

Walking in the Light of God
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One of my favorite places around here is Walden Pond—whether walking the trails, swimming, or sitting on the little beach, it's such a peaceful place. Henry David Thoreau lived in his cabin at Walden for two years, though one of my favorite stories about him is when he ventured into downtown Concord and got arrested. On July 23, 1846 Thoreau went on an errand and encountered Sam Staples, Concord's constable, tax collector, and jailer. Staples asked Thoreau to pay his taxes, even offering to cover them if he didn't have the money. But Thoreau was an abolitionist and opposed the Mexican-American War, so he had refused to pay his poll tax because of his moral convictions. The tax was imposed on all males from 20-70 and Thoreau actually hadn't paid in six years, so he maintained his stance on the matter and Staples politely escorted him to jail.

The legend is that Ralph Waldo Emerson, who had similar moral convictions, visited Thoreau in jail and asked, "Henry, why are you in here?" Thoreau replied, "Why are you not here?" Rather anti-climactically, someone ended up paying his tax for him—I've heard it was a relative though some say that he never knew who paid the tax. At any rate, he was released from jail the next day feeling resentful that someone interfered with his protest. And out of this night in jail for refusing to pay his taxes, Thoreau wrote a powerful lecture which was published as "Resistance to Civil Government" and is more commonly known as "Civil Disobedience." Thoreau's words would one day inspire and influence Leo Tolstoy, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr. among others.[1]

As he further clarified his position, Thoreau maintained that to right a moral wrong, one has to employ a type of disobedience that will disrupt the workings of society and dramatize the issues at hand without resorting to violence. When people stage these acts of civil disobedience the hope is that the consciousness of society will be awakened to see and understand and act to right these wrongs.[2] It was Martin Luther King Jr. who said that violence is a downward spiral, that "returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." [3]

Now we may think that acts of civil disobedience advocated first by Thoreau and then by Tolstoy, Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. are impractical or we might find them admirable. But these ideas about how to address moral wrongs without resorting to violence are still important as it seems that we live in an increasingly violent society with wars and mass shootings and abuse and terrible bullying and other hateful acts we hear about daily. It matters that our first reading for the Season of Advent today is from the Prophet Isaiah, and it's this sweeping vision of world peace that if we take to heart is deeply meaningful and hopeful in a world as seemingly violent sometimes as ours. This sweeping vision should cause us as people of faith to consider what the future holds.

We read that God will "judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks." [4] The sequence of events is important, for Isaiah holds up a vision of what our hearts are tuned to hear—first we have Zion elevated and exalted, the holiest ground becomes the highest ground, the place of wonder. A pilgrimage of all people to God's holy mountain follows, and the people are singing to others to call them forth, urging one another on, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." [5] A new community is gathering—multicultural, multiracial, multilingual; all are called into the Divine Presence. Then we hear that God is going to listen to the concerns of

the nations and will give instructions. The nations are about to make peace, but the gift God gives is justice and God instructs them to turn their instruments of war into farming tools.[6]

Here's the fascinating thing, God doesn't force the nations to make this change. God instructs and teaches (which was a role usually held by priests) and then God puts it back on the people to destroy their weapons of war and walk in God's ways. In antiquity, spears and swords were expensive. In order to have the metal to make them, resources had to be diverted from farming tools needed to harvest and ultimately feed your people. War could be devastating whether it happened at home or abroad. On the other hand, it was a simple transformation to beat a sword or a spear into farming equipment—any blacksmith could do it no matter his skill level. This is a commentary on the costly nature of war versus the way of peace that actually transcends Isaiah's time and place if we allow ourselves to be affected by these words today.

So walking in the ways of God is a way of peace, what does that really look like? Well I was driving and stuck at one of the busier intersections in town a couple months ago. The driver of a truck that was towing lawn equipment came out of a side street and traffic was stopped so he couldn't go any further and ended up blocking the intersection until the light changed. I hung back to let him go in front of me. Meanwhile another driver coming the opposite way was incensed by this truck blocking his way—he had a green light and some place to be, but he couldn't go. I just sat back and read the body language of the exasperated driver, well his colorful language really. When the light changed and our side could proceed, the disgruntled driver sped around the truck dramatically and then gestured out of his moon roof to bring it on home. And it wasn't a peace sign in case you're wondering or a heart or something nice.

On a micro seemingly inconsequential level, this incident doesn't point to walking in the light of the Lord as Isaiah would say. The disgruntled driver didn't get out of his car and try to punch the guy, but his temper tantrum was intense. So why am I sharing this story about minor road rage in Lexington? Because our charge from the Prophet Isaiah as we begin Advent is that those who already live in God's presence are pushed to take the first steps on the path that all nations will tread one day. We are asked to take the first steps on the path where all will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks, where people may in fact put up a peace sign from their moon roof. And when we take these steps, it shows the deep hope that walking in the light of the Lord is a vision of God's reign and that the future really does belong to God who will reign in peace.

Isaiah ends by saying, "O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!" That means we are supposed to walk the walk. You know Gandhi was once challenged by a reporter and asked what he thought of Christianity. The question came when he was organizing his own civil disobedience movement against the British and times were tense. But Gandhi supposedly said, "I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ." [8]

Being Christ-like goes deeper than driving politely and not being mean, but we have to start small and we have to start where we are. These first steps on the path may be simple acts of kindness, avoiding road rage, making time for family and friends, affirming people in our lives and building people up. UCC Pastor Robin Meyers often calls the Church back to consciousness by saying that we have to be more concerned about being loving than being right. As Christians we have to be more concerned with being loving in our lives than being right all the time. Meyers writes, "Early Christians did not think of heaven or paradise just as something beyond this life. It was, first and foremost, in this world. It is made possible by the spirit of God that permeates those at worship, who glimpse paradise around the communion table." [9] When we receive the gifts of God as the body of Christ we get a glimpse of what Isaiah hoped for—people from far and wide of many cultures, languages, and races streaming

to be in God's presence together and spend our lives walking in the light of God. May it be so, Amen.

[1] Mass Moments, <http://www.massmoments.org/moment.cfm?mid=214> and "Henry David Thoreau on Civil Disobedience," http://www.upa.pdx.edu/IMS/currentprojects/TAHv3/Content/PDFs/Thoreau_Ci...

[2] "Henry David Thoreau on Civil Disobedience," http://www.upa.pdx.edu/IMS/currentprojects/TAHv3/Content/PDFs/Thoreau_Ci...

[3] Martin Luther King Jr., as quoted by Robin Meyers in *The Underground Church: Reclaiming the Subversive Way of Jesus*, 90.

[4] Isaiah 2:4, NRSV.

[5] Isaiah 2:3, NRSV.

[6] Paul Simpson Duke, "Homiletical Perspective" on Isaiah 2:1-5 in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 1*, 3.

[7] Isaiah 2:5, NRSV.

[8] Mahatma Gandhi, <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/22155-i-like-your-christ-i-do-not-like-y...>

[9] Robin Meyers, *The Underground Church: Reclaiming the Subversive Way of Jesus*, 99.