

# **“Progressive Christian Engagement of War and Politics” by Pat Conover**



**Summer**

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It is the prophetic task of progressive Christians, particularly those of us who have the good fortune to live in the United States, to care enough about the United States and the world to claim our full agency as citizens.

Brenda recently quoted Walter Brueggemann on politics.

“The prophetic tasks of the church are to tell the truth in a society that lives in illusion, grieve in a society that practices denial, and express hope in a society that lives in despair.”

I agree with Brueggemann and add the following.

It is the prophetic task of progressive Christians, particularly those of us who have the good fortune to live in the United States, to care enough about the United States and the world to claim our full agency as citizens. This includes advocating for peace, justice, and the best interests of those who are most in need, to make political contributions, to volunteer in campaigns, and to vote. We have the privilege of following the prophetic guidance of Jesus in a democracy where laws can be changed without violence .

Before taking on the lectionary scriptures, I want to tell you what I mean by the politics of Jesus. I use the word politics in the same fundamental way that we use it in the United States today. *Politics is persuasive, or at least challenging, conversations about the circumstances we live in and how they can best be changed.* Corrupt politics subverts, sometimes destroys, such conversations.

Jesus lived in Galilee and Jerusalem, Israel and Judah, both of which were being forced into abject poverty by the Roman Empire facilitated by the temple priests and a few wealthy Jewish families in Jerusalem who were colluding with Rome and getting a share of the take. The fundamental problem was not taxes but rather monopolistic controlled low prices that reduced those laboring in agriculture and fishing to poverty. An anthropological discovery of a fishing boat dated to the time of Jesus was found on a shore of the Sea of Galilee. It was a poorly pieced together boat with recycled parts, a desperate no good boat. Jesus went to his cross for challenging the authority, economy, and morality of the temple priests, not quite a face up resistance to Roman control. His

political activity led to a legal lynching.

Jesus took a sharp turn from a major theme in Hebrew Scripture including the lectionary scripture for today,

Psalm 48 including verse 3 to 7 exemplifies what Jesus turned away from. Reading from the New Oxford English Bible.

*The mountain of Zion, the far recesses of the North, is the city of a great king. God in her palaces is revealed as a tower of strength. See, the kings assemble; they advance together. They look and are astounded; filled with alarm they panic. Trembling has seized them there; they toss in pain like a woman in labor, like the ships of Tarshish when an East wind wrecks them.*

*Go round Zion in procession, count the towers, take note of her ramparts, pass her palaces in review, that you may tell generations yet to come **that such is God, our God forever; he will be our guide forevermore.***

Mount Zion's fortification was indeed terrific for its time. Jerusalem had its own water supply. When surrounding agricultural peasants fled to Jerusalem as enemies approached they brought food with them. There was little food for the invaders to scavenge and a good supply of food in the city.

It isn't surprising that Judah was proud of Mount Zion. After the escape from Egypt the survivors became nomads for centuries living in tribes with their own flocks of sheep and goats. Water was the precious commodity in the wilderness. Flocks of sheep and goats eat the vegetation in one area and then have to move to somewhere else with water. Those somewheres were often occupied by other nomads. The circumstances were pretty simple: win a battle or die. Sharing was a theoretically good idea and probably happened in some instances. However, a usual nomad goal would be to have all the sheep and goats they could sustain, their food, their walking wealth.

Jewish nomads tried several times to cross the Jordan river and escape the desperation of being nomads. They were defeated time after time and built up bitter memories of the battles they lost to the established kingdoms that defeated them.

A coalition of Jewish nomads finally gathered together around their common heritage as children of Moses. The Levites who traveled with them kept the Mosaic traditions alive and that finally served as a coalition meeting ground. Abraham enters the Jewish story at this point as a glorification and narrative of such a coalition discussed by the later writers as a covenant with God.

The coalition won through at Jericho and then defeated the small kingdoms to claim the territories of Judah (gathered around Jerusalem) and Israel gathered around a number of Hill Shrines such as Bethel, with altars for sacrificing animals.

Then the Jews had to fight war after war to keep what they had captured from various competitors. They had civil wars as well. The most famous one was the victory of David over Saul. Judaism as a religion, carrying values and guidance precious to us today, was born and sustained in circumstances of wars and the fear of wars.

The United States was born in violence against Native Americans and then war with England. We have been involved in wars, one way or another, most of our history and are involved in half a dozen or more wars and near wars today. We promote democracy and make alliance with tyrants. Our history is messy and contradictory.

After the Korean War, the United States has followed an uneven path to military greatness, including plenty of waste and corruption as weapons makers sought their own profits. However clumsy, the United States has become the preeminent superpower in the world. We have maybe learned that a superpower can repeatedly lose wars, such as in Vietnam and Afghanistan.

We are currently faced with the lesser superpower threats from Russia and China. We are currently faced with the advantages and limitations of being in multiple coalitions. We are facing increasing civil strife within our borders. In short, our circumstances are ancient in spiritual terms. Whatever guidance we choose, however pure our intents, sustaining and using military power will be full of compromises in various war contexts. We abandoned Afghanistan and Afghan women are being reduced to subservience again.

The Jews won some wars and lost some wars. When there was victory the priestly story was that God won the war, vanquished the foes. When they lost the priestly story was that God was punishing the people for their sins, meaning not following the guidance of the priests. Plenty of recent and current political guidance from some Christian leaders speak with the same self-serving justifications.

The most relevant war story for Jews in the time of Jesus was the victory of the Maccabees, a Jewish revolt against a precursor of the Roman Empire. The victory led to the compromise with Rome that supported building the Second Temple in Jerusalem and supported Jerusalem building itself as a powerful citadel.

In Jerusalem the priests focused on their religious activities. This made room for the emergence of rabbis and synagogues to guide people with reference to Jewish laws and traditions. Synagogues spread throughout Judah and Israel. The wisdom comments of prominent Hillel oriented rabbis were gathered in the Second Century as the Talmud, the primary spiritual reference for contemporary Judaism.

The Maccabean deal was all the Temple Priests could hope for. The Second Temple was a Wonder of the World at that time. Solomon's Portico, one building in the temple complex, was the largest building in the world. The fortifications of Mount Zion, were faced with white stone, the original "Shining City

on a Hill." Psalm 48 anticipated such destructive pride and misunderstanding.

Rome kept a minimal Army presence in Jerusalem. Policing authority was in the hands of the Temple Priests. The corrupt political reality was that the Chief Priest was appointed by Rome. Temple sacrifices were the primary aspect of Temple worship, competing with the remaining sacrificial altars in Israel, competing with the spiritual authority of Israel's tribes.

The Samaritans sustained an independent Jewish religious tradition based on their understanding and appreciation limited to the books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The story of Samaritan unacceptability was straight out of the playbook of the Jerusalem temple priests. The several stories regarding Jesus and his positive portrayal of Samaritans, tells me that Jesus, a Galilean, was not buying into hostility against Samaritans.

Shortly before the birth of Jesus there was a modest Jewish revolt against Roman authority in Sepphoris, a Roman built town in Galilee. Roman destruction and genocide was swift. Jesus grew up in the midst of multiple responses to the spiritual and practical crises of Roman oppression facilitated by Jerusalem's temple priests and a few wealthy Jewish families. Common people on the ground were experiencing a very bad deal for themselves.

Zealots dreamed to repeating the victory of the Maccabees. The Qumran sect withdrew into monastery like spiritual austerity near the Jordan River and preserved the gift to posterity of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Baptists lived along the Jordan River and believed in the direct forgiveness of God if one repents, a transformative new life symbolized by baptism. Jews took ritual baths to cleanse away sin and thus be ready of enter the holy temple. Baptists just skipped the temple part.

The big answer to the limitations of temple Judaism was the creation of synagogues supported by rabbis who helped with local guidance within the difficult circumstance that existed.

There were two rabbinic schools that trained rabbis: the House of Shammai and the House of Hillel. There was enmity, even murders, between the two traditions in the time of Jesus. I have previously presented why I believe that Jesus trained as a rabbi in the House of Hillel, probably in Jerusalem but possibly under the guidance of a Hillel tutor. The gospels tell story after story of Jesus in conflict with the Pharisees who emphasized ritual purity, such as kosher eating, an understanding in keeping with the tradition of Shammai. Of course I am oversimplifying.

Synagogues had a Judgment Seat where a selected judge resolved local disputes. Synagogues were led by rabbis who interpreted Jewish law. Given the challenges of Hebrew Scripture, many rabbis told stories as inspired wisdom for addressing current circumstances. The collection of best known and best loved stories was gathered after the time of Jesus in the Talmud, the guiding reference for Judaism today. Synagogues can be thought of as a place for reasoned discussion referenced to Jewish values where people worked through their differences. I understand this reality to be one of the seldom mentioned historical source for inventing democracy.

John the Baptist, a mentor of Jesus, died when he left the comparative safety of the Jordan River valley and taught in the court of Herod Antipas in Galilee. After John's death Jesus began his public ministry and quickly was accepted by some Baptist followers, such as Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John.

There was almost certainly no confusion in the mind of Jesus about the political context and trajectory of his ministry. Baptist theology challenged the spiritual and financial bases of the Jerusalem Temple.

Jesus did what John did not do. He took the message of forgiveness of sins without temple sacrifices into Jerusalem. Jesus took the political and fateful step of taking his message into the temple grounds himself and gathered something of a following. In addition to being a spiritual challenge to the temple priests, it was a political challenge to the fundamental political deal, collusion with Rome. His trial and crucifixion for telling the truth about forgiveness continued a powerful spiritual narrative of the forgiveness of God and a powerful political narrative that Jews in Judah and Israel could support each other in the midst of Roman oppression.

The reality that the First Church of Jesus was in Jerusalem, not Galilee, strongly suggests that there was a Galilean oriented synagogue in Jerusalem among the many Jerusalem synagogues at that time. The First Church of Jesus kept that story alive and his followers took the message right back into the Temple.

Where do you fit in this narrative. Do you want to withdraw into spiritual purity in Qumran, into a monastery? Do you want to join the Zealots in violent overthrow of the United States? ...I don't think we have many Zealots in Seekers. Do you want to be a scribe who memorizes and interprets the rules of Seekers in the interests of understandable good order?

I'm guessing that many of you want to learn the stories and share the stories of spiritual transformation, of dedicated ministry in all the difficult contexts of life in Seekers Community and the wider world. We are having some tough conversations these days about the structuring of authority in Seekers. We have to fix things ourselves with constructive, caring, honest, respectful, conversations.

That is the politics of Seekers and everyone can be heard in such conversations.

So, fellow rabbis, we can continue our learned and not so



learned conversations, aim at forgiving each other, and continue to contribute to the dailiness of helping Seekers sustain and grow as a transformative Christian community, a community where Jesus would feel at home.

We are fortunate, and take our fortune for granted, that no one is trying to oppress us and shut us down. There are plenty of people in the United States who don't like Christians, and plenty of Christians who don't like progressive Christianity, but no one is trying to shut us down. The United States government protects our right to exist and that is a political fact not experienced by religious groups in many parts of the world.

We are safe. There is no immediate threat. Russia and China would take that away if they could. They don't have the military capacity to do that.

In considering progressive Christian guidance regarding U.S. military strengths and purposes we need to begin with confession of our collective sins, repent as best we understand that, ask for forgiveness and make amends as appropriate.

The military power of the United States has been grossly abused for the benefit of you and me. Neo-colonial wars fought in Central and South America supported oppressive individuals and governments. We continue to benefit from inexpensive bananas and sugar. When corporations made their deals with the support of the United States Marines, you've got to know that something was terribly wrong.

Wars for economic advantage continue to shape U.S. policy around the world. Whatever you think of the historical justifications for the independence of Taiwan, remember that Taiwan matters so much to power brokers in the United States because it is a major supplier of electronic chips that make our increasingly technological things work.

We commonly tell ourselves that Jesus was a man of peace who forgave his enemies and take away a lesson that we should oppose war and be on the side of peace. Such simplicity is a great escape from facing up to our political responsibilities as Christians to address the hard military questions that are basic to reality in the United States today. Spiritually setting aside the reality of our involvement and responsibilities regarding United States military activity, perhaps vaguely opposing it, eases our consciences and allows us to focus our caring on other political agendas.

Jesus understood that military resistance to Rome was folly, and that resistance and community building would have to take another form. The genocide and destruction of Jerusalem a decade or so after his death proved his point.

I suggest that Jesus was opposing, rather than quietly submitting to oppression. I suggest that Jesus made a shrewd and costly decision to demonstrate opposition to religious and political oppression by the temple priest and Rome by going to an agonizing death on a cross. He could not have known how his gift would be interpreted down the ages. He did what he understood to be his to do, whatever the cost. He had hope when no path of hope was clear.

Here and now we are not living under the oppression of Rome, or Russia, or China. We have non-violent political freedom to reshape the rules for living together in the United States and to contribute to reshaping the roles the United States plays in the world.

Will we claim our agency to participate in political processes to make things better? Instead, will we sit on the sidelines, enjoy our lives the best we can, and complain when other people don't agree with us, complain when other people make political decisions we don't like?

Will we follow the guidance of Jesus and take advantage of

hard won opportunities to participate in political conversations, voting, contributing, and volunteering? Ron Kraybill and I have different points of view with regard to responding to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Over some hard conversations we have clarified that we agree more than we disagree. We have sustained a mutually respectful and mutually helpful ongoing conversation including talking about the guidance of Jesus.

Of course I would like you to agree with the political perspective I carry forward. What matters far more to me is that you claim your agency, walk out of the audience and onto the playing field into political activity.

I hope that this sermon has promoted an understanding that Judaism, Christianity, and the United States were born and then matured in the ongoing changing contexts of wars and near wars. Instead of turning away from these realities, I believe we must face into these realities to remain faithful, even though our best choices involve various painful compromises.