

## From Silence to Salaam A Reflection on Contemplative Peacebuilding

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*For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest. Isaiah 62:1  
Jesus came near and saw the city, he wept over it saying, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hid from your eyes." Luke 19:41f.*

Isaiah sees injustice and invokes Jerusalem, refusing to keep silent. Jesus sees Jerusalem and laments our refusal to see what makes peace. Jerusalem, a central and symbolic place whose name embraces peace -- *salaam/shalom* – embodies violence reverberating around the world.

*Salaam* is Arabic and *shalom* is Hebrew for peace although they hold more holistic meaning than "peace." In Arabic the greeting everywhere is *Salaam Aleykum* (the peace of God be with you) with the reply *Aleykum Salaam* (God's peace be with you).

A Christian worship tradition is to "pass the peace" with the greeting "The Peace of Christ be with you" with the reply "And also with you." Jesus longs for us to embody Christ's peace and truly "see what makes for peace."

The heart of peace, as I have come to know it, is a contemplative heart. Contemplation, from the Latin *contemplatio* and *templum*, is deep devotional looking upon something with our hearts and minds to see the sacred and to seek *salaam*. It is to see God's love for the world and to see the face of Christ in the other. Contemplatives know that we must be silent and listen with the heart as much as the head and that we see and speak from the heart as much as the head. A gift of the contemplative heart is to have a disciplined sense for when to be silent and when to break silence in solidarity with suffering people seeking *salaam*.

I have been listening and reflecting on "the things that make for peace" while Marg and I spend five months (Dec 2014 through April 2015) at the Collegeville Institute of Saint John's Abbey in Minnesota. My first *work* here is to *pray* with the monastic community at 7:00 a.m., noon, and 7:00 p.m. The Benedictine monastic way of *Ora et Labora* (pray and work) offers contemplative wisdom for a world of war. My further *work* here is to reflect on what God has set before me over four decades of Mennonite pastoral and peace ministry and envision what I see God still setting before me even in retirement for *Contemplative Just Peacebuilding*. Over my vocational life I have slowly become aware that at heart I am an activist becoming a contemplative activist becoming an active contemplative called to pastoral and peace ministry.

Last fall I was in Iraqi Kurdistan with Christian Peacemaker Teams. As I reflect on being there I have come to see what makes for peace more deeply as a contemplative interweaving of silence, seeing, and speaking in solidarity with suffering people seeking Salaam.

I began writing this contemplative reflection on the mid-January day when we celebrate Martin Luther King's birthday. As my heart and head returned to Iraq, my heart and head also turned to King who helped us "see what makes for peace" in the context of an earlier war also waged on the basis of lies and myths. On April 4, 1967, King spoke a defining word at Riverside Church in New York City, in his sermon, "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence." He prophetically dared to break silence to help America "see" our triple-sin of militarism, materialism, and racism. King said that this three-fold sin reveals a nation "approaching spiritual death" manifested by waging war on those whom we label "enemy" and dehumanize at home and around the world. Declaring, "A time comes when silence is betrayal," King exposed America's sin not to denounce America but "to save the soul of America." He concluded, "We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. We still have a choice today: nonviolent coexistence or violent co-annihilation." We still face that choice today.

Sadly we celebrate King with a national holiday yet still refuse to "see" the truth of King's life and reason for his death in our warring nation. King knew that speaking-truth-to-power is not without cost and consequence. One year later he was killed on April 4, 1968. More than an assassin's bullet killed King; a powerful military-industrial-intelligence complex meant to silence him. King, like Jesus, knew that the powers-that-be demand our unseeing silence and cannot tolerate anyone truly "seeing what makes for peace." Yet King's life like Jesus' life will not be silenced – if we dare to see and break silence in solidarity with suffering people seeking salaam.

Jesus and King turn my heart and mind to our current wars, especially Iraq, where I have been three times: March 2003, (beginning U.S. invasion of Iraq), January 2010 (war presumably winding down), and September-October 2014 (war escalating again). I was in Iraqi Kurdistan with Christian Peacemaker Teams ([www.cpt.org/work/iraq](http://www.cpt.org/work/iraq)). CPT has been a peaceful presence in Iraq since 2002, first from Baghdad and since 2006 from Sulaymaniyah in the Kurdistan region of northern Iraq. As always, CPT is there at the invitation of and in solidarity with local people committed to nonviolent peacemaking.

Being in Iraqi Kurdistan helps me "see what makes for peace" with eyes of the heart. To truly "see" is to have one's eyes opened to see the land and culture as well as the setting and the suffering of people rooted in ancient history with an ongoing story and struggle. It is to be welcomed into another life and world and to begin to see through the other's eyes.

When I arrived at the Sulaymaniyah International Airport, I soon saw Mohammed in his red CPT cap. He greeted me with a warm smile, "Welcome to Kurdistan." A Kurdish school teacher and a leader of CPT in Iraqi Kurdistan, Mohammed's gracious hospitality made me feel at home. One evening we were walking along a busy street, when two guys on a motorcycle passed us and yelled, "Welcome to Suli" (as Sulaymaniyah is known). Traveling across Iraqi Kurdistan, a checkpoint guard, hearing that we were CPTers, waved us on with a smile, "Welcome to Kurdistan." We were often welcomed in word and with tea in Kurdistan.

Razhier, a Kurdish activist identifying unexploded landmines in Kurdistan, took us to a village to see villagers being harmed by a nearby oil and gas drilling company. In addition to destroying the roads and polluting the air and water, the company's earthshaking drills caused a jagged crack across the wall of the village's small school. In this huge crack in the wall we saw the specific danger to village schoolchildren and the symbolic damage caused by drilling to feed the world's insatiable appetite for oil.

The leader of this village of 18 homes invited us for tea. As we sat on the floor of their home drinking tea with them, he and his wife told us about the damaged roads, trembling earth, foul air, and polluted water that endangering their children's lives. They told us of the drilling company's endless broken promises to repair and rebuild their village and roads. Unlike other villages that want to stop the drilling, they assured us that they weren't asking for the company to stop drilling; they were asking to be seen and helped rather than endangered and disempowered.

At an outdoor people's press conference held at a center for citizen's dialogue called the Cultural Café in Sulaymaniyah, we saw and heard Muslims, Ezidis (known as Yazidis), Christians, Kurds, and others calling for everyone to work together for peace and healing in their war-weary land. One table, including CPTer Peggy Gish, embodied this commitment with Kurds, Ezidis, Muslims, and Christians welcoming each other in peace and friendship.

In that meeting an Ezidi leader explained the common reference to them as Yazidi is false with connotations of devil worship while Ezidi means to worship God. Later we saw a central Ezidi temple and heard their elders explain their religious beliefs and practices, which have roots in Zoroastrian, Islamic, and Christian traditions.

The most immediate and intense context for war was the simmering ISIS crisis that boiled over last August throughout western Iraq and eastern Syria. While the world considers ISIS to be a non-state terrorist group, it now control about a third of both countries as a strict Islamist state called a Caliphate. There are significant differences between ISIS and Al Qaeda, including local internal targeted territorial control vs. global external specific targets. Yet the West lumps both together as "terrorists" against whom the U. S. led Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) is waged in what has become unwinnable permanent war.

In a later article I will address these differences and why permanent war on terrorism is ineffective. I am reminded of a wise word by an early United Nations Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld, who said, "When all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail." When permanent war is our answer and all we have are weapons we "see" more bombs as the way to "degrade and destroy" ISIS, to use the President's language.

A tragic cost of war is the countless victims left in war's wake. Victims are rarely those who decide to wage war. Victims are those who fight and are left with physical, emotional, psychological, economic, spiritual, and moral injury. Most of all victims are civilians, especially children, women, elderly, and others whose lives are torn apart by war.

Victims of this war include thousands who have lost everything they have ever known, including family members, and have been forced to leave home and become Internally Displaced Peoples (IDPs). Fleeing in terror from ISIS, they struggle to find a new life in UN refugee camps or empty open buildings in the cities of the Kurdish region of northern Iraq.

CPT collaborates with Kurdish human rights groups working with these victims of war. For several days another CPTer, Peggy Gish, and I accompanied Zhiyan (meaning *Life*), a human rights delegation of about 20 people, visited Ezidi IDPs in Iraqi Kurdistan near the Syrian border, to document women and girls recently abducted by ISIS. In our Zhiyan leader, Bahar, I saw a woman of gracious diplomatic wisdom speaking passionately with the Governor of the Duhok region of Iraqi Kurdistan and compassionately with displaced Ezidi people. Our Kurdish Zhiyan team members were also passionate and compassionate people listening to those who told heart-breaking stories of beloved wives, sisters, mothers, daughters, and grandmothers missing at the hands of ISIS. We visited two IDP camps each with thousands of people in endless rows of UNHCR (United Nations High Commission on Refugees) tents lined across the desert hills. In teams of four we listened to countless stories of Ezidi women and girls abducted by ISIS. In one tent our team sat with two sisters (17 and 15 years old) who gave details of 70 girls and women from 2 years old to their 70s that they personally knew who were missing. Seeing their suffering hearts and their gracious spirit was heartbreaking and eye opening. Seeing my three Kurdish team members being so compassionately present while documenting missing women was also eye opening. I discovered what it means to “see” with the heart while being a silent presence with others engaging in intense conversations in languages I don’t know, a mixture of two Kurdish languages, Arabic, and an Ezidi dialect.

We saw hundreds children of all ages playing in the treeless desert sun of the IDP camps or in multiple story unfinished open walled cement buildings that are now home for their families. Children swarmed around us to welcome us with joy and sadness. With no playgrounds and no schools they played under the hot desert sun that would soon turn into cold winter weather.

We faced the reality of our own “privilege” knowing that we would get on a bus and leave before the day was over while they had nowhere to go and an unknown future. Many Ezidis lamented not being able to return home and longed to migrate to other countries to begin a new life. We heard cries about once again being oppressed and abandoned by the world. We heard pleas to be seen and gratitude for our presence to show their suffering face to the world.

We faced the challenge of hearing victims of war call for bombing as the global response to ISIS. To be in solidarity with suffering people means listening to the cries of the heart without devaluing or disempowering others. A contemplative challenge in the suffering face of war is to sense when to be silent and when to speak on behalf of others while holding a vision and commitment to break the cycle of violence inherent in war by “seeing what makes for peace” through Jesus’ eyes. It is the contemplative way of just peacebuilding. In America, especially with those who call themselves Christian, we are called to break the silence and share their story so suffering people and Jesus’ way of peace do not remain forever hidden from our eyes.