

Sermon: Costly Peace

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Nov 5, 2023)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Peace has been an elusive goal of humanity, seemingly within grasp yet always out of reach. Increasingly as the world is becoming more and more complex, we are learning that peace comes at a cost, and it is getting costly.

Recently, I had the privilege to attend a private luncheon, hosted by a retired minister on behalf of PWS&D, the Presbyterian World Service & Development. We, as a group of local area clergy, met with an Afghan national named Raimon (not his real name as it needs to be withheld due to the nature of his work). Raimon is a Muslim, who works for a non-governmental organization called Community World Service of Asia, or CWS. It is a charitable organization operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan, helping the poorest of the poor getting much needed reliefs, such as food, medicine, shelters and others.

Raimon is soft spoken, with a neatly trimmed beard; he speaks perfect English and comes across as honest and sincere. Through casual conversation and formal presentation, we learned from Raimon what has been happening in Pakistan since the devastating flood of 2022, and also what has been happening in Afghanistan since the withdrawal of the U.S. troops.

The news out of Pakistan are not good. The 2022 flood submerged one third of the country, affecting 33 million people, many of them were children. Even recently, some areas are still not quite dry. Many infrastructures were damaged; unsafe water and poor sanitation are causing wide spread diseases and malnutrition in the affected areas.

Rebuilding will take years but the more concerning fact is that climate change has drastically altered rain patterns in the region, and no one could tell with any kind of certainty, if the same kind of devastating flood might not happen again. The reality is that it is usually the poorest of the poor who are bearing the brunt of the impact of climate change. While many wealthy nations have pledged to establish a 'climate relief fund', currently no actual money has been deposited to the said fund.

The news out of Afghanistan is not much better. Ever since the Taliban took power in 2021, the country has been plunged into one crisis after another. While fightings have diminished somewhat, poverty is impacting the entire population. Infant mortality rate is currently at 10%—so one child out of ten born have died. Education for young girls and women is now banned. Increasingly, women are being barred from work in ever expanding areas. With elections (even the local ones) all but outlawed, the Taliban are ruling by decrees, even at gun point.

Worst, according to Raimon, is that there is little help coming from the outside, no hope of change from within, as the country is seemingly all but forgotten by the international community. Raimon asked how much news coverage of Afghanistan do we see here in Canada. To that we admitted, sheepishly, very little. It was as if Canada had never send troops, brave men and women of the Canadian Armed Forces, into that country at all. Has that recent chapter in the Canadian history been forgotten, out of sight, out of mind?

But we were there, in Kabul, Kandahar, for thirteen long years. More than 40,000 members of the CAF served, and 158 Canadian soldiers died during that mission. Thousand of other veterans of the war were wounded physically and psychologically. The cost paid by Canada was high, but peace in Afghanistan was always out of reach, elusive as ever.

Peace, in Ancient Israel was just as elusive. The Old Testament passage read earlier, Micah 3, is set in the context of Judah the southern kingdom, facing the looming threat of the Babylonians. Prophet Micah was a contemporary of the Biblical prophets of Isaiah, Amos and Hosea. He prophesied during the reign of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. One has to understand that prophets of Ancient Israel were boundary figures, crossing between the divine and the royals. They were charged with the all too important task of speaking the words of God to the ruling class, a sort of royal advisors with a divine pedigree.

Micah in particular was critical the other false prophets, who were leading the people of God astray. They whitewashed the failings of the ruling class, they put up a smokes screen of pretend 'peace', all for their own benefits, at the expense those who have very little. The crimes of these false prophets were both theological and economical. The peace they preached was a mirage, soon to be shattered by the reality of war. That type of peace is unreliable, self-delusional, and came at a great cost to those least able to afford.

Peace in the time of Jesus was equally elusive. Jesus, like other Biblical prophets, have no patience for pretend peace. He drove a stake through the hypocrisy of religious leaders of his time, in Matthew 23:1-2, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’s seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it, but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach.”

Never afraid to rock the boat, Jesus called out the pretentiousness of those religious leaders. The way they dressed, the way they talked, where they sit, and how they taught were all designed to maximize their own respectability at the cost of imposing impossible burdens on the practicing masses. The goal of an inner peace, of shalom with God and with each others, was truly out of reach should one follow their lead.

Instead, Jesus taught the disciples, and us, a valuable lesson on integrity—that is the coherence of what one thinks, what one says, and what one does. Jesus taught us to be humble, for “*all who exalt themselves will be humbled and all who humble themselves will be exalted*”. Jesus taught us also the importance of service, as “*the greatest among you will be your servant*”. Again, in another part of the Gospel, Jesus puts it plainly, “*the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*” (Matthew 20:28)

So on this Remembrance Sunday, we remember all Canadian Armed Forces personnels who humbly served their country, with utmost integrity, often at great risk, and sometimes at great cost—the ultimate sacrifice of their lives. We acknowledge the peace we enjoy as a country was bought at a great cost that most of us did not pay. We recommit, as the Church, to hold ourselves to a high standard of integrity, of humility and of service. Furthermore, we seek to hold the political, the ruling class, who is responsible in funding and deploying our soldiers, to the same standards as well.

For the peace that we keep and make as a country, is not just for ourselves, but for others as well. So, with God’s blessing, that one day, the blessing we pronounced as ‘peace of the Lord be with you’ will become a lived reality, as ‘peace of the Lord is here with you’.

I will leave with you what Raimon, the Afghan national, left with us. While he was realistic with the state of his own country, he nevertheless thanked us, the Church, for not abandoning Afghanistan. The organization he worked for, CWS, used to be called Church World Service, which still exists as a global organization. But its subsidiary operating in Afghanistan

and Pakistan was renamed as Community World Service for operation purpose. Evidently, it is easier that way to get aid to the people in that part of the world.

Nevertheless, Raimon is quite aware its funding is mainly coming from Christian organizations across the world, including the Presbyterian World Service & Development. His parting words to us was, "Don't forget about Afghanistan and Pakistan. Remember us, and pray for us."...We certainly will.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**