

## **The path of peace**

Malachi 2:17 - 3:5

December 6, 2015

*Where is the God who is supposed to be just?*

This week, we are asking that question again ...

... because twenty-month-old Savannah Adams, the precious daughter her parents had tried for for years, will have to grow up without her Dad.

... because Bennetta Betbadal, an Iranian refugee who left her homeland to escape Islamic extremism, will never return home to her husband and three adolescent children.

... because Tin Nguyen will never celebrate the wedding she and her fiancé had long been planning and preparing for.

... because a team of five-year-old girls have lost their soccer coach and six children their father and Renee Wetzel her husband. On Wednesday, she posted to Facebook: "My husband was in the meeting where the shooting happened. I have not been able to get in touch with him. Please please pray that he is OK."

He was not OK. They were not OK, because Robert and Bennetta and Tin and Mike were among the fourteen victims shot and killed at the Inland Regional Center last Wednesday in San Bernadino.

Where is the God who is supposed to be just? Where is the peace on earth God's people were promised at the announcement of Jesus' birth? Where is peace?

I think you know where it is ...

*Our God is merciful and tender ...*

Our God is merciful and tender. Say the words! Taste the words in your mouth. Hold the words in your heart. Yes, there is darkness all around us, and the shadow of death looms over us and all those we love, but our God -- our God -- is merciful and tender.

*Our God is merciful and tender,  
our God will cause the bright dawn of salvation to rise on us  
and to shine from heaven on all those who live in the dark shadow of death,  
to guide our steps into the path of peace.*

There it is. There is the answer to our questions. God will guide our steps -- our steps, you and me -- into the path of peace.

Into the path of peace. The preposition matters! It is not the path to peace, but the path of peace. Peace is not the destination. Peace is the way. God will guide our steps into the path of peace, into the way of peace, so that God's way may be our way, so that our way may be God's way.

Where is the God who is supposed to be just?

*The Lord Almighty answers, "I will send my messenger to prepare the way for me. Then the Lord you are looking for will suddenly come to his Temple. The messenger you long to see will come and proclaim my covenant." But who will be able to endure the day when he comes? Who will be able to survive when he appears? He will be like strong soap, like a fire that refines metal. He will come to judge like one who refines and purifies silver.*

That doesn't sound very merciful or tender. But is it merciful or tender to let a precious child continue to walk a path that leads to death? The path of peace leads to life, but it is not an easy path! If we will walk it, we must be guided, prepared, equipped, hardened, refined, purified.

Purified of what?

*The Lord Almighty says, "I will appear among you to judge, and I will testify at once against those who practice magic, against adulterers, against those who give false testimony, those who cheat employees out of their wages, and those who take advantage of widows, orphans, and foreigners.*

We must be purified of adultery. We must be loyal, faithful, to God and God alone, not distracted by other lovers, not serving other masters -- money or prestige or power or pride. On the path of peace, God is the only guide.

We must be purified of perjury. Speaking the truth in love, not just saying whatever works or whatever gets you out of trouble or whatever gets you ahead. It is sad, so very sad, that our political rhetoric has become saturated with perjury, with giving false testimony, with lies. Or maybe it's always been that way. Who will be the next scapegoat, the next fall guy, the next man or woman or race or tribe to blame? Speaking for effect, demagoguing, pandering, hyperbolizing, manipulating, demonizing: is this the path of peace? And if we believe what they say or repeat what they say or even fail to challenge what they say, are we walking the path of peace?

If we will walk the path of peace, we must be purified of exploitation. What is exploitation? Making use of resources, making use of people, for personal gain or advantage, or for corporate gain or advantage. It is using water, air, land, fish, forests, employees as tools, as a means of making profit, instead of ends in themselves to be treated fairly and carefully and tenderly. Isn't it the right thing, the just thing -- isn't it the way of peace -- to pay a living wage? Isn't it the right thing, the just thing -- isn't it the way of peace -- to take care of this planet?

We must be purified of xenophobia, even in its mildest manifestations. Brushing aside the alien, turning away the stranger, building walls on the borders of our nations or on the borders of our hearts: these are not the ways of the path of peace. The path of peace is the path of loving neighbors, each and every neighbor, especially those who have few friends to love them or protect them or provide for them.

We must be purified of sorcery. Sorcery? Sorcery is calling on dark powers, making use of extraordinary and uncontrollable and pitiless forces, to make things happen, to protect ourselves or to bring down our enemies. Dark powers, uncontrollable and pitiless forces ... like guns and bombs and nuclear weapons.

Where is the peace on earth God's people were promised? We carry it in our souls and in our bodies ...

... when we love God most of all.

... when we speak the truth in love in every situation regardless of the consequences.

... when we refuse to take advantage of any person or any thing for personal profit.

... when we welcome foreigners.

... when we put our trust entirely in the power of God and God alone.

... when we walk the path of peace.

The path of peace is the only way to peace. There is no other way. It is not an easy path and there will be hardship and testing and suffering and grief along the way. Yes, we may doubt and we may cry out and we may feel still the shadow of death looming over us and over those we love, but God is with us -- it is God's path after all! -- and God will be merciful and tender. Our God is merciful and tender.