

THE PEACE CHILD

(Luke 2:14)

On this eve of the day on which we celebrate the birth of the one whom Isaiah prophesied would be the *Prince of Peace*; the one whom the angels sang to the shepherds would bring *peace* to all whom God favors; and the one who himself said to his disciples—which include we who are gathered together this evening— “*My peace I give to you...*”

I was interested to hear some of the things that we as humans have thought and said about what I find to be the very illusive concept of *peace*. Some of the more positive examples of what I found include:

- Marvin Gaye saying “*If you cannot find peace within yourself, you will never find it anywhere else*”;
- Writer Henry Miller saying “*If there is to be peace it will come through being, not having*”;

- President John Kennedy saying *“Peace is a daily, a weekly, a monthly process, gradually changing opinions, slowly eroding old barriers, quietly building new structures”*;
- Civil Rights icon Martin King saying *“True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice”*;
- President Woodrow Wilson saying *“Only a peace between equals can last”*;
- Clergyman and political activist A. J. Muste saying *“There is no way to peace; peace IS the way.”*

I find myself wondering whether since the advent of humanity on this planet over 2 million years ago, we as a human race of people have ever experienced peace? If peace is defined generally as *cessation of or freedom from any strife or dissension*, then, quite the contrary, human life has always seemed in its myths and legends, its his-stories and her-stories, to be a game of the survival of the fittest, where only the strong survive. The only peace a game of that kind uses is a fake peace, meant

to somehow throw the other side off guard; or used to replenish your own side for when the peace is inevitably broken.

There was no peace in the world on whatever day or night was indeed the day or night that the one who we know as Jesus of Nazareth was born. Because whatever day or night it was, it was another day or night in the decidedly un-peaceful life of the Roman Empire's occupation of Palestine, a country that included Bethlehem; where oppression, genocide, abuse of children, appropriation of other's lands and property, war, slavery, rape, murder, and religious prejudice and discrimination—just to name a few atrocities—took place on a daily basis.

It is not a new saying or a new reality, my contemporary sisters and brothers, that where there is no justice, there can be no peace. And indeed, in the land of the birth of Jesus—then and now—there was and is no justice, so there was and is no peace.

Not only in that region of the world, both then and now... But in ANY region of the world—even now, even today, even as we sit here and speak of peace—there IS no peace! There is no region on this whole planet where humanity resides or has influence that is experiencing peace—the cessation of or freedom from any strife or dissension. On every continent, and in every country on every continent, and among people in every country on every continent, there is—in some shape, form or fashion—a mutual disharmony between people and groups, including and especially in personal relations, that causes strife or dissension.

In other words, no peace! We live on a planet where there is no peace! Even the lakes and rivers, oceans and seas, birds and fish, the trees and the air, wildlife as well as domesticated animals, the polar caps and the glaciers, the rain forests and even the subterranean core of the earth—the very essence of the earth and everything that is in it—is CRYING OUT for mercy; CRYING OUT for justice; CRYING OUT for relief! I've

traveled through a few airports lately, and my favorite airport billboard is for an organization that does eco-justice, whose slogan is “Because the earth could use a good lawyer.”

II.

It seems to me that there are two major questions when it comes to the whole concept of attaining peace. One question is “*do you really want to have peace?*” And the other question is “*what are you willing to give up to attain the peace that you claim to want?*”

Both of those questions for me are addressed in a true story that I discovered in my Africa travels, a true story called the *Peace Child*.

This story was appropriated by a missionary couple named Don and Carol Richardson, who in the 1960’s were Christian missionaries who took the Judeo-Christian gospel along with the European culture that the gospel was encased in to the Sawi people of New Guinea. The Sawi people had many customs and traditions, including a tradition that valued *treachery* and *revenge* above all other values. For example,

when the story of the betrayal and crucifixion of Jesus was told to the Sawi, they saw Judas as the hero—because of his successful treachery in betraying Jesus. In the same vein, they saw Jesus as the dupe to be laughed at for being so naïve.

The Sawi people also had history and traditions that included what we would determine to be unspeakable violence involving life between the different clans and villages. When Don and Carol Richardson had a house built in the midst of a clearing, three separate clans decided to move into the clearing, so they could be closer to the new things that the missionaries were always using and having delivered. Lots of bloodshed followed among the three villages for prime position and favoritism from the missionaries; to the point where both Don and Carol—feeling themselves to be the cause of what was in their eyes unwanted and unnecessary bloodshed and loss of life—decided they would leave the area.

Upon hearing this, the three villages brought their chiefs together, and one night told Don and Carol not to leave; that the next day would bring peace. Don and Carol doubted that true peace could come among a people with a value system that lifted up treachery and revenge so highly. But what they were privileged to see and experience the next day was truly amazing for them!

The next morning, all three clans gathered in the respective places they had carved out as their own in the clearing. As the tension mounted, a chief of one of the clans grabbed one of his young sons and began to stride purposefully toward one of the opposing camps. The mother of the child, sensing what was about to happen, ran and grabbed their child from the chief's arms before he could reach his destination, and was quickly surrounded by others who would not let the child be taken from her.

After a while, a chief of another one of the clans unsteadily rose to his feet, grabbed the hand of his youngest son, and began to slowly lead

him toward the place where another clan stood. Halfway there the father began to tremble and his eyes filled with tears as he quickly turned and went back the way he came, crying out in his native language that he thought he could do it, but discovered that he could not.

As the commotion heightened, another chief of another clan quickly climbed up the ladder to his home, grabbed his 6-month-old baby boy, quickly descended the ladder, and sprinted toward one of the other encampments. When his wife saw her husband running toward another camp with their child, she let out a wail and moan of anguish and grief that is the universal language of practically every mother who has ever lived. The chief took his baby son and presented him to one of the leading men from the opposing village with these simple words:

“Would you plead the words of peace among your people?” The chosen man answered: *“Yes, I will plead the words of peace among my people!”* Then the man whose baby son it was said *“Then I give you my*

son as well as my name.” Then the other man took one of his younger sons and said the same words to the man with the 6-month-old, and the man answered in the same way. Then people from the respective villages lined up to lay hands on the child that had just been received from the house of their enemy.

And with that brief but powerful ceremony, that 6-month-old baby and the son of the other man that he exchanged children with became the peace children. Each one of them became a peace child.

A peace child is a child given to prove sincerity, and to establish peace even in the midst of the dreaded contexts of death. Even among the Sawi people, who lived with traditions of violence and mistrust, their traditions also said that if a man would actually give his own son to his enemies, that man could be trusted. In that culture, that and that alone was a proof of goodwill no shadow of cynicism could discredit.

And everyone who laid hands on the given son was bound not to work violence against those who gave him, nor to set in motion anything that

would cause the destruction of the people from whom the peace child came.

III.

How badly did the Sawi people want to have peace? They wanted to have peace pretty badly.

What were the Sawi people willing to give up in order to attain the peace they claimed to want? That which was the MOST precious to them.

I have been sent here to announce to you this evening good tidings of great joy! For unto us is born this day, in the city of David, a Peace Child, who is Christ the Lord. His parent gave him willingly—sadly but willingly—in order that our world should know peace, and that all who lay hands on him, partake of him, cover themselves in him, cannot and can no longer work violence against nor set in motion anything that would cause the destruction of anyone.

And so on this blessed Christmas eve night, may the peace that passes all understanding keep our hearts and our minds on the peace child, and what we are pledged to do in his midst—and NOT do in his midst—to those who are in those villages that oppose us, be they real or imagined.