

The Song of the Ruthless Be Stilled  
Psalm 23, Isaiah 25: 1-9, Matthew 22: 1-14

“The song of the ruthless” is a phrase found in the Hebrew Scripture for today, Isaiah 25: 1-9 Margaia just read for us. You heard the full sentence: When the blast of the ruthless was like a winter rainstorm, the noise of aliens like heat in a dry place, you subdued the heat with the shade of clouds; the song of the ruthless was stilled.”

The blast of the ruthless was like a winter rainstorm, the noise of aliens like heat in a dry place.... I was struck by how these ancient words of the Hebrew prophet seemed to describe the horrific real-time images streaming into my TV screen from the war zone for the past week, not far from where the prophet brought the words of warning, judgement, consolation, and hope several thousand years ago. For those who live there today, the song of the ruthless has not been stilled; it is sounding louder if anything.

Just over a week ago, on the same day Hamas first launched a barrage of rockets against Israel and the terror descended upon the unsuspecting music festival goers, the first batch of balloons launched into the beautiful Albuquerque sky, kicking off the 51<sup>st</sup> annual balloon fiesta. You and I could just click the remote to switch channels between these very different images of the simultaneous reality.

Today is the last day of the balloon fiesta which has just been wonderful this year. We also know today will NOT be the last day of the bloodshed in Gaza. Israel is gearing up for even more intense attacks. How are we to live this moment, this disorienting and unescapable reality, as a child of God who calls us to be the light of the world?

The answer I seek, and I invite you to seek with me, is not political in a worldly sense, but biblical in a practical sense. For one thing, the complex history of the region is beyond my capacity to engage in any meaningful political analysis, even IF I tried. On the other hand, if we trust in God whose dwelling is among the mortals, a God who acts in our unfolding history, and if we uphold the authority of the Scripture as our rule of life and that God speaks to us through the Scripture, then, we must trust the guide we find there, in such times as this.

And it's not that our own personal lives are problem free, as beautiful and peaceful our corner of the world may appear. We have our own challenges, pain and suffering affecting our

immediate world; at times overwhelmingly so, that we feel as if we are disconnected from the larger world. But are we really?

The job of a prophet is to give us the Word God wants us to hear, and that Word to the people in distress is “Hope in the promise of God” that the song of the ruthless WILL be stilled. But tragedies and crises, small and large, tend to make us skeptical of anything that sounds too good to be true, like the world Isaiah describes and says it’s coming, where God will make all peoples, divided no more, eat at God’s welcome table, where God will swallow up death for ever and wipe away the tears from all faces.

With our awareness of how difficult life is not only for us personally but also for those out there in the world, the act of hoping for such time and such world does not come naturally. The last time I checked, shroud of sadness and suffering is still over those living in war and all of us living with the awareness of their suffering. Death is still swallowing up innocent lives, in Gaza, in Ukraine, and other places in the world unknown to us, and death still swallows up the lives of our loved ones closer home.

Yet, the Isaiah’s words of hope in God’s promise rises out of a great conflict... God is honored for utterly destroying an unnamed city, a force of oppression, and for providing the shelter for the poor who suffered the oppression. Hope is hope because of the present reality of oppression and distress. God is God precisely because God defeats the forces of oppression and provides for the needy; God is known to us in the suffering that God gets us through.

So also, the backdrop of Psalm 23 in our call to worship this morning, words of the opening hymn we sang, is a landscape in which God’s sheep could easily get lost, a landscape with an ever-present awareness of enemy. And King David, to whom this psalm is ascribed, found deliverance from the dangers because of his trust in God the shepherd.

But hope and trust in the promise of God’s protection and deliverance are not our natural response when we are gripped with fear and the threat. Turning to God in praise, trusting in God, when fear, panic and despair overwhelm our senses, may be just beyond what we are capable of doing. It is, then, a prayer, “may the song of the ruthless be stilled.” How do we make that hope real and keep it alive in such time as this?

The voices in both Psalm 23 and the Isaiah passage begins with a personal declaration, naming God for who God is: The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want. O Lord, you are my God, I will exalt you, I will praise your name.

Then they recall the moments in their past when God was there for them, more faithfully than they were there for God; the moments God came to them when they were helpless. King David recounts the wonderful acts of the Lord in his life, as the shepherd who leads and guides him to the life-giving path, accompanying him through the darkest of time and making God's presence known to comfort him. This act of remembering leads him to claim that hope, the trust in the promise, that God's goodness and mercy shall follow him all the days of his life and he shall dwell in the house of the Lord his whole life long...

Isaiah also moves from praising God's name to remembering God's liberating acts in the past: You are my God and you have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure.

Our memory of God's saving acts in our lives over the entire human history, such as those recorded in the Scriptures, brings us hope that endures through the present of utter darkness, under the shadow of death.

I remember the seven short months from my late husband's diagnosis to his death. When he was diagnosed with an aggressive terminal brain cancer, we were about to start a new chapter in our lives, with our daughter off to college, selling our NYC apartment to move to Albuquerque where I was to start a chaplaincy training. His illness came completely out of the blue, like rockets raining down from a clear blue sky, for he was the most health conscious and fit 49 years old, and it turned our world upside down. We quickly pivoted to Plan B, and nothing went as we planned; our NYC apartment didn't sell quickly and so we couldn't buy a house in Albuquerque, and we were stuck in an extended stay hotel for weeks, even as he went through the radiation treatment. Then the family support didn't turn out as we had hoped, and I had to drop out of the training program to be his sole caregiver. The best available medical care and my dropping everything to care for him did not miraculously cure his illness and he died all too soon. It was difficult. It was the hardest thing our family went through. And yet, at his memorial service, the most genuine words that welled up from the bottom of my heart and came pouring out of my mouth was God provided everything we needed and we lacked nothing during the shortest and the longest seven months, our last seven months together on this earth. Even though nothing went according to our plan, when the blast of the rainstorm ended and the song of the ruthless WAS stilled, I was more sure of God's presence in our lives than any other times. When we were too deep in the suffering to pray, other who could carried us in their prayers.

It's just a personal story and my personal experience, but it is in knowing God's loving care through the hardship of our personal lives, we come to trust God will act with the same loving care in the larger world and in the lives of people who are suffering in the situations beyond our reach and beyond our imagination. Because it is the same God, our One and Only, who watches over the sparrow watches over me watches over all. God who prepares a table before me in the presence of enemy invites all to eat at the welcome table.

In Matthew's Gospel we heard today, Jesus makes this table a table at the wedding banquet. When those in the original guest list didn't come, the king opens the feast to everyone. Sure, all are invited, but Jesus points out to us, you don't truly get to enjoy the rich food and mature wine at this marriage feast if you don't have this wedding robe on. For centuries, even today, bible scholars and theologians have proposed different ideas for what this wedding robe might mean.

It's putting on what's required in marriage, a good successful marriage. As I listen to this parable alongside the words of Isaiah and the psalm 23 of King David, this wedding robe looks like "Trust" to me. Trust in the promise of God, is like the trust that keeps the marriage that is born of love and sustained by love. From this table of abundance, set in the presence of our enemy, we pray for the world God so loves, trusting God who acted in our personal lives and the lives of others, according to God's plan of salvation to all, formed of old, faithful and sure.

Trusting in God's loving kindness and compassionate care that we experience in our personal lives, we pray for the crying world; we pray for Gaza and Israel, we pray for Ukraine, we pray for all nations of this hurting world. May the Song of the Ruthless Be Stilled. Amen.