

Toronto United Mennonite Church  
Sunday 14 November 2021: PEACE Sunday  
War & Peace: Radical Remembering OR  
How I learned to read the Bible through the lens of war

**Gathering Hymns**

**VT 797: We are the People of God's Peace**

**VT 801: I'm gonna eat at the Welcome Table**

**Welcome: Melanie Penner**

**Announcements: Melanie**

**Call to Worship: Melanie**

**Land Acknowledgement: Melanie**

**VT 808: Between Darkness and Light**

**Offering: Melanie**

**Children's Time**

**Story for all: Life-Changing Moments**

In mid-April of 1985, I got a telephone call from a woman who had come to Tottenham to set up a Canada World Youth programme. I was vaguely familiar with Canada World Youth, aware of this federal opportunity for a gap-year adventure for Canadian young people before heading for University. For nine months Canadians were paired with 18-20-somethings from another country; in this case, the counterparts were from Bolivia. The woman on the phone was looking for billeting farm households—and she was looking for a translator.

'One of the places I went looking,' she said to me, 'was the local ministerial. Your minister said that you speak Spanish. We're kind of desperate. None of the anglophones or francophones speak Spanish and none of the Bolivians speaks English.'

My undergraduate degree *was* in the Latin-based family of languages. Though my Québec roots kept my French in reasonable shape, it had been some time since I had heard, read or spoken Spanish. I opened my mouth to say, No, sorry, you will have to look further.

I don't know if any of you have had what you might call a mystical moment, a momentary inbreaking that defies explanation. NO was indeed the logical response. However, something that I recall as audible in some way interrupted my NO. *Don't say no. Don't say no.* Instead, I said to her: give me three days.

I hung up the phone and walked to the kitchen window and looked out at the little garden edging the fence. I thought, OK, I remember how to say 'How are you?' 'Cómo está?' But what about—my eyes falling on the brave little purple and white crocus heads poking through an early morning dusting of snow—pretty flowers? No idea. Geez, what were you thinking, LeeAnn?

I went down to the crawlspace and dragged out my Spanish text-books from University. Three days later, I said yes. Two weeks later, I was doing translation for the group of 22 young people at the Tai Chi Centre as they started the process of getting to know one another. The grammar and the words had poured back into my brain and heart; all I needed to do was to add rural and farming vocabulary. Words like manure spreader, for example.

That hinge No-to-Yes moment changed my life. There are few things in my personal narrative that cannot be connected

back to that Yes. Including enrollment in seminary the following year. And especially, work in war zones enabled, first of all, by the return of my Spanish. The callings that followed that first one, in the midst of 16 years as a stay-at-home Mum, would not be denied. Not given to five-year plans or even one-month plans, I responded (and continue to respond to) open doors, invitations and opportunities that eventually expanded my work to the globe, going from accompaniment of people doing risky things to human rights monitoring and then, eventually, training in conflict transformation and non-violent direct action, supporting groups and communities in their desire to find peaceful solutions to conflict. Thirty-two years of this stuff has radically changed my theology, my Christology, how I read the Bible and my ideas about all sorts of things like discipleship, race, gender and war. Today, I'm going to share some stories...

**Scripture Interpretation: Doreen Martens: Matthew 5.38-48**

**Congregational Prayer: Peter Haresnape**

*A portion of Peter's prayer: To the veterans of wars of all nations:*

*We are sorry that you were dehumanized by being asked to fight other creatures of God. We are sorry that you were asked to commit atrocities no one should ever be involved in. We are sorry that you were asked to kill for property and ideals. We are sorry for wounding your bodies and souls for the sake of our fear and greed. Please forgive us for getting you involved in our selfishness and arrogance. We were wrong. God forgives you and we ask that God would also forgive us.*

*The source is Luke Kammrath, a Lutheran Pastor in the USA, and a friend.*

<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10165766863150646&set=a.10150312524485646>

**Scripture Interpretation: Doreen: Isaiah 58.6-12**

**Reflection: War & Peace: Radical Remembering OR How I learned to read the Bible in a context of war**

**Armistice**

One hundred and three years ago this week, the leadership of the Allied Forces and the German Reich signed an armistice that brought an end to the bloodletting of the hopefully-called-at -the-time, 'Great War' – the one to end all wars. What will be the nature of our remembering? Glorious coming-of-age for Canada on the ridges of Vimy or a solemn contemplation of all the errors and the carnage, the short-sightedness of the terms of both the Armistice (11 11 1918) and the Treaty of Versailles (10 January 1920) that, together, ensured that another war would follow not long down the road?

**El Salvador**

Thirty-two years ago this week, I arrived in El Salvador for the first time, a visit that would put my feet firmly on the path of a vocation to peacemaking. On the 11<sup>th</sup> of November 1989, the largest offensive of a dozen years of civil war was launched by El Salvador's FMLN insurgency – a violence of despair when it seems as if no other tools exist; when one's cries to the international community go unanswered and the world's largest purveyor of violence is funding your oppression. The U.S. State Department-underwritten response by the Salvadoran military killed thousands, displaced and sent into refugee-exile tens of thousands more. The sanctuary of Emmanuel Baptist Church had been turned into a storehouse of necessities. I remember turning to one of the church members as we were stacking bags of flour and beans and rice in the church sanctuary, 'For me, this is a day of remembrance of wars past,' I said, 'not of the present.'

Each day we ventured out into the most heavily-bombed areas of the capital to deliver these supplies and bring in, eventually, hundreds of families to perch precariously in a church compound ill-prepared for their numbers. Little in my toolbox at the time prepared me for the nightly sorties of helicopter gunships dropping bombs, machine-gun fire, tanks lifeless bodies in the streets; the fear, the mutiny of my own body as the daily terrors continued; the brutality of the murders of two housekeepers and six Jesuit priests by the Fort Bragg-trained Atlacatl Battalion.

## Colombia

Twenty-nine years ago, I stood in the clearing of thick woods that was Teresa Ochoa Rueda's coffee farm. She had emerged tentatively from her adobe farmhouse on hearing reassurances from our Colombian colleague. We had come to smuggle her and her family out of the area, which had been taken over by death squads. Teresa was a tiny, inauspicious-looking person, yet seen as a threat by Colombia's largest army-supported paramilitary. Her crime? She was the leader of a local peasants' association, helping her neighbours to recover their deeply-rooted traditions of dance and music, textiles and medicines – activities considered subversive by a government who prefer their citizens quiescent, malleable and rootless. Villagers are given three choices by the paramilitary: Join us, Leave or Die. The names of those refusing to hand over their sons or abandon their homes of generations, were placed on a hit list in the village central square, Teresa's name now at the top.

'They killed my son,' she told us. 'Just a few weeks ago.' Oh, no! I groaned inwardly.

'How old was he?' I asked her gently, thinking: we've come too late.

'Sixteen,' she told me.

'*Igual que mi hija*,' I replied. The same as my daughter.

She lifted her tear-stained face to mine in what she assumed was shared pain: 'They killed your daughter, too?'

How to respond? I felt the question land hard in my gut. 'No. She is the same age.' She lives on.

We saved her and her 12-year-old son, Germán, and his puppy, for awhile, launching them into a kind of exile, from safe house to safe house. I don't know where they went or where they are. If they survived.

## Iraq

Eighteen years ago, I stood in a children's cancer hospital in Basra, southern Iraq. It was just a few weeks since George Bush had declared 'Mission accomplished' and five months since the birth of my grandson, Owen. It was 49 degrees, inside and outside, electricity roaring the building into life only occasionally during the course of any given day. In one of the wards crowded with children and their mothers, I encounter a woman, young, beautiful, dressed in the brilliantly-embroidered weaves of the Kurds. An Iraqi physician translates for us. She is holding her son, who is five months old: the same age as Owen. Her son is clothed in a thin shirt, exposing a purple-hued, scarred and distended belly, evidence of a vain attempt to conquer the depleted uranium-induced cancer that is killing him.

The two little boys are suddenly, in my mind, together somehow, sharing a common past of five short months, facing very different futures. Why!? I want to shout. Blond-haired, blue-eyed little Owen will live, playing in parks and streets and sandboxes unsullied by the fine yellow powders of DU, unlikely to stumble over and mistake for a toy a brilliant, winged – and death-dealing – cluster bomb. Child of my child. Child of a woman whose name I have forgotten; one lives, another dies. Who decides. What is the world doing about this. What am I doing about [this](#).

## Sudan

Nine years ago, Mai Shutta and Daoud Rudwan, Priscilla Nupal, Widad Derwish and Ilham Khairy were part of, leaders, of a movement to overthrow the Sudanese government of Omar al-Bashir. Trained as trainers by me over eight years in conflict transformation and non-violent direct action, their exponentially-multiplied efforts on the streets of the Sudanese capital went viral. Eventually many of them showed up as posters on Facebook, arrested, awaiting trial for sedition. I talked to some of them after their release; one of them was Mai.

She had been held in the Women's Prison in Omdurman, only blocks from where she had been trained. I'm not sure what to say to her; I confess to feeling badly, that somehow I have been responsible for their incarceration, their torture and their exile. Mai, looking very different on skype than the woman I had known, said in broken English in response to my lousy Arabic something like, Get over yourself, *Haboba!* You gave us the greatest gift—the gift of nonviolence. She told me that, while in prison, she had taught the other women what she had learned about nonviolence, telling them: there is a baby called peace growing inside of you; it is waiting to be born! It's the future you want to live! All of them,

with the exception of Widad, have been forced to leave their country.

In April of 2019, decades of oppression under dictator Omar al-Bashir came to an end. The peace was a sketchy one, moving, step by step towards a civilian government. Those steps were halted two weeks ago week with a military coup. Activists are once more in the street—and urging the world to respond... [update: military leader made president]

Briefly back to Iraq. Peggy Gish and I were standing in a courtyard attached to the municipal offices of the City of Fallujah. It was filled with US soldiers as well as the tools of war, LAVs, Tanks, jeeps, guns. We had just come from a meeting with the city leadership. They had somehow managed ahead of just about any other place in Iraq to put some semblance of governance in place. But there was bad news that morning. A group of parents who wanted their children back in school had marched onto the local school grounds demanding the return of its facilities and the withdrawal of soldiers and vehicles. Something had happened; soldiers had suddenly opened fire on the crowd. Fourteen were killed, 104 injured.

We found ourselves talking with a young Filipino American from Utah. We asked him what happened that morning. He said that a woman had hidden an AK-47 under her abbeya and that's how it started. 'Do you believe that?' I asked him quietly, I hope, kindly. He lowered his eyes. Quoting from Peggy's book: 'She told him that CPT were concerned not just about the Iraqi people and their safety. 'We are also concerned about *your* safety and your soul—because, in order to kill, you need to distance yourself from the Iraqi people. And, when you do that, you kill something of your own humanity as well.' Both ends of the gun. He was very quiet and when we were saying good-bye, we noticed tears forming in his eyes.

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I started PhD coursework in 2001, and my first class – *War and Peace in Christian Thought* – began at 10:00 on the morning of the 11<sup>th</sup> of September. An interesting crucible if there ever were one in which to begin such an enquiry. [I added for TUMC: with professor Jim Reimer – his daughter was in the congregation; cool]

In my work that is all about supporting local initiatives for peace, I had become increasingly disturbed by Christian warriors' use of the crucifixion as a rationale for violence. If God's violence 'worked' somehow, so should mine, right?

I began to hang out with those who were doing some innovative thinking and writing about non-violent doctrines of atonement. What was the true meaning of Good Friday? And what has happened in the last two millennia as its meaning has been bent into something it was never meant to be? How does one, as a follower of Jesus, the Prince of Peace, read a Bible that seems to speak with so many different voices? And I tested out my findings in the context of war.

So, what did I learn?

1. I learned that if religion is not much more than a Jesus veneer on what we were going to do anyways, invitations to violence can be attractive. In a conversation two years ago with a Baptist leader in North East India, I asked him, 'How is that the NE is both the most Christian—vastly outnumbering all other religious communities—and the most violent, with 600,000 killed in decades of internecine warfare? 'Easy,' he said. 'The Tribal identity trumps the Christian identity.' Ok, I thought: sort of like me.
2. Figuring out the Bible is key to discipleship. There's a video online that documents an experiment by some theology students in Amsterdam. They have disguised a Bible to look like a Qur'an. Engaging with passers-by, they read them some verses that are about women who have to stay silent, be submissive at all times, not teach; about men sleeping with men and how they both need to be killed; about eating your sons and daughters, about cutting off hands. The students ask their reaction to what they have heard. *This is unbelievable! How could anyone believe this stuff?* One woman says, *to me this sounds as if they want to oppress you and force you to believe what they believe!*

Then the students asked them, 'If you were to compare this to the Bible, what are the biggest differences?' One says, *The Bible mostly has a lot of positive things in it.* Another says, *the biggest difference is about the role of women. The world is changing and they should have to adapt to it. It bothers me that some people see these old writings as the absolute truth!*

Then one of the students says, I have a bit of a surprise for you. 'These 'beautiful' verses from the Qur'an are actually—as he removes the jacket—from the Bible!' Some of the responses I won't repeat—which is why I'm not showing the video itself. They said, *Wow! I didn't see that coming! That is really unbelievable! That is sick, really sick!* One says, *It's all just prejudice, really; I always try not to be prejudiced myself but apparently I already am.* Another says, *I went to a Christian school but I really had no idea this was in there!* She is wiping tears.

3. The Bible was written by human beings, writing out of and reflecting their own ancient context—with absolutely no idea of ours. And why should they? Even those who regard all parts of the Bible as equally available for moral guidance and exhortation, insisting that the Bible is a flat landscape without potholes, mountain tops, twist, turns and contradictions—even those readers would pause should they go looking for rules on what to do with disobedient children. 'Spare the rod, spoil the child,' is the least of their worries. There are no fewer than four passages in three different books of the Bible that command capital punishment for naughty children. (You must have been very good children.)
4. Selectivity: We all read the Bible selectively, what we teach, preach, memorise, take to heart – or avoid, leave out, walk around, turn a blind eye, to rationalise or domesticate. It's an easy confession to make. The Lectionary does it, as well, avoiding entire stories as well as parts of passages for reasons I have yet to hear them explain. The rapes of Dinah and of Tamar are nowhere to be found. Then there is Psalm 137—such lovely poetry: 'By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down...'; we sing it, we read it from pulpits—but we stop short of the last three verses: 'Oh happy day it will be when we get to take revenge, grabbing *your* children by their ankles and bashing *their* heads against the stones as you did ours!' Not a suggestion we should take to heart, but, oh! so human in its expression of grief and anger. Sort of like Bruce Cockburn's 'If I had a rocket launcher'.
5. Yes, so we're selective; but what is the criterion for my selectivity? Somewhere in my search to 'rescue' the Bible, I went looking for a measuring stick, a hermeneutical/interpretive plumbline—a story or a passage that so clearly reveals the biblical God, through the biblical Christ in the historical Jesus. A key one of those plumbines is Matthew 5.38-48, as we heard some weeks ago. If Jesus' disciples and the crowds that followed him were truly to understand the God he enfleshed: An eye for an eye was an improvement over a life for an eye or a tooth—but not nearly good enough. It. Resist! but without evil means [*NOT that translation error—DO NOT RESIST!*] You have heard it said, Love your neighbour and hate your enemy! BUT I say unto you, says Jesus: Love your ENEMIES; pray for those who persecute you.

This verse has mostly been dismissed as nice, for sure, but unrealistic, suitable only for some well-mannered banquet table in the sky in the bye-&-bye, impractical for real life. But the Christian peacemaker chooses to take it seriously: difficult but possible, through Christ.

What about Jesus the rule-breakers? We all know well the familiar stories such as the Woman at the Well and the so-called Good Samaritan; the leper, the tax collector—all of them low-lives, defiled, excluded. He broke the rules, hanging out with, approaching, touching, healing, validating the humanity of the other—in contravention of Torah, the LAW.

6. Using those plumb lines tied to the life, ministry, death and resurrection, God's incarnate one—I could then interrogate the text: So, what is this? Is this story—a DESCRIPTION of a people in search of God and how to serve God, sometimes getting it right, sometimes getting it dreadfully wrong, attributing pathological violence to the God who is LOVE? Or is this a PRESCRIPTION, unbound by time or place, ideas, behaviours for everyone always? Is this a verse or a passage that has been / is used to harm someone, inviting me to harm, mistreat, marginalise, torture or kill? Is it DESCRIPTION of a people in search of God, sometimes getting it right, sometimes getting it wrong; or is it PRESCRIPTION, useful, applicable for all people, in all times in all places?

Someone I read once described this journey as moving from being COMPLIANT readers (this is what was taught to me in Sunday School, so just go with it; don't question it) to CONVERSANT readers, prepared to ask questions of sacred text. Yet this is simply following the Bible's own lead—evaluating the text's claims and assumptions—enabling us to embrace the whole Bible, all of it—not just pick and choose our favourites and avoid the puzzling, disturbing ones.

7. One other thing. In pre-Covid times when we had the Sunday School in church with us, I would ask the children: Have you ever seen a conflict in your schoolyard? What does it look like? They are quick to answer: *Sometimes they hit one another. They quit talking to him. They don't let them on their team. So, how does conflict start? Somebody took something that belongs to me. I teased him. Somebody hit me. I don't like her because she's not like me. She has more... than me. She did this to me so I get to do that to her. He doesn't share. He's a bully. Revenge. Jealousy. Difference. It's all there. Wars start the same way schoolyard fights start—which is both despairing and hopeful! While conflict is an inevitable part of being human, violence and aggression are not. In every life there are openings for loving disruption.*

So, what's this got to do with the Armistice of a century and more ago marked this week? The Bible, read flat, without its potholes and mountains, twists, turns and contradictions, allows lots of room for Christians to see themselves as Christian both as a killer and a lover, torturer and tortured.

Both Germans and the Allies prayed to the same God for victory and deliverance, with guns their only tools, slaughtering their way to that elusive goal. But think of that 1914 Christmas Truce; imagine it. And it was not just one exotic outcropping—but in several companies scattered across the front, unbeknownst one to the other. A moment, the guns silenced for a time, when they let free their common humanity, breaking the rules of war. A dusk-to-dawn moment, an inbreaking, a pulling back of the veil: this is the one. This is truth; this is what you were born to be, beloveds: No diabolical game of multiple choice: love 'em or kill 'em? This is the ONE. Who calls us to love. Period. If I learned anything, crosses and swords don't belong together; and I reached the conclusion that this biblical God revealed in the biblical Christ rooted in the historical Jesus *calls no one to war.*

### **Responsive Litany: Melanie (God weeps)**

#### **Commissioning and Benediction**

**Beloved people of the Beloved Community,  
Precious people born of and into the Body of Christ:  
As we go from here may we never forget God's tears, God's blood,  
That God weeps at love withheld, at strength misused,  
At anger's fist, at trust betrayed, at hungry mouths and running sores,  
At creatures dying without cause.  
That until we change the way we love, the way we win, the way we care, God weeps.  
That God waits for stones to melt, for peace to seed, for hearts to hold each other's need,  
And, until we understand the Christ, God waits.  
Nevertheless and at all times, we work, we play, we wait, we go out from here,**

**And we do so with the blessing of God who can do all things,  
of Jesus Christ who reconciles and restores us and makes us new;  
and of the Holy Spirit, restless movement of hope amongst us.  
One God, forevermore. Amen**