the Arabic version almost sounding the same—salaam—somehow comes across as if it's less desirable. If one seems prayerfully biblical and the other conjures terrorists, then we need to keep hearing and speaking. Salaam. Shalom. The Hebrew is not closer; the Arabic is not further. They need to speak and listen to each other for us to practice peace. I ain't gonna study war no more.

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Thinking about the salaam/shalom pairing also perhaps highlights our Psalm, on praying for the

peace of Jerusalem, a meeting place of the tribes, coming together. "Jerusalem's a city meant to be at peace with itself," we read. This internationally cherished place is a holy city to three sibling religions, three squabbling siblings.

So how do those interactions go? On the Holy Land trip, we saw lots of M16 automatic weapons in that city. We saw people forced to wait through checkpoints to get in. We met people who were barred for life from going to the city because they were born outside of it, because they were male, because they were presumed and labeled violent, a prejudging unjust prejudice. Not at peace with itself.

Wandering the city, we heard of the powers, the armies, the empires, that controlled the city through history. Jesus lamented over it, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem! If only you had known the things that make for peace." We saw where the powers killed him, crucified him, Jesus who came with a word of peace, came in nonviolence. The way of empire doesn't know peace. I ain't gonna study war no more.

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In Lutheran schools we visited, Christian and Muslim students study side-by-side. They have breaks for separate religious studies. But being able to study together paves the way of peace, from elementary school up.

It marks a striking contrast with those soldiers with the M16s. Almost all Israeli young adults serve two or three years. The settler we met was proud of his three children being trained to fight. He kept saying, "We want peace. It would be nice. But instead we have to be well trained to fight."

It makes me think of Einstein saying "you can't simultaneously prepare for and prevent war." One side was preparing for war. The Lutheran schools were preparing for peace. How do we convince ourselves what to study, and with what aim?

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Isaiah talks also of “beating swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks,” the effort to “transform the metal tools of death into the tools of life.” A recent book updating this idea says prophets like Isaiah “were provocateurs of the imagination. They weren’t trying to predict the future. They were trying to change the present. They invite us to dream of the world as it could be and not just accept the world as it is.”* This dreaming and imagining is a practice, then, of how we study.

You might know that the former pastor of this congregation, inspired by the book inspired by Isaiah, took a blacksmithing class, ironically studying under a guy with an NRA bumpersticker. Jeff took up an idea of transforming guns into garden tools, to melt down assault rifles and handguns, to take violence out of our hands, and rework it and forge it into tools for life.

That’s dramatic and beautiful. But more than guns, many of us might have wallets in hand. Maybe the transformation we want to pound out of the system, to melt down and bring out a new creation, is to change the huge portion of our taxes that go to the military and invest them instead in the Department of Agriculture. To support family farms. Into ELCA World Hunger. There’s a lot of possibility to dream and imagine. I ain’t gonna study war no more.

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It can be a difficult resistance. When there is news about North Korea nuclear weapons and about shootings in schools, when we’re told to fear people who are different from us or trying to stay woke against racism, when we see semi-new news of unrest in Iraq or ignore Syria because it’s no longer news, when hate speech fills our ears and minds, when this bad news invades our lives, it can be demanding. It can seem like the only wise response to nukes is nukes. That a bad guy with a gun should be met by a good guy with a gun. That the world is scary, so we need to be prepared to defend ourselves

But is the study of war really helpful? Does it seem like it’s slowing the spread of violence? Do our lives feel safer? What if we responded not with threats and bigger barriers but with humanitarian care and an open hand and an olive branch? What do we not accept of the world as it is? What could be? I ain’t gonna study war no more.

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This, of course, isn’t just international relations. It’s not just neighboring Palestinians and Israelis. It’s personal resentments and animosities, when it’s easier to complain and argue, those studied perspectives of looking askance at each other, looking down on, looking warily at. It’s the retrenched hardness around some Thanksgiving tables, or who was absent. It’s breaking retaliatory cycles by refusing hostility. It may feel like we need remedial coursework to continue this study of peace, the way of Jesus!

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But if it’s mostly our work, of changing the federal budget, of changing our culture, of changing our family, of improving ourselves, I start to despair and my imagination gets overwhelmed.

So I look for good news. I remember this is God’s good news, that we will walk in the paths of the Lord. I take some confidence in Isaiah’s vision that all nations will stream to this postbellum future, and in Paul’s vision that sees the hour is now nearer.

And I listen to Jesus. His word subverts our usual patterns. When we want security and try to protect ourselves, when we are steeped in fear, when castle laws fake fortify us in our abodes, the notion of a thief breaking in is terrifying. It’s exactly the sort of image we would study systematically against.

But Jesus breaks in, perhaps coming to steal away our mis-education, to rob us of false notions of security, to burgle our self-pretension, to thieve the thinking that we can study war-into-peace.

* p20-21, *Beating Guns: Hope for People Who are Weary of Violence*, Shane Claiborne and Michael Martin

After all, he steals our sin, leaving grace and peace instead. He replaces our shortsighted hatred with a vision of all people as siblings, all creation joined in loving sustenance. He breaks in to take death, and life and health come in its place. "Renew our lives again; Lord Jesus, come and reign!"