

Advent II, 2008
Holy Trinity, Buffalo, NY
The Rev. John A. Buerk

SUNDAY – DECEMBER 7, 2008

It is only once in eight years or more, that December 7th, Pearl Harbor Day falls on a Sunday, the same day of the week the attack occurred. It all depends on how many leap years there are in-between. December 7th was such a memorable day in our country's history, that it calls for some reflection on its meaning.

I was going to ask if you knew where were you on that infamous day – as President Roosevelt described it. But then I realized that 1941 was so long ago that most of you were not alive – then again, there are a lot of us here who were.

I was nine years old at the time, and I remember distinctly sitting on the floor of the living room on that sunny Sunday afternoon playing with some toys. We had one of those big radios that took up more space than a 42 inch TV does today, and my aunt was listening to the opera. The program was interrupted with the news of Pearl Harbor.

As a little boy, its implications meant little to me. I had no relatives who served in the war. My father was a master carpenter and sheet-metal worker and he was exempted from the draft because of his critical work at GE. I personally knew no one who was killed or seriously injured in the war, even though the death tolls were horrendous – over 50,000,000 military and civilian casualties.

Because of my age, the war was a kind of video game for me. All the war movies had our side winning and they were sterilized – the closest they came to swear words were “darn” and “gee-wiz”. In the movie, “The Naked and the Dead”, they substituted bad grammar – especially the word “ain’t” - for swear words. At that point in my life I had been educated enough and had hung around gas stations and cattle auctions enough to find the bad grammar more grating than a few appropriate swear words would have been. As some one pointed out, when men are dying all around you, saying, “oh darn”, doesn't cut the mustard.

I never served in the armed services. When the Korean War came along – I was in seminary. During the Viet Nam war I was working at U/B, and the worst thing that happened to me was getting tear gassed – when I found myself between the police and the demonstrators.

I was the Protestant Chaplain at the time and one evening I arranged for a panel discussion to discuss the Viet Nam war issues. Among the presenters were - the ROTC Major, our Jewish chaplain, and a philosophy professor, Newton Garver, who was a Quaker. It was a compelling discussion.

The ROTC officer spoke well and carefully about the conflict and had the respect of everyone.

The philosopher was a Quaker pacifist and he spoke about the futility of war. He noted how Gandhi had successfully brought down the British Empire through non-violence.

And then the Rabbi spoke and reviewed the atrocities of the Hitler Regime. We were moved by his reflections, and were sympathetic with his arguments and agreed that something had to be done to stop Hitler.

But then Newton Garver responded from his provocative pacifist perspective. He spoke with sensitivity about the Second World War and all the bad things that happened. He recognized the need to stop Hitler. But then he asked at what point should Hitler have been stopped. Was it when he marched into Poland? Was it when Jewish faculty members were removed from the universities? Was it when Kristal Nacht occurred? Was it when Hitler took over the government? Was it when he wrote “Mein Kamph” and spelled out why the master race needed to take over? Was it when the Jews and the Communists and the homosexuals were arrested and sent to concentration camps?

The problem, as Professor Garver so aptly pointed out, was that if you are really serious about using military force to control those who violate other people’s rights, then you had better be prepared to take over the whole world and set up a reconstituted Pax Roman. And, remember, the Roman Empire was not a democracy, as such. A few elite controlled the senate.

The problem with a “democracy” is that when the majority wins the election, the majority may want to oppress the minority. That is exactly what

happened recently in Palestine when the religious conservatives won the election, that is usually what happens in Muslim countries when the religious conservatives take over – as was the case in Afghanistan – read “The Kite Runner”, and “A Thousand Splendid Suns”, if you want to get a horrific sense of how the strong can abuse the vulnerable – especially women.

And remember, going into Iraq was an attempt at getting rid of a dictator and establishing a democracy. But, I don't think that anyone even wants to talk about that these days.

It is a very complicated world – and there is a lot of killing, and maiming and oppression, and injustice, and abuse, and starvation going on – and a lot of this stuff is done in the name of religion.

Some of our lessons during Advent reflect on bad things happening in the world, especially to God's people.

In today's first lesson, Isaiah calls for tears for God's people because they have suffered greatly for their misdeeds.

And the epistle lesson tells about the need for patience when justice and righteousness do not prevail. The people are urged to be patient because it may seem like a long time to wait for the Kingdom to be ushered in – but people have to be reminded that for the Lord “one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day”. Still, when you are suffering, you might think that that it is easy for the author to say, but...

So here we are in the midst of a very confusing world – a world that seems beyond fixing. No matter how many fires we put out, someone starts a new one. It is as though we are crying in the wilderness – and there is no one to hear.

And then comes our gospel lesson. And John the Baptist - the prophet – comes to speak to those in the wilderness who were despondent. And the crowds come from far and wide to hear his message that the people should shape up and repent, or there would be hell to pay.

Now it's a long way from the Holy Land to Washington – about six thousand miles – but the voice of the prophet is a loud voice – and we pray that it will be heard even there.

Interestingly, John the Baptist preached a message of repentance, but he also preached about the coming of one who was greater than he. He said that someone was coming whose sandals he was not worthy to untie. There was a tradition that a student of a rabbi was required to do anything his teacher asked, except to untie his sandals. This meant that Jesus was to be above all other teachers.

And this Jesus would be in the tradition of the Messiah. And it was understood among the rabbis that when the real Messiah came he would not only forgive sin – he would eliminate sin.

And that means no more war, or weeping, or gnashing of teeth. Because the Lamb who is coming will be the Prince of Peace, and he will guide us to springs of living water, and then God will wipe away every tear from our eyes.