

- 2 The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.
- 3 You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.
- 4 For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.
- 5 For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.
- 6 For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
- 7 His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore.

It's been impossible to walk by a newspaper box this week, or to turn on a TV, or to listen to the radio news, without facing some piece of reportage or commentary about where we stand as a nation and a world five years after the fall of New York's twin towers, the destruction of one side of the Pentagon, the airplane brought down in a field in Pennsylvania. Those anniversaries, or the attention we pay to them, might be bringing us back to the anger, the hurt, the fear, and maybe also the despair that we felt in the first place. But I'm not actually convinced that five years later we have so much more perspective on those events. I'm not sure that five years is the magic number by which everything becomes clear to us. We can say without question that the world has changed, but that doesn't mean, just because we've come to an anniversary, that we can see any more clearly how we are supposed to live in this changed world. Or that we can see any more clearly how Friends, as a people of peace, are supposed to stand for peace in a world which is, without question, more violent every day.

What I think we can see is that, even if we don't know how to live boldly our convictions about peace, they are ever more important. What has become clear in five years is that war, despite its intention of summoning all the power of coercive force, does not in fact carry the power to bring peace. The diplomacy that goes on alongside the war might bring peace, the peace-building that sometimes goes on alongside the war might bring peace, but violence begets violence, and war brings with it all the causes of more war, whether on conventional battlefields, or in the neighborhoods and streets of Iraq, or wherever terrorists find meaning and purpose in bringing random harm to strangers.

So what I have been remembering these days is not only where I was and what I was doing when I heard about the attacks, but also some of the messages and stories I have heard since then which make the ways of peace—whatever they may be—more powerful to me than acts of war.

I remember, for instance, the prayer service I attended at Wilmington Friends Meeting on the evening of September 11, and how at the end we stood in a circle and prayed the “Our Father”, and how the words all seemed to carry more weight than they ever had before: forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Amen. I wonder, sometimes, what it would be like to pray those words every day with the same intention we had that night.

And I’ve been remembering a story I stumbled across that week five years ago, a story about the civil rights movement. It occurred during the time of the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama. For a while, the actions involving the boycott were limited to Montgomery. But gradually the circle spread wider and wider, from city courts to federal courts and, finally, the Supreme Court. On November 13, 1956, the Supreme Court declared bus segregation laws unconstitutional. On the very same day, in Montgomery, the city government declared that car pools would henceforth be illegal. This was an effort to force African-American citizens back onto Montgomery’s segregated city buses.

That evening, two simultaneous mass meetings were held in Montgomery’s principal black churches, to celebrate victory on the national level and to bolster the courage of those at the local level whose refusal to ride the buses had now become a partly illegal act. To be a black man or woman arrested by white police was no small thing, so the meetings were held to encourage the faithful. The speakers emphasized love, and dignity, and the continuing importance of refusing to ride the segregated buses.

The white powers that be in Montgomery also responded to the same news about the Supreme Court and the new city law. That night the Ku Klux Klan rode through the black neighborhoods of the city, trying to terrorize the residents, as they had in the past. But on this night, something was different. Instead of the dark,

locked houses of frightened people, the KKK found the lights on, the doors open, and people watching the Klan parade. Some even waved. Perplexed and confused by their inability to create fear, the Klan disappeared from the streets.¹

In addition to what it says about fear and power, I like this story for what it says about the power of even a little light in the darkness. One open door, and then another open door, and some porch lights. The night is still out there, towering above the street, surrounding it. But in those small shafts of light joined together, there is some safety, and a way forward.

I have also been remembering, these past couple of days, a much more recent story told by the Wilmington Yearly Meeting folks who went over to Ramallah last December. The members of Wilmington Yearly Meeting are farmers and teachers and postmen and truck drivers with an occasional lawyer, accountant, doctor, or business person thrown in, and they aren't, on the whole, the kind of experts who think they know enough to tell other people how the world ought to be. But the folks who went to Israel and Palestine were deeply affected by the suffering they saw among the Palestinians they met—and which they also saw in the faces of the young Israeli soldiers who manned the checkpoints and the military posts. At the end of a presentation they made to the yearly meeting about their visit, one of them said, “We asked one small group of Palestinian men what we could do to help their situation, from here. They said, ‘Work for the poor and the oppressed in your own country.’”

And I have been remembering some graffiti I saw on the men's bathroom wall at Guilford College, when I went there for a Friends' peace conference a year and a half after 9/11. I don't know whether it was original, or whether someone was copying something out of a book, but this is what was written:

Do not be intimidated by the colossal challenge of saving the world.

There are as many worlds as there are people.

Save your world.

The one made up of the life you share with the people around you.

Where one flower blooms, a million will follow.

The people who walk in darkness have seen a great light. And the great light we have seen is the victory of the prince of peace, and the life and light in him that could not be extinguished by death and darkness. A life and light that we participate in, the Light which comes to us as the Inner Teacher, the Inward Christ, and which is still coming into the world.

That is the great light, but for me, I have to keep reminding myself that I'm not likely to be blinded by it. What I can see of it, usually, is a bunch of little lights. I don't have the answer to peace in the middle east, but I can still work for the poor and the oppressed in my own country, I can still attend to the world which is made up of the life I share with people around me.

Yesterday, a handful of folks from Cincinnati Friends met up with a handful of folks from Community Friends, and we spent three hours at the Free Store Food Bank, sorting food donations that will be distributed to the hungry in three states. We got our hands plenty dirty, but it wasn't hard work, and all us Quakers got a lot of good feeling just by standing shoulder to shoulder with a common aim. It was only afterwards that I realized this was as fitting a way as any to mark the anniversary of 9/11. It was feeding the poor in my own country, it was attending to the world we

share. It was a little light, maybe only a little light, but if you've ever been to a theater to see a live performance, you know this much: put a bunch of little lights together, and eventually you wind up with a brightly lit stage, a lit up world.

¹Gene Sharp, The Politics of Nonviolent Action, pp. 96-97.