

I was 17 years old, a senior in High School when our nation responded to the violence of September 11 with violence against our supposed enemy. I am now 32, a father of two, and an ordained minister, and we remain at war.

For my entire adult life I have lived under the shadow of state violence. The façade of this great structural violence is attractive, and its beams are firmly planted in the foundation of our national identity. The answers of life's fears adorn the walls, and these murals demand allegiance.

"We must protect national interests." "The only way to stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun." "Freedom is not free." "Heroism is awarded by way of violent courage." These are the lessons of my youthful residence.

And that foundation: how can anyone doubt that foundation? Deeply set within the way we view the world is this idea of retributive violence. Our national icons are men who arrested freedom from the clutches of tyranny: Washington, Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, Wilson and Roosevelt. We teach our children to idolize righteous violence. We test the virtue of a cause not by its practice of love, rather by its ability to incite boiling anger.

The great structural violence of our national identity enjoys a natural home in the sins of Christianity. When my faith's ancestors traded persecution for power, when their descendants taught salvation by way of divinely sanctioned violence¹, and when their descendants, our nation's founders, justified revolution with religious speech, both formal and folk Christianity became decidedly anti-Christ.

This is the world I've known. This great structural violence looms over my nights. It dominates my view and shadows my days.

The Prophet Isaiah describes my world: "They will look to the earth, but will see only distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish." (Isaiah 8:22, NRSV)

When friends and parishioners speak of PTSD and moral injury as a result of their military service, I sense that gloom of anguish. When family members reside in fear, evidenced by their dehumanization of the perceived enemy, I sense that gloom of anguish. When I am caught up in the anxieties of adulthood—attempting to keep my children safe and our economy steady, I sense that gloom of anguish.

The great structural violence of our time and place darkens our world.

And this, my friends, is why I long for Isaiah's illuminating hope. Following the "gloom of anguish," Isaiah proclaims:

¹ I'm speaking in the realm of Christian Theology and against penal substitution theory, not atonement in general.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined. (Isaiah 9:2, NRSV)

Oh, I pray, may the light of peace might shine! Oh that light would illuminate the shadow of death. Oh that the shadow cast upon my world fade, and structural violence crumble in the light of day.

Into a reality marked by corruption, war, oppression and fear the Prophet Isaiah imaginatively speaks a hope-filled alternative marked by cooperation, peace, liberty, and love.

So resilient is this message of light that Jesus of Nazareth proclaims it far and wide saying, "I am the light. Those who follow me do not walk in darkness."

This light shines forth today—it shines in the spotlight-examples of Gandhi, Dr. King, Dorothy Day and Mother Teresa.

And the light shines forth with each of you. For you are light every time you embody true courage and embrace the so-called enemy. You are light every time you forgive those who've sinned against you and love those who would harm you. You are light every time you refuse fear's impact and live divine mercy. You are light every time you prioritize neighborliness over isolated comforts. You are light every time you speak truth and advocate uncompromised peace. You are light, and you are blessed for you are peacemakers, and to you belongs the light.

The structural violence marking our age is awesome—awesome in the worst sense of the term. It towers over us, and its shadow encompasses our children. This is why you who are the light; you preachers of peace; you heroic pacifist; you brave resisters of fear, you counter-cultural spotlights of hope, you must never, never, never give up.

You have seen a great light.

With your promotion of peace the light shines. Amen.