

THIS IS NOT THE WAY

Texts on Sunday, August 18, 2013

2 Kings 6: 8-23; Luke 19: 39-42

Late last spring, I read a new book by Nick Turse called *Kill Anything That Moves*. I recall the moment I finished it. I closed the cover and laid it on the table and wept some while in silence.

It took Turse ten years to compile this history, never told fully until now. He interviewed hundreds of veterans and Vietnamese and pored over files forgotten or hidden by the government. More than 1,000 footnotes armor his book against the rage it will provoke in many Americans. Its 250 pages still the heart like the most appalling confession of sin our soul could conceive.

Here is one veteran's memory of one atrocity. It is not My Lai; it merely mimics My Lai, except that it was undocumented until now.

We moved into a small hamlet, 19 women and children were rounded up as Vietcong suspects and the lieutenant that rounded them up called the captain on the radio and asked what should be done with them. The captain simply repeated the order that came down from the colonel that morning . . . to kill anything that moves . . . I looked toward where the supposed Vietcong suspects were, and two men were leading a young girl, approximately 19 years old, very pretty, out of a hootch. She had no clothes on so I assumed she had been raped—that's standard operating procedure for civilians—and she was thrown onto the pile of the 19 women and children, and five men around the circle opened up on full automatic with their M-16s. And that was the end of that. (p. 238, Turse)

If we can't deal with these things in church, what good is church? Where else will we cry this utterance in a way that can do some good? Told short, the book shows that murder and rape and bombing to death of millions of Vietnamese civilians was unleashed by orders from the top. Through a decade of hell, on virtually every day and in every province of Vietnam, North and South, America practiced genocide. Of 5.3 million civilians wounded by our war, one third were women and one quarter were not yet at the age of puberty. We lost our mind. We also lost hundreds of thousands of our veterans to homelessness, mental illness, unemployment, and prison. We utterly lost our way.

Americans of privilege have liked to think that we are nice people with high ideals. Of course, it is easy to find nice people who talk of nice ideals. But it is a sham. In Christ, Christians ought to have the guts, and do have the means, to confess it. Even as the costly movement for civil rights crested in Martin King's transcendent speech at the March on Washington in August of 1963; even as there followed landmark federal civil rights legislation in 1964 in 1965; in those very years, we descended into a maelstrom of atrocities,

making war with no meaning or purpose whatever more than to spit our awesome technology of death in the face of God—who, true to character, did not keep us from conjuring from our evil imagination a rarefied experience of torture for yet another people of color. Now, all this happened just yesterday. Why do we not sit in sackcloth on a heap of ashes and weep?

In forty years, have we repaired anything or anyone? Have we shut the cover on even one volume to show we ain't gonna study war no more?

Many of you know that in the spring of 1967, three and one-half years after the March on Washington, Dr. King stood here in this chancel to deliver a speech severely rebuking the nation for making war on Vietnam. In the opening words of the speech, King expressed great sadness that so many considered the concerns of the war disconnected from the aims of civil rights. Even his closest aides had admonished him to leave the subject. King reflected on conversations he'd had with young men in cities burned by race riots. They demanded to know, he reported, why *they* should not use violence when America relied massively on violence to solve all problems. "Their questions hit home and I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today—my own government."

In the days that followed that speech, the establishment lashed out at him. Ralph Bunche disputed King's understanding of peace. The NAACP called it a "serious tactical mistake" to merge civil rights and peace drives. Declared the *Washington Post*, "Many who have listened to him with respect will never again accord him the same confidence. He has diminished his usefulness to his cause, to his country, and to his people." *The New York Times* editorialized that the Riverside speech was "a fusing of two public problems that are distinct and separate." Historian Taylor Branch offers this summary of the backlash: "The call for segregated silence on Vietnam dashed any expectation that King's freedom movement had validated the citizenship credentials of blacks . . . It relegated him again to the back of the bus, conspicuous yet invisible." (*At Canaan's Edge*, p. 597)

I remind you of these things in advance of the fiftieth anniversary of the great March so that we may be sober-minded about our predicament, before the news media put Martin up on display again to reflect shining rays upon our wonderful American wisdom to respond and yo change. It is a lie. White America generally despised and feared the living Dr. King. The nation could not bear to follow our Elisha, the man of God, on the way of non-violence, for the way of violence is the American way.

Still, the way of nonviolence did defeat the way of force, again and again.

Playing the role of king of Syria, the FBI's J. Edgar Hoover sought again and again a way to "go and find where he is so I may seize him." How often the enemy surrounded the people, huddled in churches and marches as at Dothan, with gaudy displays of armed violence. How often, seeing the violence arrayed around them, the disciples of our American Elisha cried out, "Alas, master! What shall we do?"

To be sure, what has changed in America since the 1960s must not be minimized. And may days of good news like those from this week give us hope, for the Federal District Court here declared the NYPD practice called "Stop and Frisk" unconstitutional. Yet Trayvon Martin and Kimani Gray and Ramarley Graham are not yet raised from the dead by a nation ready to abandon the way of violence. We need our Elisha alive.

If you have followed our Elisha series this summer, you are already looking for the connection between the master and the disciple, for this is always the pattern. The master has something to teach by a miracle, and the disciple has something to learn. At Dothan, the disciple learns to confront terror, that one ingredient that empire stirs into all oppression. *Master! What shall we do?*

Elisha prayed—not for himself or for the city; not even for victory or for peace. Elisha prayed rather for the disciple. This is what you and I need. "O Lord, please open his eyes that he may see that there are more with us than there are with them." O people, are your eyes opening? Do you see the mountain full of God's horsepower, and chariots of fire? Surely Martin prayed this and saw this and lived by this, regardless that the blind world spat in disgust as he moved to stand in the way of America's military machine.

And Elisha prayed God, "Strike this people, please, with blindness, for this is not the way." This is not the way. In that speech offered here in 1967, King said our "situation is one in which we must be ready to turn sharply from our present ways . . . A true revolution of values will lay hand on the world order and say of war, 'This way of settling differences is not just.'" O, strike this people, please, with blindness, for this is not the way.

The king of Israel, seeing the army of his enemy blind and subdued before him, shouts to Elisha, "Father, shall I kill them? Shall I kill them?" This too is a figure. Hatred and violence and terror persist deep in our bones. The king of Israel stands for how we try to overcome whatever we fear by destroying it. We are all that king, eager for brute advantage. *Shall I kill them?* But the man of God has prayed that the eye of the disciple open and see that this is not the way. Learn the way of nonviolence. How is it learned, O disciples of Christ? Why, even Jesus, the master of nonviolence, despaired when he saw the city, and wept over it, saying, "If even you, had recognized

the things that make for peace! But now they are hid from your eyes.” Jesus knew that mostly, we would not learn Jesus; we would not learn the way.

Martin, our man of God, taught us exactly what Jesus, exactly what Elisha the man of God taught. Elisha loved the enemy. He set before them a great feast, and after they ate and drank, he sent them on their way to peace. It is a parable. Let us pray to see by it that there are more with us than there are with them. See the mountain bursting with chariots of fire, waiting to take you up from your fear of small deaths into your confidence that your life has no end but God. Then see that all injustices have one root, and all who practice them, like the king within, one fear they dare not confront—that they are empty [3x of meaning and purpose, and are unwilling to turn to the living God, to learn that God comes to nothing, and comes only to nothing.

The wars America wages have all this ungodly root. This is why Martin grew great in solidarity not only with black people of the South, then North; but then with yellow people of the East and with all people, poor people, everywhere where there is nothing. Mass incarceration, mass deportation, mass fracking of the foundations of the earth, mass calculation of short-term profits blind to long-term poisoning of the globe, mass destruction of small nations, mass production of bad food, mass distraction with mindless media, mass unaffordable health care, mass bad education for little ones—all these wars are waged by blind warriors craving more money and more control because they have not known the gift of God.

Therefore, do not take up sides with who you say is worst hurt in the world’s wars, and despise those tending to other wounds. This is not the way. Rather, soberly seeing how dreadfully easily we Americans utterly lose our way, pray for solidarity, that all who have faith see that there are more with us than there are with them. And do not think that politics will ever cool that violence in our nature which underwrites all the powers of domination and oppression. Only the spiritual, with learner’s mind, can see the way. Only the spiritual recognize no division between loving God and opposing oppression with all our heart and soul and strength. Only the spiritual can lead, for only the spiritual live their lives not literally, up against the clock, ever afraid of death, but liberally, already eternal in time, ready to feed the most fearsome enemy what they need, and send them on their way. Live your life so that Jesus will not weep, but say, “The Kingdom of God is like the eye of that Jim, that Jane, who in courageous imagination saw that there are more with us than there are with them. Come my way. This is the way.”

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*The Riverside Church
in the City of New York*