

When I was in college I took a class on Middle Eastern politics  
and in just one short semester

I was an expert on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

For years I was a big supporter of the Palestinian cause, of the Intifada,  
and I was a vocal critic of Israel.

In fact, if you were to dig through my old college newspaper  
you would find a picture of me from 1991 with a Braves hat  
on my head and a Palestinian flag draped over my shoulders.

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Last weekend I saw things very differently when I woke up to the news  
that Hamas had invaded Israel, had massacred innocent people,  
and launched over 2,000 missiles at them.

Where I saw Israel as the clear villain when I was 21, now it was Hamas.  
And all of the historical complexity took a back seat  
to the horror of what was happening.

Hamas was the villain now, and the villain needed to be destroyed.

My 21-year old self would be shocked  
at how my 54-year old self saw the world.

But what sadly connects my younger & older selves is this deep,  
emotional desire to identify the villain that must be defeated,  
the monster who must be slain.

In times of violence or deep conflict,  
my first impulse is to see the enemy as less than human.

32 years ago it was Israel. Last weekend it was Hamas.

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Now I know I'm not alone in looking at the world this way.

Humans are a tribal species.

There is something in us that seeks not only to protect our own tribe,  
but to see other tribes as a single, faceless enemy.

And there I was last weekend, doing it again,  
watching the terrorist attack on Israel,  
picturing the same monstrous, faceless enemy that I saw  
after the attacks on 9/11,  
the one we evoke when we call our countries  
to wage war on one another,  
the same faceless enemy we imagined as we lynched black men,  
as we banished native American and African-American people  
from their homes and property.

Because it is always easier to kill a faceless enemy  
than one who has eyes to see us, and a mouth to cry for mercy.

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Let me be clear - this is not just the sin of "my people,"  
is not just the sin of "white male hegemony," or whatever.

Dehumanizing our enemies is the sin of us all.

Male and female. Left & Right. Every continent, every race, every age.

What is the flaw in critical theory,  
this lens being applied so often right now,  
if not its attempt to take away our faces,  
to see one another only through the lens of race or gender or class?

It's the same failure as seeing one another through the lens  
of religion or nation or party -  
the sin of using a lens to take away our faces, our choices,  
a lens that keeps us from seeing the UNIQUE image of God  
in another person  
and instead reduces him or her to their anonymous, faceless tribe.

Last weekend, in my shock and outrage and sympathy,  
I was all too ready for Israel to do what it has now started:  
to lay siege to an entire people,  
to sacrifice any Palestinian life in order to destroy Hamas,.

Because all I saw last weekend were faceless monsters.



28 centuries ago, God called a powerful and brilliant prophet  
to deliver a message to this same Holy Land.

God sent Isaiah a vision of how his people should respond  
to the threats they were facing from enemies on their border,  
and even greater enemies to the East.

Isaiah was NOT a pacifist.

He was engaged in the political, cultural, and military realities of his time.

Today we heard one of his visions,  
and some of you probably recognized it  
because the Church proclaims it at the graves of our loved ones.

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples  
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines...

And he will destroy on this mountain  
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,  
the sheet that is spread over all nations;  
he will swallow up death forever.

Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces,  
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth



It's funny how scripture reveals itself to you over the years.

I don't know how many times I've read this at a funeral,  
but I didn't really get what it was saying until this week.

God sent Isaiah a vision of our shared humanity,  
and a revelation that God's ultimate plan for every one of us -  
enemy and friend, oppressor and victim - is his plan of redemption.

Look closely at our reading:

A feast of rich food for ALL peoples, of well-aged wines strained clear.

The shroud of death that is cast over ALL of us, taken away forever.

The Lord God wiping away the tears from ALL faces,  
and the disgrace of his people taken away from ALL the earth.

There are no faceless enemies in God's final reality,  
no monsters beyond redemption,  
no groups or individuals whose humanity is taken away  
by the accidents of their birth or the affiliations of their hearts.



Instead, God proclaims that one day  
the people of Hamas and the people of Israel  
will be together at the feast of rich foods.  
That the people of Judah and Syria and Babylon  
will share the cup of well-aged wines strained clear.  
And the deeply divided people of America...we will be there, too.



But until that day comes, what do we do as followers of Jesus?  
How do we bear witness to Christ  
in a world where sometimes violence has to be met with violence?  
God is giving us Isaiah's vision not just for quiet graveside funerals  
but for times of conflict, for times of war and terror and violence.  
God's vision understands the reality of violence,  
the necessity of standing up to the attacks of our enemies,  
but God remembers that there is no enemy without a face.  
No enemy who is not human.  
No enemy who is not also loved by God.  
That there is not one of us whose tears of shame will not be wiped away,  
whose shroud of disgrace will not be destroyed,  
so that one day we may all proclaim together, "Lo, this is our God."



Holy Trinity, this is why the Church is still needed today.

This is why we gather. This is why we give.

Because the Church is singularly equipped to stand in the face  
of division and violence and proclaim Isaiah's vision  
that no one is without a face, no one is forever lost,  
that we are all unique and beloved creations of God.

We give so that we can proclaim,

“God's love is for every single one of us. Even our enemies.”

To stand in the midst of warfare and destruction in one place,  
in the midst of injustice and hatred in another,  
to stand in the place of political division and broken families  
and adolescent struggles...  
to stand in the midst of all these painful places and proclaim  
that everyone involved is created in the image of God,  
that every one of us in this fight has a face and a story.

We give so that we can gather and teach our children

the same lesson that we ourselves must learn over and over and over -  
that God's vision is not of victory over our enemies,  
but of unity with one another through his divine mercy.

And we give so that we can gather to celebrate

God's first step in drawing us all to that holy feast -  
the day when Jesus rose from the grave,  
conquering the power of violence and death,  
and stepping out into the light of resurrection morning.

Amen.