

In ancient times, the fragile nations of Israel and Judah suffered mightily from the oppression and defeat by Babylon, the current country of Iraq. King Zedekiah, the Hebrew people's king, was caught in constant conflict of pleasing his Babylonian or Egyptian overlords and leading his people. The exile of his people was a magnificent crisis of faith as well as physical, mental, emotional suffering. It is into this kind of time that the prophet Ezekial speaks a word from the LORD.

I sometimes get asked why the church is involved in political, economic, social issues. The Bible is filled with the ways God moves and works in history. We believe in a sovereign God who acts in history not just in disembodied, individual spirits. Psalm 24: 1 declares, "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world and all who live in it." All people, all nations, all the earth belongs to God who created it and works to redeem it desiring healing of the nations and peace. In the midst of the exile of the people of God, Ezekial speaks:

**Ezekiel 17:22-24**

17:22 Thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar; I will set it out. I will break off a tender one from the topmost of its young twigs; I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain.

17:23 On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar. Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind.

17:24 All the trees of the field shall know that I am the LORD. I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree; I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I the LORD have spoken; I will accomplish it.

**2 Corinthians 5:6-10, (11-13), 14-17**

5:6 So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord --

5:7 for we walk by faith, not by sight.

5:8 Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.

5:9 So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him.

5:10 For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.

5:14 For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died.

5:15 And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

5:16 From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once

knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way.

5:17 So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

## **Proclamation of the Word**

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Renee Montagne told the following story this week on NPR:

*The roar of a car bomb has been the prelude to Karim Wasfi's performances of late.*

*The renowned conductor of the Iraqi National Symphony Orchestra has been appearing at the sites of explosions across Baghdad. Just hours after attacks, Wasfi can be seen seated amid ash and rubble in a black suit jacket, long hair combed back, playing his cello. For him, this combination of music and place has become a form of resistance...*

*Karim Wasfi says,*

*"This was an action respecting the souls and the spirits of the fallen ones due to terror around the world — and, of course, Baghdad, because we're living the reality over here," Wasfi says. "The other side chose to turn every element, every aspect of life in Iraq into a battle and into a war zone. I chose to turn every corner of Iraq into a spot for civility, beauty and compassion."*

*Wasfi resides in a well-to-do neighborhood of Baghdad called Mansour, once an enclave of diplomats and private clubs. A deadly attack in Mansour a few weeks ago, an explosion Wasfi narrowly missed, prompted him to take his cello to the streets.*

*Wasfi's close friend Ammar al-Shahbender posted footage of that first performance, in which he performs an original composition titled "Baghdad Mourning Melancholy." In the video, a man in a wheelchair rolls up slowly right next to Wasfi, taking in the unusual moment, while others gather to watch and listen.*

*He says, "Some soldiers were in tears, some shop owners were in tears. Some people were confused," Wasfi remembers. "I was connecting everything: death, spirits, bodies, life. People were supportive. They were appreciating the fact that someone can still at least lead their emotions and spirits towards something beautiful, to rise above the intimidation of improvised death."*

*The video went viral, broadcasting Wasfi's music and message beyond Iraq. His next performance came after a tragedy that affected him personally, when his friend Ammar was himself killed by a car bomb attack. The next morning, Wasfi put on a full white suit and grabbed his cello again.*

*Wasfi state, "Unlike what people think, we have a choice of fighting back," Wasfi says. "We can't just surrender to the impending doom of uncertainty by not functioning. But I think it's an awakening for everybody to make a choice and to choose how they want to live, not how they want to die."*<sup>i</sup>

This cradle of our earliest civilization continues to experience turmoil. Islamic State and factions wreak destruction and death in the ancient land of Babylon where our ancestors in the faith suffered as well. Some like Wasfi are choosing life not death. The defiant act of resistance is a choice. Like others around this world who choose to defy terror and violence with life.

Ezekial speaks into the destruction of Israel and says God is doing a new thing. God is recreating the people. He uses the image of a tender sprig growing into a strong tree. The trees symbolize the nations. He declares that our God is a God who grows life out of destruction. God seeks the well-being of his people. God is the great reverser who takes the weak and vulnerable and makes the tender shoot into a cedar tree, noble and strong. God uses a man and his cello to recreate order, civility, and peace. Instead of a tree of power and greed, it will be a fruitful tree providing shade for the birds and creatures. This cosmic tree of life will flourish.

It is hard to imagine the areas of our world so hard hit by destruction whether it is Iraq, or the inner cities of the US like Baltimore rife with poverty, drugs, and violence being redeemed, made new. It seems God would just chop down the tree or destroy with divine retribution. But Scripture gives witness to God who is a creator, a redeemer, a sustainer of LIFE. God is a God of new creation. God wills that all our interactions- social, political, environmental, international- be governed by fidelity, wisdom, and overarching commitment to life that allows us to participate in the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.<sup>ii</sup>

Let's be honest. It does not look like LIFE is always flourishing. Paul reminds us here that people who believe in a sovereign God, walk by faith and not by sight. Like Wasfi who steps into the ravages of a car bombing and plays music that weaves the emotions of his people: mourning, sorrow, and even hope in the midst of rubble. It is a small act done with great courage standing on the side of life against death.

In our gospel lesson (Mark 4:26-34) today, Jesus tells a parable of a tiny mustard seed growing into a large bush providing shelter for the vulnerable and living things. Jesus says that is how the kingdom of God grows from tiny mustard seeds and small acts of beauty, kindness, compassion, and love. The kingdom of God is among us Jesus tells us. We walk by faith and not by sight. As people who follow Jesus of Nazareth, we are called to stand on the side of life, too, for all creation, not just our party, our clan, our tribe, our nation, or even just for Christians, but for all the earth. The earth is the Lord's and all who live in it (Psalm 24:1). Jesus had kingdom eyes, seeing the world as God intends it to be.

Faith is like a pair of glasses that help us see as God intends. In the same way Scripture is a set of glasses to help us comprehend God's ways.

Paul has the eyes of faith. When he writes this letter he describes reality. Paul reminds us that Christ died for sinners in order to make us fully alive. Christ died so we might live for him. That is what drove Paul to the edges of the earth as he knew it. To share the good news that Christ died for all so we might live for him. Paul had been given the gift of kingdom eyes, a pair of glasses that saw the world as God intends.

It was kingdom eyes that made Paul declare that there is neither Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free- a radical statement, not a party line, but a kingdom vision. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Paul sees everyone as someone who can be a new creation. So in God's eyes there is no longer Sunni or Shiite, Republican or Democrat, rich or poor, gay or straight, Christian or not, for Christ died for all so that all might live for him. For God created each one in His image, male and female God created them. Paul sees people with kingdom eyes, with potential. Or to put it a different way, while Jesus loves me this I know, it is also true that Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world, red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight.

Paul writes it this way, "We no longer regard anyone from the human point of view... If anyone is in Christ, he/she is a new creation. The old has gone; the new has come!" God, as sovereign Lord can defy what we see to accomplish His purposes. The kingdom of God is like that, like a small, vulnerable child, a tender sprig, a tiny mustard seed that grows into a great shrub providing protection, food, and peace.

How can a little bush do that? It sounds just as silly, just as profound, as a orchestra conductor playing cello in the aftermath of a car bombing, choosing life over death. It seems just as impossible as God taking a tender sprig of a defeated people, Israel, and making of them a strong cedar, a great nation.

For God is doing a new thing! It may not look like it, but it is true, because the Bible gives witness to it. What we see is not always true. We may look around, and say the Gospel is not true. It looks like sin has won. When it appears that evil and terror are winning, we walk by faith anyway. When it appears that the car bombers have the upper hand, we walk by faith anyway. When we have kingdom eyes we see others the way God does.

Just this week in my hometown of York, SC, Muslim residents of a little community called Islamville hosted my clergy friends for a tour and a meal together. Last month, the 200 residents were afraid when a Tennessee man threatened to bomb a similar community in New York. This man made a trip to Greenville to meet with a secret militia according to the FBI. Terrorists can be white, Christian, and American, too. This group of African American US citizens have been harassed. Crosses have been thrown in their yards (luckily none have been burned yet), and gunfire has been discharged outside the gates of the community.

The Sheriff, a member of my home church, a Christian, vowed to protect them. Sam McGregor, my Presbyterian Pastor friend, called upon local clergy to stand with these Muslim neighbors. Sam, by the way, was active in our PSA while at Clemson in the 1980s. Last week Muslims and Christians (mostly Presbyterian) in York, SC, sat down to eat together, and talk about normal things such as grandchildren, favorite restaurants, fashion, life, a small glimpse of the peaceable kingdom, the tender sprigs of hope made real. God is a God who stands on the side of life, and so do we who follow the Prince of Peace, Jesus.<sup>iii</sup>

What is God calling us to do to witness to the Kingdom of God and Jesus Christ?

We have a choice. We walk by faith anyway believing that the Spirit is making all things new, taking the tender shoots of justice and mercy, and growing them into kingdom trees. We walk by faith, not by sight, in deep reverence before the Lord who made heaven and earth and all who live in it, striving to love all our neighbors as God intends. And all the trees of the fields, all nations, will know that the Lord is God! The Lord declares it.

May God's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

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<sup>i</sup> Renee Montagne, "Amid Violence in Baghdad, A Musician Creates A One-man vigil," June 08, 2015 at npr.org.

<sup>ii</sup> Katheryn Darr, "The Book of Ezekial; Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," The New Interpreter's Bible (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 1252.

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.heraldonline.com/news/local/news-columns-blogs/andrew-dys/article21180297.html>

<http://www.heraldonline.com/news/local/news-columns-blogs/andrew-dys/article21491304.html>

<http://www.heraldonline.com/news/local/article23815702.html>