

Summer Series Intro

July 3, 2022

Peaceful Endings; Peace to the End

Ecclesiastes 3:1-10, Deuteronomy 30:11-14

Deuteronomy 30:11-14

Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

The Revelation of John 21:1-4

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

'See, the home of God is among mortals.

God will dwell with them;

they will be God's peoples,

and God will be with them;

they will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away.'

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Peaceful Endings; Peace to the End

Deuteronomy 30:11-14, Ecclesiastes 3:1-10 and the Revelation of John 21:1-4

Susanne and I have entitled our summer series for 2022 with a dual heading: “Peaceful Endings; Peace to the End”. Today I will offer some background to the process of how we got here and a roadmap for the summer; all sprinkled with a few illustrations. Hopefully, all the Sundays of this series will be grounded with humility, scripture, theology, and maybe even some science.

The Peaceful Endings saga emerged at a worship committee meeting earlier this year. Russia’s incursion into Ukraine was months old with uncertainty how long it might go on. Our Worship Deacon, Don Klaassen, asked a very good question. “What does it mean to be a peace church with this particular war continuing as well as the countless other civil wars and occupations about which we do not hear?” It is an important reflection. Mennonites have practiced peace theology for centuries with it often taking very different nuances. Let me wade into the historical waters.

Slide: Dirk Willems (the classic icon)

In the early years of the movement, mid 16th century, there was a vibrant evangelical impulse amongst our Anabaptist forbearers. In the midst of disease, impending war between Protestants and Catholics, and hunger for “peaceful endings” some held out hope that the life and teachings of Jesus could make a difference. The more people who knew of the Sermon on the Mount the better, and it might make a troubled world better. In the slide you are seeing we behold Dirk Willems. We listened to his story in the children’s time, so we understand the evangelical and peace minded intent of major branches of our Mennonite ancestors. The persecutions of following decades took a significant toll on the Mennonite communities, and the ardour of such evangelical peace filled witness lost its luster. Peace theology of subsequent centuries amounted to maintaining a peace within the community of faith; peace to those beyond the religious community was essentially abandoned.¹ It is a simplification of the historical record, I know.

Slide: MCC Logo

¹ See *Anabaptist and Mission* in general and particularly N. van der Zipp “From Anabaptist Missionary Congregations to Mennonite Seclusion”; (Kitchener, Ontario: Herald Press, 1984), pp. 119-136.

The two World Wars of the 20th century and a shrinking globe brought with it newer wrinkles in the evolution of peace theology. Organizations like Mennonite Central Committee, Mennonite Disaster Service, Mennonite Voluntary Service, Christian Peacemaker Teams, prison ministries and Thrift stores cropped up. The *More With Less Cookbook*, the *Upsidedown Kingdom*, the Peace Tax fund movement, protests to nuclear weapons also happened. Each of these 20th century movements have invited a more active engagement in peacemaking-- engaging those beyond our walls. In some cases, it was directed to impoverished people at home or abroad, and in other cases it was directed to the Military Industrial Complex or government policy makers.

It should also be noted that some Mennonites took active engagement of society in a more militarized direction. The “Selbst Schutz” (Mennonite National Guard) and a relatively high participation rate of Mennonites in WWII as part of active duty are also a part of this 20th and early 21st century peace-making equation. I know, this brief summery of some 20th and 21st initiatives is a simplification of peace to the end in the last 110 years. But we must forge ahead.

Slide: Thomas Müntzer statue

A lesser stream of peace theology within the Mennonite world is found in apocalyptic forces that have periodically arisen. The ugly tale of 19th century Klaus Epp leading a group of Mennonites into eastern Russia awaiting the 2nd coming of Christ is one such case. The 16th century preaching of Thomas Müntzer (the picture of him on the screen comes from Leipzig Germany) convinced peasants to make an armed revolt against the better equipped ruling elites; it led to a slaughter of the peasants with no appearance of the promised Christ.

One of my Canadian clan asked me if we were preaching about the Apocalypse. “No, I replied, “is that what you are hearing in the religious circles in which you move.” “Absolutely”, he responded. I asked him what that might mean in the context of these churches. “The end of the world”, he replied. In my recent time visiting relatives in the good old USA tele-evangelist could be heard describing the end times and encouraging renewed piety, and donations to their ministry in order to keep their souls safe and the mission rolling. Lest we had thought apocalyptic peace making had itself ascended to the heavens, it is still very real to many and an increasingly attractive option. Pandemic strictions, factory outsourcing, inflation, income disparity between the rich and poor, disinformation campaigns, political disillusionment, school shootings, violence in the streets, etc..., have all contributed to a time in which there is widespread fear and dis-ease among many.

Slide: Peace in the Sand

I raise the issues of wars and rumours of wars, a brief Mennonite historical survey of peace, and the resurgence of apocalyptic ideology to highlight the very important theological conversation which needs to happen. If we are going to be people engaged in fostering compassion and questioning fear, it is good for us to clarify some of the scripture and theology which informs our opinions. If we are expecting that God is the midst of creating a new heaven and new earth among us, rather than being content to watch it go up in flames, it is good for us to talk about why we believe such things. Take the whole MAID conversation, and that topic begins a section of overview to the summer series.

Last Sunday we read in the joys and concerns that Connie Gutwin died peacefully on Monday June 20th, with medical assistance. On the front page of the Friday, June 24 (2022) edition of the Saskatoon Star Phoenix in very large font we read: ‘It is unacceptable...It is dangerous’—Conservatives seek pause on extension of medically assisted death for those with mental illness”². I have no qualms regarding Connie’s decision and I think the question of the Conservative’s is a good one. My point here is that we, as a congregation, have not really talked about peaceful endings in the midst enduring suffering, MAID in general, or the manner in which personal circumstances shape the way we make theological sense of very emotional end of life questions. It is a piece of a larger concern of making peace at the end of our lives. Tentatively slated for July 17.

Next week we will explore Peace to the End // Peaceful Endings as it shapes our views of seemingly intractable war using the situation of Ukraine as a case study. Do we simply do nothing in these arenas of war trusting God to sort it out? Are we comfortable with apocalypse in these areas trusting God to sort the sheep from the goats? Are we drawn to engagement in such conflicts, and if so what are redemptive ways in which we might get involved? Tentatively slated for July 10.

July 24th and July 31st are two Sundays Susanne will either speak or preside as a point person for a guest speaker. What does a peaceful ending look like in relation to the issues of the climate? One title for that Sunday tossed about in our worship meeting was “Climate Crisis, Climate Hope”. The other Sunday of those two we would consider peace to the end as it regards colonialism and racism. Those are really two huge topics and not ones upon which we all agree. It would

² Ryan Tumilty, “Conservatives Seek Pause on Extension of Medically Assisted Death for Those with Mental Illness” (Saskatoon Star Phoenix), page NP 1.

be a mistake, I would say, for the church NOT to wade into such waters and offer a perspective.

The first Sundays of August we will have a series within a series on John's Revelation. The Revelation of John is often poorly applied to Christian living. I have learned much from my Mennonite teachers, and the people they reference. John's Revelation was given and written for active and suffering Christians as encouragement to hold to the way of Christ. On that point, for example, the term "apocalypse" doesn't really mean what typically comes to mind for us. The number of ways English translators have rendered "ἀποκαλύπτω" or its cognates is truly revealing in itself. Here are some of the options: uncover, to reveal, to be disclosed, to be plainly significant, distinctly declared, announced, to be discovered in true character.³ This comes from the most trusted lexicon scholarly translators use. In this respect, the Apocalypse of John is a revealing of a God who is not far from us, as Deuteronomy 30 puts. It is a revealing of a God who brings the heavenly temple down to earth amidst turbulence. It is a revealing of a God who makes something new as the old passes away. It is a non-violent lamb which brings this renewal. Peace to the end; peaceful endings.

As example of this I want to close with a reflection on retirement. What makes for peaceful endings as one retires or contemplates retirement. I know of at least four of this community full on in retirement mode, and there are probably a whole host itching to retire. What does peace to the end // peaceful endings mean in such a situation. I am grateful to Gordon for his thoughts.

Slide: Happy Retirement?

Gordon Peters

About 3 years ago, after being asked by many people, "when are you retiring?" I had no answer for them. I was enjoying my job and mostly, things were going well. Shortly after that though, one day the idea came into my head that when I reach 65, I will retire. That still seemed a long time away, so I never gave it much more thought. Although, something did change within me. Some of the uncertainty about the future seemed to not be there anymore. I had an end date for one part of my life. Not sure what spurred that on, but a number of things changed around my work place and I decided I did not need to be there forever.

My former supervisor was not looking forward that date. However, when she decided to leave the company, it confirmed that I had made the right call.

³ *The Analytical Greek Lexicon Revised*, edited by Harold K. Moulton (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978): p. 42.

When a new supervisor was hired, I informed him very quickly of my long range plans. He immediately began planning on life at the office without me. A part time worker was hired on as a permanent employee and it was my job to make sure she was brought into all aspects of my work. We've had almost a year to work on that, so that transition has been smooth and steady.

The idea of not going into the office come August feels kind of strange, but not scary. I still have a small bookkeeping business of my own that I will keep operating. I have some travel plans, and if what other people tell me is true, I am curious how my new crazy busy life will evolve. Since our granddaughter is 2 provinces over to the east, that will not be a big part of my life. Which means other opportunities will come around here. I am looking forward to the change in my life and being able to spend more time with Geraldine, I just hope she will too.

How do we make for peace filled closure to occupation holding vocation?
How do we make for peace inspired endings to conflict—external and internal?
How do we make for peace as we recognize climate concerns and colonialism?
How do we make for peace at the conclusions of life?

We hope to live with these important concerns in the weeks ahead. Amen

Patrick Preheim, co-pastor Nutana Park Mennonite Church