The Perils of Crying Peace

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Micah 3:5-12
Matthew 23:1-12

What's wrong with crying, "Peace"?

It's something I'm inclined to do. Over thirty-odd years of ministry, when the specter of war (or worse, war itself) have arisen, I have called for peace. I've also called for justice. I've called for negotiated resolution of conflicts. I've called for peace.

What's wrong with that?

It's probably clear that I don't think there is anything wrong with that. I don't think Micah was criticizing what I do – which might be hubris on my part. I think Micah was criticizing other prophets who were supporting the wealthy and powerful when they acted against the poor and powerless. Micah was a fan of peace – "They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks…" comes from chapter 4 – but he was not a fan of deceit or of official corruption. In this chapter Micah relentlessly accused the prophets, the priesthood, and the civil rulers of bribery and corruption, and he accused them of claiming that everything was all right as they did it.

If everything was all right for them, it seems, they said everything was all right for everybody. The problem is that everything wasn't all right for everybody. There were people who had nothing to put in their mouths while their leaders were ruling by bribes.

That was a problem. It was aggravated by the fact that the prophets, those whose job it was to remind people of God's guiding call and will, were avoiding the truth.

Engineers know what happens when people ignore truths, especially when they ignore more expensive truths. Engineers warned in advance about the failure that doomed the space shuttle *Challenger* in 1986. Other engineers warned about the safety of the deep-sea submarine Titan, which was crushed by deep ocean pressures three years ago.

What's true in engineering is also true in human relationships. The saying "truth hurts" has some validity, but lies hurt a lot more. The most well-intentioned falsehood – which is the ever-popular "Oh, no, it doesn't bother me" – can build into resentment and anger. It might not be simpler to have an earnest, honest conversation with a friend or family member about something that rankles, but it might address a problem. Unaddressed problems don't get resolved in engineering or in human relationships or in larger communities or with God.

We are not going to deal with the impact of climate change by refusing to measure it. We are not going to reduce poverty by misreporting it. We are not going to stop fighting wars by declaring non-existent agreements.

Last weekend I went to the Hawai'i Island Festival of Birds here in Hilo. I hadn't been before and didn't know what to expect. I got to listen to a lot of very smart and very committed people from universities, government agencies, and private nonprofits. The main area of focus this year was the status of Hawai'i's forest birds: the ones I tend to tell stories about week after week.

Their condition is not good. In the ten years since I moved to Hawai'i, populations of some species, including the palila have decreased by ninety percent in the wild. The forest managers and academics have learned a lot about what hasn't worked, or what hasn't worked well enough, and have ideas about new approaches that might work better, such as the release of 'alala on Maui where they are not vulnerable to 'io.

Old ideas. New ideas. What they have in common is the refusal to ignore the problem as if human impact on the environment were negligible. What they have in common is the commitment to preserve a home for these birds in the wild and increase their populations.

It's inspiring and chilling at the same time. But you can't address a problem without acknowledging it; you can't address it effectively without understanding it.

My own relationship with God is founded on realizing I had a problem. On the grand scale of things, it wasn't much of a problem. I'd got arrogant and told off some friends. They got mad, as you'd expect. As you might not expect, I realized that I needed some help with the situation, and I prayed. In that prayer I realized that I'd created the problem. That was the first step. The second was also mine to take, and though it stung, I did it. I apologized. My friends were good enough to accept it, and we remained friends.

Ignoring what keeps you from God – God's forgiveness, grace, and comfort – doesn't help either. Sometimes you've got to acknowledge your arrogance. Sometimes you've got to deal with your hurt. Sometimes you've got to work through your other idols, the things we depend on that aren't God. Unacknowledged, they'll just be barriers. Confronted, they can fall.

Carolyn Sharp writes at Working Preacher, "Are Micah's words uncomfortable for us? Certainly – just as it is uncomfortable when loved ones carry out an intervention with an alcoholic, or when a therapist declines to play along with a client's dysfunctional script. But without truth there can be no repentance and no transformation. Thus, Micah is an invaluable companion for individual believers and for every community that seeks to please God. It is good news indeed that Micah continues to walk with us."

Climate change. The attempts to gain power over information through AI systems (and no, I won't call it "superintelligence"). The horrors of wars. Poverty and homelessness. Public officials who are not held accountable for their misdeeds.

Failing to remember the welfare of my friends and family. Letting anger or arrogance or jealousy or self-interest rule my decisions.

Mistaking the things that keep me comfortable for God.

If I ignore these I cannot do well. If I overlook them I cannot change them. If I call it "peace" when there's still a war of deliberate ignorance going on, the war and the ignorance will continue.

There are perils to crying peace.

Amen.

by Eric Anderson