

2018 12 09 – Stories of Peace

Luke 3:1-6

So our scripture passage today is about John, ben-Zechariah. Of course, “ben” is Hebrew for “son of.” John was the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth. What else do we know about John from today’s scripture or from other passages? *(wait for answers – “John the baptizer,” baptized in Jordan River, “Word of God came to him,” prophet, lived in the desert, clothed in camel’s hair & leather belt, ate grasshoppers/locusts and wild honey (Mark), baptized Jesus, got in trouble with the authorities, beheaded, Jesus’ cousin).* We know quite a bit about John.

One thing that the author of the Gospel of Luke wanted us to know was the context in which John, ben-Zechariah lived. Thanks to Maxine for reading all those difficult names of people and places at the beginning of this passage. The author put them there for a reason - not just to drive us crazy with unfamiliar pronunciation. The author wanted us to know that John began his ministry in a time when the people of Judea and Galilee, Ituraea, Trachonitis and Abilene were living under the oppressive rule of Roman governors.

It was a difficult time in the lives of the Jewish farmers and fishermen and craftsmen. It was a time of great poverty and suffering. It was a time of uncertainty. Everyone was talking about the possibility of revolution, of war. In fact, many of the Jewish people were hoping that God would send them a warrior king to set them free.

We all know that poverty, suffering, uncertainty, revolution and war exist in this world even today. They have existed throughout the history of humanity on this earth. The 20th century was one that contained two great wars and many other smaller but still deadly conflicts. War is happening in this moment and people are dying of exposure, starvation and from the wounds of conflict.

John came into a similar time of great suffering with a story to tell and he told it boldly. His was a story of a different kind of revolution. John, the prophet, was proclaiming a revolution of the Spirit. He told people that if they repented, if they turned to God and connected with the spirit within them, they could make a difference in the world. John believed in the power of the Spirit of Love and that people could make a difference through cooperation and non-violent action. He was getting people ready for the peaceful revolution that would be led by his cousin, Jesus, son of Joseph and Mary.

John was a prophet with an important story to tell. Today I want to share with you a couple of stories from another prophet, a young woman named Sabiha Kapetanovic. Sabiha grew up in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990's and was only 23 when she wrote an article that contained three different stories about war and peace. Like her predecessor John ben-Zechariah, Sabiha believes in the power of love and the goodness that exists in people. Today I am going to tell you two of her stories. Here is the first:

In Bavaria, southern Germany, there is one small place called Dachau. The medieval town of Dachau is important for history as it

was the location of the first of the Nazi concentration camps. Today, if you go to Dachau you will find a church standing in the place where the concentration camp once was. For me, this church is situated there to tell a beautiful story – the story of two best friends. These two best friends are not just any kind of best friends; they are the kind that makes the sun rise and shine again, the kind that makes nights seem neither dark nor cold, they are the type of friends that teach us that love and forgiveness are possible. One of the friends is a priest who works in the Dachau church, yet his father was a Nazi and one of the main builders of the concentration camp at Dachau. The other friend is a Dutch Jew, whose father was imprisoned there in times of war. After the war ended he built the church on the place where the concentration camp once was.

<http://unoy.org/wp-content/uploads/25-Stories-Publication-Final-for-web.pdf>

In her article, Sabiha also explains why she shared this story, she says,

When I heard the story of the two best friends, it inspired me and showed me that I am not the only crazy fool in this world that believes in the goodness of people. Because if they were able to build a friendship and leave their pasts behind, and that of their ancestors, then everyone is capable of spreading positive energy and love, while forgetting the negativity of stories that are actually not ours; we did not live them, we did not write them.

Sabiha believes in the power of Love and its ability to bring peace to the world.

In her second story she explains the origin of her faith in people. She writes:

Another story is set in my childhood and involves those who taught me the meaning of love and humanity. The year was 1993, and the place Bosnia and Herzegovina. The country was at war then. It felt like the whole world had forgotten us, like we would be killed one night and just disappear forever. There was no food, no water, no gas, no fire. Yet shootings were abundant and gun shots could be heard constantly, coming from all directions. People were scared; everyone seemed to be going crazy. I can still remember the terrible sounds you could hear - shots, screams; they are like a melody inside my head that is stuck on repeat, and goes on over and over.

However, sometimes during long, dark nights I recall a different melody accompanied with different images. I remember my parents' voices on a similar, cold winter night. I was so afraid; I did not understand anything. All I knew was that something bad was happening outside, that we should all be scared, and that we should be prepared to run. The term 'war' was constantly used by the elders to explain the plight we had been experiencing.

While we were terrified, waiting for new explosions, someone knocked on the door. We froze immediately. My mother went and opened the door. There, standing feebly, were three persons asking for shelter. They had "belonged" to who knows which nation, and were running from who knows

whom. Yet, my mother and father accepted them. In the midst of all our despair, my parents welcomed some unknown people into our home. They gave them a place to sleep and bread to eat, even though we did not have enough for ourselves. I thought they had gone crazy!

I will forever remember those voices and faces. A few years after the war had ended, they came to visit us and show their gratitude for accepting them that night. After all that mess and horror of the war, the opposing sides now live together again, and we love each other again. Isn't it ironic? Because not so long ago we were literally killing each other.

In 2014, Sabiha shared these stories to explain why she, at the age of 23, had a passion for building peace. She wrote:

It is in these stories where I find a meaning to being a peacebuilder. It is thinking about these situations, that ignites a flame inside me difficult to extinguish. Therefore I like to share and retell such stories about inspiring, brave people. To remind myself and others of who we are. People are not machines, but something way more beautiful and primordial. We are human beings and we should act and live in peace. That's why I want to be a peacebuilder.

Like John, Sabiha is a prophet, a story-teller, someone who, whether she knows it or not, is deeply connected to the Spirit of Love that unites us all. May we have the courage and the faith to be prophets, story-tellers and builders of peace. May we all prepare the way for the coming of God's reign of peace and justice.