

“Peace Maker”

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Text: Isaiah 9:2-7, Luke 1:67-79

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Zechariah (a Temple priest) was the father of John the Baptist. On the day of John’s circumcision and official naming, Zechariah spoke prophetic words about the future. Words not about his son on that important family day, but about a mighty saviour descended from the house of King David. A saviour that was spoken of by prophets from of old, he said. This saviour, he said, would bring peace....peace in different ways. He said, “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them.” A person who is redeemed is granted release by another. Granted freedom. And to have more freedom is to have more peace. A saviour saves another from their trap—whatever the trap may be. To be freed from a trap is to know more peace. In this prophecy the trap was described on one level as a political and military one. We hear that this saviour would save God’s people “from our enemies and the hands of all who hate us.” That hope is repeated a few verses later: “rescue from the hands of our enemies.” The people of Judea in those days were a subjugated people under Roman occupation. Many hoped the longed-for Messiah would rid them of the Romans, and to have the Romans gone would bring peace. So the hoped for peace in Zechariah’s words were in part a yearned for peace in human relationships.

But Zechariah also spoke of a hoped-for peace in their relationship with God. A relationship marred / disrupted by human sin. Zechariah said that this mighty saviour...this redeemer...this king of David’s line would fulfill God’s promises to people, show mercy on a people in need, and restore the strained relationship between God and humans by offering forgiveness. There is no peace where there is a broken relationship. This saviour, bringing forgiveness and restoring the relationship of God with humanity, would bring peace to that relationship. Then Zechariah—after extolling the advent of this saviour in quite a long speech—returned his attention to his infant son on the day of his circumcision...the day of his naming. “And you” he said, “you will go before the Lord and prepare his way.”

Zechariah here spoke of three places peace was absent for his people, and by extension can be absent for the people of the world. Where there is a disrupted relationship with God there can be no peace. Where there is a disrupted relationship among people there can be no peace. And when people let the feeling of being bound and trapped lay heavy upon them there can be no peace. Zechariah said that it feels like sitting in darkness and like living under the shadow of death....and there can be no peace when life feels like that. And then, Zechariah here—with great insight—observes that when we do not know peace because of these things then that lack of peace can impede our relationship with God. Zechariah said: so God is going to send a rescuer, so these things we fear will be lifted, and peace returned, that

we might serve God in holiness and righteousness all our days. God will bring peace so our thoughts will not be distracted from God by worries and fears. To those who sit in darkness, Zechariah said, comes a saviour who will guide our feet into the way of peace...these three kinds of peace. Isaiah said the name of this guide will be Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father.....Prince of Peace.

Jesus was a prince of peace. He was a promoter of an attitude of peace, encouraging us to be practitioners of peace, for ourselves and others. Our sense of peace can be disrupted by worry. It's something we do to ourselves. Jesus asked, "but can your worrying change your life in even a small way, like enabling you to add an hour—just an hour—to the length of your life? No? So do not worry. You are in God's care." Be at peace. Jesus lived in that time of military occupation, and many of his fellow Jews hoped the Messiah would bring that occupation to an end, bringing peace. But Jesus' route to peace with a different attitude. He said, "render unto Caesar what is Caesar's." Give them what they want. Then he said, leave that behind, don't get wound up by the occupation. Shift your focus. Focus on God. "Render unto God what is God's." And then, there are those who can have no peace because they truly are suffering. We are just wrapping up a study of the Letter of James. In it he says, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress." Be redeemers yourself, freeing people from the traps they suffer in. When we relieve suffering we bring peace. And what did Jesus say about that? In the Sermon on the Mount he said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God." We can know more peace when it gives perspective to how we think about our lives. We can know more peace when we become its ambassadors to those around us in life.

Marguerite ("Maggy") Barankitse (pronounced Barren-Keet-See) was born in East Burundi in Africa in 1957, a country where people feel strong allegiances to their tribal heritage: either Hutu or Tutsi. Maggy disagreed with the alienation and discrimination and the pain that happened all the time in her country over these ethnic differences. She dreamed of a national harmony that would lay these antipathies to rest. She demonstrated her commitment to this cause by adopting 7 children: 4 Hutu and 3 Tutsi. She was fired from her teaching job because she spoke out against the discrimination practiced in the school. She went on to work in the office of the local Catholic bishop. In 1993 a group of armed Tutsis descended on the bishop's home because it was rumoured the bishop was hiding Hutu's. Maggy whisked two dozen children into hiding. The marauders captured Maggie, tied her up and demanded that she tell them where the children were. She refused. So they forced her to watch them kill Hutu's, saying "now will you tell us where the children are?" She refused. She watched 72 Hutu's killed. In the end they spared her life because she was Tutsi, and the children remained safe.

How does one deal with such a horrific trauma? It can rob you of your inner peace for a lifetime. The insecurity of living in a nation embroiled in a civil war for 15 years can leave you in fear, robbing everyone of peace. It can make you question God in a way that can also rob you of peace. Maggy said,

““They killed my friends, my neighbors — 72 people in front of me. If I was not a Christian, if I didn’t believe that there was a reason to continue to believe, I would have committed suicide because I lost everything.” She helped bury the dead and then went on to care for the children who lost their parents that day.

What did Maggy do? She started Maison Shalom (Peace House): a residence for orphan children who survived violence. She started with the children she saved that day. But it wasn’t just a place of care. Maison Shalom had a purpose: to help people be released from tribal hatred. To effect that she opens Maison Shalom to both Hutu and Tutsi children. Her thinking is this: if they grow up together, form friendships, support each other in school, then through these experiences they will learn that tribal heritage shouldn’t and won’t divide them. Rather than living in a big orphanage building the children live in small groups in houses, Hutu’s and Tutsi’s together. What started as one house in time grew into a village of more than 300 houses. In time the village came to include a bank, a hotel, shops, and a training center that taught sewing, computer skills, auto mechanics. They had a hospital, a swimming pool and a movie theatre. Once a resident child became an adult, they could receive a parcel of land and a home if they committed to give back to Maison Shalom by working to support the community. In the school most of the teachers are graduates. She also obtained 350 scholarships to help youth attend university. To date, over 30,000 children and youth have benefited from the programs of Maison Shalom.

How could one person do this? She says, “I am a Christian and I know that our Christian vocation is love. I believe God is God and God will help me. Maison Shalom was born to say no to war, yes to love and yes to the lives of children.” Reconciliation and peace are a big part of the culture of the community. After all, Hutu children are there because their parents were killed by Tutsi’s...and now the Hutu children live with Tutsi’s. The same is true the other way around. Tutsi’s are there because their parents were killed by Hutu’s, and now they are living with Hutu’s. But the children are raised to believe that we are all created in the image of God, that God has created us all as equal, that they are all equally children of God. I can think of no story that better reflects Zarchariah’s words: “By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” Recall that verse I quoted from the Letter to James: “religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” This is how one single poor woman, a fired teacher, in an ethnically divided war-torn African country, who suffered a most horrific trauma, found her way on the path to peace. The international honours she has been given are beyond count.

Things changed in 2015 for Maggy. She was famously outspoken against the then president of the country which resulted in her name being put on a kill list. She escaped to Rwanda and became a refugee there. But then the blessing in the midst of the crisis. Maison Shalom now operates in that country where she works to help some of the 90,000 Burundian refugees in Rwanda. The Opus Prize is a faith-based humanitarian award that comes out of the Roman Catholic Church. At the time Maggy was presented with this award it was said, "Here is living proof of what one person can do to bring peace." And at that time Maggy said, "I know in my heart that evil will never have the last word."

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.