

SHEPHERDS IN THE FIELDS

December 2001

On the night of Christmas Day, I went out to find the closest thing to a field within walking distance of my house so that I could see what it might have been like to be a shepherd. The field I found was across the street. It's a baseball field in summer, a soccer field in fall, but this time of year the ground is hard and the grass is low much like I would imagine a field suitable for grazing sheep would be. The night was cold and the moisture on the grass glistened as it turning to frost.

The field is surrounded on three sides by houses and tall trees, but the other side is open and I have a tendency, when I walk there, to face in that direction. This night I saw Orion, that great Greek man, lying on his side and high above his head I saw a very bright star. A star too bright to be a star, a planet most likely, Jupiter or Saturn. That made me think about the wise men and wonder if that is what they saw too. But then I know the Arabs were great astronomers and would not have been so easily fooled. The shepherds must have seen the star too, and as I looked up at it, so bright in the night sky, I realized I was facing east toward Bethlehem.

I don't know much about shepherds. I know they were looked down on by the Jewish society because their life-style prevented them from following the required religious customs. Undoubtedly they could not observe the Sabbath, nor could they follow all the dietary and sanitary restrictions. I imagine their nomadic life prevented them from marrying and having families as was the expected social norm. Perhaps they chose that life deliberately; perhaps they were men like me, who preferred the company of other men and were willing to live in the social margins to be able to find that opportunity.

The best picture I have seen of the shepherds on this night is by the painter Carl Bloch. It shows about half a dozen men in the fields and in their midst, in the center of the picture, is an extraordinary light. Within the light can be faintly seen the outlines of a figure but so faintly as to be barely visible. All that is there is an intensely bright light, too bright for human eyes to look on directly and so the shepherds have thrown up their hands to shield their eyes or have even turned their heads away. Three shepherds are looking out of a lean-to tent; they have robes or blankets wrapped around their waist but their upper bodies are naked as if they had been sleeping, wrapped in one another's arms. Others lie on the ground or kneel near by. Their faces are startled, reflecting the story's words that they were much afraid.

This night in the field I wondered what that might have been like. I tried to imagine a bright light before me, brighter than any star I could see, as bright as the sun come down

to rest ten feet in front of me, a light too bright for human eyes and a voice out of nowhere. Would I have been one of the shepherds to rush off to town to see the child the voice spoke of, or would I have stayed behind with the sheep as someone must have had to do. They went, saw a child, came back to their fields and told the ones who had remained behind, and went on with their lives. Did that one look change the way they lived? Were they more peaceful, more loving towards one another, did it sustain them for the next 30 years when nothing happened and nothing seemed to change?

Though I have gone to the Sunday peace vigils for the past months, I haven't been inclined to write about them. I've wondered about that. It is as if I have been silenced and what has silenced me is not the events of September 11th but those of October 7th and thereafter. I don't want to write because I don't want to feel what I feel and that is a deep and profound sense of hopelessness. Nothing I can say to myself, nothing I've written about faith and God, can shake off the feeling that peace will never come. And yet each Sunday I show up.

I came to the vigil last Sunday having spent the day with a young man from Germany who is here working at a Jewish community center as an alternative to serving in the military. The night before we had been out with a friend of his, and now a friend of mine too, who is here doing the same thing. They are both 20 years old. They have a sense of the history of the effects of war that I will never have and it has given them a passionate commitment to peace. They have a sense of history that leads them to understand that we are all human, that differences are inconsequential and so they have a passionate to equality as well. I see these same attitudes in my own sons. I look at all of them and can see how much the world has changed in the 40 years that have elapsed since I was their age.

At the vigil it was very crowded. People wandered all around us waiting in line for the Liberty Bell or pressing their nose against the glass. Four young men also in their twenties came up and asked if they could each take a button; they put them on, wished us good luck, and walked away. A girl of ten or so came out of line to take four buttons for her family. I saw her sister take one, but her parents shook their heads and she returned theirs. All the children that came near were prepared to pin the words "Peace be with you" to their coats without the slightest hesitation.

My Christmas card this year contains a quotation from Oscar Romero. It begins with the phrase "The kingdom of God is not only beyond our efforts, it is beyond our vision" and goes on to say that no matter how hard we try to carry out God's work we may never see the end results. "That is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are the workers, not the master builders. We are the prophets of a future not our own."

Sometimes it is necessary to be able to take the long view, to have faith that God's work is being accomplished even if we can't really see that. The children who took the buttons, my young German friends, were for me that day the long view, that view of a future not my own, a future in which I could believe not only that peace was possible but would be. And I could readily imagine that the shepherds saw that too in the face of the child they came to see and returned to the fields believing that the words that came to them out of the light would come true, that there would be peace on earth and good will toward all people.

A THIEF IN THE NIGHT

February 2003

For a long time now it has seemed that each Sunday afternoon has been dark. Either it has snowed or been overcast or so cold that I focus my attention down at the ground merely trying to keep warm. I may glance up from time to time to look at people, but my eyes seldom went higher than that and when they did all I can recall seeing is a gray and overcast sky.

On this day my attention was suddenly caught by bright sunlight reflected off the edge of the Constitution Center and the US Mint. As soon as I saw it I realized I hadn't seen sunlight there in a long time. The light made me look higher and I saw lots of gray clouds moving eastward across the sky. And at their edges and in between them I saw the pale blue sky emerging. Soon the dark clouds were replaced by whiter ones with more blue sky surrounding and showing through them. It was almost a theatrical moment, a moment when the light comes beaming through symbolizing a change from something sad or difficult to something good and joyful. The first thought that came to my mind was "peace is here." Not just there where we stood but here on earth, everywhere. Something seemed different, as if in that moment when the blue sky and bright light returned people's hearts all over the world looked up and changed.

How will peace come? Not with trumpets blaring, not with the sounds of fireworks and whistles, not with parades and marches or politicians cheering. Peace will slip in silently, when no one is looking — like a "thief in the night" I think the phrase is. We will all feel joyful without at first knowing why or what has changed. And when we look around it will be like looking up at the sudden blue sky and bright sunlight but what we will see is God's inner light shining forth from the faces of everyone we meet.

A SONG OF PEACE

April 2003

During meeting for worship this morning I heard several people question the relevance of the signs they still had in their yards. “Peace is patriotic” and “No War on Iraq.” I wondered about the signs we held at the vigil, particularly the one I had been holding. I thought it said “Pray for peace with Iraq” as a statement of my hope that we would reach peace before we went to war. When I checked my sign I realized it said “Pray for peace in Iraq.” That still seemed relevant so I held on to it. But the distinction was subtle and one passerby reminded us that that we were irrelevant, as least in his view, with his comment “it’s over.”

Today our “Peace be with you” buttons flew off the table. There were lots of people around in spite of the added restrictions around Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell. Many groups seemed to include lots of teenagers and young adults as well as young children with parents. I particularly remember one young boy who walked by then came back with his mother pointing out to her the buttons on our table. I went up and asked him if we would like one. He said “yes” and pinned it on his jacket. He was wearing a military style green jacket with Air Force insignia all over it. A large shield on his back said “Fight.” As I watched him walk away I smiled, wondering if he was aware of the inconsistency of his messages.

It seemed right to be there today. The number of people who took buttons told me that there were lots who didn’t think it was over, that peace had not finally prevailed on earth, and many needed encouragement to preserve their commitment to peace. I seemed to reach a decision without knowing I was trying to make one that I would continued to stand here in the months ahead. Perhaps it is the warm weather that encouraged me to consider doing so, but whatever the reason it seemed like the right decision.

The sky in front of us was clear and blue and as I stood I found myself humming a song I’d just heard for the first time. It sums up a great deal of what I am feeling these days. The music comes from a section of Sibelius’s *Finlandia* to which someone else added words around 1932. It goes like this (you’ll have to hum the tune yourself):

*This is my song, O God of all the nations;
A song of peace for lands afar and mine.
This is my home, the country where my heart is,
Here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrines.
But other hearts in other lands are beating
With hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.*

*My countries skies are bluer than the ocean,
And sunlight beams on cloverleaf and pine.
But other lands have sunlight too and clover,
And skies are everywhere as blue as mine.*

*O hear my song, thou God of all the nations,
A song of peace for their land and for mine.*

THINKING AHEAD

March 2004

It's March, but I look ahead to April, the month of my birth. When April comes, God willing, I will have completed the 64th year of my life and the 5th year of the prayer vigil for peace on Independence Mall. The 64th year isn't a particularly significant landmark; just a reminder that my life is two-thirds over (again God willing) and that I need to figure out what I am doing with what's left. But the end of the 5th year of the vigil is a different issue: it requires me to stop and ask myself if I am continuing and if so why, and of course if not why not.

When people ask me why I started attending the vigil in the first place the answer is simple and easy to give: God asked me to. Sometimes I word that differently, saying I was led or called to do it, which is often easier for people to hear since there is something in saying "God asked me" that can sound arrogant or presumptuous, as if I were an Old Testament prophet to whom God speaks directly in clear and uncertain terms. Hardly. It's often a challenge to discern God's leadings, but this one was fairly easy. Over the years I've read a lot about discerning leadings and I think I've done fairly well in discerning the ones that came to me. Of course, I could be totally wrong. Often I wonder if these things that seemed to me to be so clearly leadings of the Spirit might not merely be temptations of the devil, designed to lead me into good works and away from a truer calling. Good works, the feeling that one is doing good for others, can easily be a temptation in itself.

But discerning when I am led to do something, if my decisions have been approximately right, has always been easier than discerning when I am led to stop.

There is a Quaker story of two women in the colonies who felt led to travel to England to preach the word of the Lord. They prayed, and presumably counseled with their meeting, concluded the leading was a true one, and prevailed upon a ship captain to take them to England. Halfway across the Atlantic they looked at one another and realized that they were no longer led; they had been released is the proper phrase I think. And they bid the

captain turn the ship about and take them home. Whether he did or not, there likely being other passengers involved, I do not know. Perhaps their leading was just a test of faith—were they prepared to up and leave home and family to follow God’s will; a sort of mini-version of Abraham’s call to take Issac to the mountain top. The issue was not accomplishing what was asked, the issue was whether you were willing to do what was asked, and setting sail across the ocean was proof enough of faithfulness, there was no need to actually arrive and preach. How did they know they were released? The story doesn’t tell me that, nor do other things I have read.

Sometimes there is a natural ending to things, it’s clear when a leading should be laid down. But many of things I got into from spiritual motivation are still with me, or I with them. It’s hard to say “that’s all, it’s time to move on” because that just seems to be my own judgment. Rarely is there a message as clear and strong as the one that got me started. The messages that get me started more often than not come to me from others. I think of them as God’s messengers who come to me in strange ways and ask something, say something or suggest something that is understandable in normal human language, but beneath which only I hear God’s voice: “this is where I need you now” it says. And so I go. But seldom does the messenger appear and say stop.

For many years the vigil was a strong source of spiritual growth. It added something to my spiritual practice quite different from attending meeting for worship or from my other activities. It forced me to think about peace and prayer in a way I hadn’t done before, and those thoughts found their way into written form because I was inspired to share them with others. For more than two years now that has not been the case. I still enjoy my hour on the mall, people still respond in interesting ways to our presence, but the activity doesn’t speak to me in a way it did before. I’m rarely inspired to write about the experience either for public consumption or for private reflection in my journals. Yes, this period corresponds to the period after September 11th (no one will ever need to give the year) and it is in some respects a reflection of my ambiguity about what a person of peace does in this world, in this country I guess I should say, that now finds violence so easy a solution to its problems. I know I don’t have the answer to that and I am no longer sure that my mere standing with my sign is answer enough.

And so I wonder, what will April bring?

THERE IS ANOTHER WAY

May 2004

On Sunday, most people who passed by our vigil and spoke made a simple comment. Generally they just said “I agree with that” in response to our signs that say such things as Peace for Everyone. This commitment or desire for peace transcended the differences of the people who passed—race, country of origin, male/ female and I am sure religious backgrounds made no difference. But early in the hour one woman who stopped for a button said something different: she said, “I believe in prayer”. Although some of our signs say pray for peace and our action is a prayer vigil I was, nonetheless, surprised to find someone who focused explicitly on prayer rather than on peace. Near the end of the day a group of women stopped and approached our table to take buttons. One said to her friends, “you should start each day with prayer, you’re whole day should be a walking prayer”. I liked that thought—a walking prayer. It reminded me of Fox’s phrase “Be patterns, be examples and walk cheerfully over the earth answering to God in those you meet”. He might have said more simply, “Be a walking prayer.”

Across the street, in the area of the mall set aside for public events, there had been a larger gathering earlier in the day complete with stage, sound system, music and speakers including Bono, the lead singer of the band U2, one of my favorites. He was participating in an event for a cause in which he has taken a major interest, that of AIDS and poverty in Africa. I didn’t attend the event and so I have no idea how many it attracted. But as I watched the workmen take down the stage I thought about how many worthwhile causes there are and how easy it is, in many respects, to attract people to them. Sometimes the attraction is just the event—being with other people who share your views about something. But more than that I think the attraction is that perhaps you can do something about it, you can change the situation by getting involved. And no doubt people can and do; Margaret Meade said something to the effect that all great movements start with a few individuals.

But these thoughts reminded me of a statement of Thomas Merton’s to which I referred in a vigil report several years ago. “Do not depend on the hope of results”, Merton wrote in this letter. “Its not what we achieve but how we allow God to act through us.” For Merton, the elimination of AIDs and poverty or the establishment of peace are the results we seek through human action. They may or may not come, and even if they do come there will still be a list of other causes requiring our attention. This doesn’t mean we shouldn’t try to do something about these situations, but it does mean that addressing AIDS in Africa, for example, is, in many respects, addressing the symptom and not the disease if I can use that analogy.

Prayer is not a result; it is something else—a process perhaps. A process of listening to God and allowing God to act through us; a process of letting God determine the appropriate results; a process of surrendering to God; a process of trying to act in harmony with God in all things; a process of believing that with God all things are possible and without God nothing lasting can be achieved; a process of trying to change ourselves. To believe in peace is, in fact, relatively easy. It's a tangible state that we can all agree is worthwhile, even if we have difficulty agreeing on the way to get there. To believe in prayer is much more difficult. To commit oneself to such a process is much more difficult. But it's the commitment to that process, to the goal of changing oneself, to the goal of acting in harmony with God in all situations, to be, if you will, a walking prayer, that is the only way that has the potential to address the underlying cause of all the issues that distress us. That underlying cause is our lack of real and tangible compassion for one another. No, not just for one another but for everyone—for every one another.

I watched the men loading the stage and sound equipment onto their trucks. Two of them often stood and looked our way in between their tasks. What are they thinking, I wondered? Did they compare our small silent group of nine with the loud crowd of hundreds that most likely were there to hear Bono speak, and think how ineffective our actions were in comparison. Or did they stop and stare because our signs made them stop and think about not only another possibility, but another way of achieving change. I don't know. But it is the possibility of the latter that compels me to return each week.

INDEPENDENCE DAY BLUES

July 2005

On July 4th, Independence Day, five people gathered for the vigil on Independence Mall. We were surrounded by hundreds of visitors, milling about and heading for the Liberty Bell Pavilion or the Visitors Center. There were American flags everywhere you looked—many people carried small flags, others were t-shirts with flags on them. Outside the Liberty Bell Pavilion long lines of people waited to get in, the first time I've observed that all summer.

Behind us on the grass was the AFSC exhibit of pairs of soldiers shoes, each one with the name of one of the 800 American dead. I was surprised how little space this display took up—not more than half of the grassed area in the center block of the mall—and consequently, how insignificant the display looked. Yes, that was my reaction: insignificant. How many were dead in Vietnam before the numbers became significant enough to change American policy, was it 50,000? We've a long way to go, I thought,

before the dead will bring an end to American occupation of Iraq. And “only” 800 dead in a war that has cost billions of dollars and has overthrown the government of another nation is a remarkable achievement.

It disappointed me that AFSC had bought into the government’s public relations message that only American dead count. Iraqi civilians aren’t worth keeping track of. How much more astounding it would have been to see some sign of the 10,000 Iraqi civilians that have been killed since the war “ended.” What symbol might have brought that home? Children’s and women’s shoes, perhaps. I once saw a photograph of a similar exhibit about the Israeli / Palestinian conflict in which the dead of one side were represented by white coffins and the dead of the other by black. The collection filled a huge public space in wherever it was that the exhibit was held. That made a much more relevant statement to me than this collection of black boots. I don’t mean to be harsh, I regret their deaths all the more so because so unnecessary. But let’s be realistic, too.

Many people came by who had visited the exhibit. They wore the old AFSC pin that says No War On Iraq. How strange, I thought; that cause is lost. Is there no current message? That seemed to symbolize the situation. What is our message? What is mine?

FAREWELL FLYBY

September 2005

(It surprises me that there aren’t more vigil reports from mid-2004 to late in 2005, when I decided to end my participation in the peace vigil. The last note I have is this brief one in September.)

Today at the vigil three fighter jets flew by so low that the sound of their jet engines was so loud it made me look up and follow their path as they headed south. For a moment I could imagine what the people of Iraq must feel each day, except in their case it is undoubtedly followed by the noise of bombs falling and exploding.

I assumed the jets were headed to the stadium for a flyby over the football game, but I could be wrong. In my imagination I humorously thought they might be there for me, a farewell flyby in honor of my diligence over the past five years and my decision to retire, if you can call it that. But then, that would be unlikely. More likely the flyby was a reminder that though I might go they — the planes of war — were still there and would continue to be. Peace has not prevailed.