

**HEALING FOR THE NATIONS**  
**REVELATION 22:10, 22-22:5**  
**MAY 16, 2004, MITZVAH DAY, EASTER 6**  
**THOMAS H. YORTY, WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

It has been quite a ride, here in May. Two weeks ago eleven of our former clergy were back as well as sons and daughters of this church family who have entered the ministry, not to mention our choir, the luncheon, the stories, the old friends coming home. Last Sunday celebrating the glorious history of our Sunday School and youth ministry with pillars Dottie Millard and Sandy Harwood was a great day as well.

One of our returning clergy cautioned us not to get too light headed over all the nostalgia and memories. Westminster has always stirred things up he said, we need you to do the same today, there is a hurting world out there.

As I thought about it what we were remembering May 2<sup>nd</sup> were the struggles of our ancestors. The sermon that day was excerpts from a century of preaching here at Westminster and addressed everything from the Fundamentalism, labor abuses, the Great Depression, World War II, the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, the Arms Race, the struggle for justice and inclusion for gay and lesbian Presbyterians to name a few.

I believe we are living in our own defining moment. So today I'd like to offer three snapshots from the week past that have stirred in my conscience and are, for me, the backdrop for this Mitzvah Day. First snapshot: a rough week for America on the world stage. The abuses in Iraq of Iraqi prisoners by American soldiers and then the revenge of Iraqi insurgents upon an innocent American civilian is profoundly disturbing.

It reminded me of the opening of *Saving Private Ryan* in which American soldiers are landing on the Normandy beaches being slaughtered by the German infantry as the Americans came ashore. But once the Americans gain the upper hand they then slaughter the Germans in their gun nests and fortified positions.

The point is everybody loses in war. The tragedy of violence and bloodshed transcends the "reasons" for war. Biblical scholar Walter Wink who is coming to Chautauqua this summer is right: the idea that violence can redeem or settle the score for the act of violence that precipitated it is not only wrong, it is diametrically opposed to the teaching of Jesus. Yet this is the basis of our own and most nations' military and foreign policy.

Shift with me to the second snapshot: the annual United Way luncheon. Seven of us from Westminster including our WECP co-directors and some teachers attended Thursday at the Convention Center. The luncheon celebrated the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Success By Six – a landmark, state-wide program in which Buffalo is leading the way.

Westminster member Trudy Mollenburg, with lots of help, has been serving as the point person and voice for progressive early childhood policies and practices.

The keynote speaker at the luncheon was Dr. Bruce Perry known world-wide for his studies and research on the affects on children of witnessing and experiencing trauma and violence. He is a strong advocate for early childhood programs and policies.

After hearing Dr. Perry talk I came away almost as depressed as I was with the situation in Iraq. You see, Bruce Perry says that we are a child-illiterate society. What he means is we are forgetting how to raise our children. We are not passing on the very values and behaviors in child-rearing that our children need to grow into strong, healthy adults.

He documents this with statistical information and stories. For example, whereas not that long ago the average person was raised interacting daily with forty persons, today the average number of what he calls primary persons in the life of a child is three. And forty percent of that child's time is spent not interacting at all but watching television.

Community is a thing of the past. Yet, community is the milk, the lifeblood of child-rearing. Without it children are greatly at risk for impaired brain development, substance addiction, promiscuity, and violence. Dr. Perry actually said, if we persist we will be in danger of becoming extinct as a species. The irony is we are society that knows better and has the resources to prevent our self-destruction.

Now shift with me to the third snapshot – a presentation by Jackie Maxwell, artistic director of the Shaw Festival Thursday night at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery. Ms. Maxwell has been on the job for a year. Her predecessor shaped the Shaw Festival into a theater of international acclaim.

She talked with us about what it is like coming into a healthy, thriving institution. She talked about the challenge of not getting stale relying on old programming.

When someone in our group asked her how she managed to do that she said this:

The guiding spirit of the Shaw Festival is George Bernard Shaw and his motto: question everything. If you think it's right question it. If you think its new and strange or comfortable question it. If it's social custom or oral tradition or the popular thing to do question it anyway.

'Living in today's world,' Ms. Maxwell said, 'makes me realize how relevant and urgent our work in the theater is. Hopefully, people who come to our productions leave with a willingness to be open to a different way of seeing and doing things.'

'And in that openness maybe they will find a new perspective that will challenge the forces of fear and apathy and darkness that suffocates relationships and families and places of work.'

That same evening in the spirit of Ms. Maxwell's presentation Gail Johnstone, President of the Community Foundation who I saw at the United Way luncheon earlier in the day said to me, "we have to do something." How about if you and I call a meeting of concerned people in our community to consider how we can raise our response even higher to Dr. Perry's dire predictions. 'You're on,' I said.

Three snapshots: the senseless violence of war; the dire predictions of a child advocate for the future of the human species, and a theater director's passion using the arts to question the world around us and the forces of darkness within and about us.

What do they have to do with Mitzvah Day?

Jesus promised his disciples that he would not leave them orphaned. He said he would send the paraclete, the Holy Spirit to be their guide and teacher. To help them remember what he taught them when they faced hard situations in life.

The Book of Revelation today envisions a new world, where the nations are healed, the leaders of the nations walk in the light of God's truth, and the peoples of the nations honor and respect one another.

If the church is about anything it is about standing up to our defining moments. Not letting lethargy or bad news paralyze us. Not letting fear and intimidation stop us in our tracks.

Saving the human race does not rest upon our shoulders. God is in charge. Our job is to look and listen for the spirit of Jesus by our side, his voice reminding us what to do when we are confused or depressed or feeling helpless.

Nor is it up to us to figure out how everybody is going to get along, how such a diverse and complex human family can learn to work together instead of killing each other and self-destructing.

God's vision that a new world of cooperation and peace is on the way is sufficient. Our task is to be agents of change and instruments of reconciliation in God's hands. God will use us if we stop, take the focus off ourselves and listen for the voice of the Holy Spirit leading us like a trusted tour guide in a strange city.

That's what all this has to do with Mitzvah Day. Mitzvah Day will not end the abuse of prisoners of war; it will not change government policies and society's practices raising children.

But it will do what Jackie Maxwell of the Shaw Festival says the best of her plays does: it will give us a new perspective on how we are living our lives. It will give others a new perspective on how they regard Jews and Muslims and Christians. It will be even a small step toward that new world Revelation says is on the way.

The beauty and truth and spirit of this day will, if you let it, weave a thread of hope and empowerment into your own life. While the human family waits for that new world promised to us others will see in your living and hear in your voice God's vision for the healing of the nations. Whatever else you "do" as a professional or student or business person that is God's purpose for your life.

Today, we take our turn in the rower's seat against the stream of what is popular and easy and destructive in our world. The river is wide and deep, the current is strong. We will need to rest after today, then take our turn again another day.

But there is nothing God would rather have this congregation do this morning than link arms with our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters – making the new world, the new community visible wherever our Mitzvah teams go this morning.

That new world and community comes not with force of arms or revenge through violence. It comes when regular folks like us honor what is good and true and just – sometimes at great expense and sacrifice to themselves, most often in small, gentle and earnest acts of caring. Amen.