

# *When Peace Breaks Out*

Peter JB Carman

Emmanuel Friedens Church, Schenectady New York

Luke 2:22-40

Galatians 4:4-7

“The redemption of Jerusalem”. What a lovely phrase, for a time like ours. *The redemption of Jerusalem*: Jerusalem, holy city; Jerusalem, city of occupation and conquest; of suffering and sacrifice; symbol of the sacred; sign of our human inability to come together in peace, even on holy ground. Who doesn’t pray for the redemption of Jerusalem, and the suffering land it stands for, even today? And yet! At a deeper level Jerusalem is not only there, but right here, in another city in need of a cure for violence in the streets and an end to the structural and systemic violence that holds so many people down. We need peace to break out.

Luke tells us that when Jesus was a little baby, they took him up to the temple on the holy mount in Jerusalem, for the usual purification rites, dedication and sacrifice. Because the family was poor, they went with the poor-folks sacrifice option—the one for those without the means to offer sacrificial sheep. Instead they came up with two turtle doves or pigeons. And there in the temple, sometime during their visit, two strange and unlikely people found the infant Jesus.

The first was an elderly man named Simeon, guided there, says Luke, by the Holy Spirit. Simeon took the baby in his arms and spoke out words of great power and hope—words about seeing the consolation of his nation, of good news and revelation for all the nations.

The second person to respond to this little tiny child, according to the Gospel-writer, was a woman named Anna, an eighty-four year old widow who seems to have taken up permanent residence on the temple grounds. I have seen Anna! Some years ago when Lynn and I were visiting England, one day we went to Salisbury Cathedral, a grand huge building, a lovely edifice that had just celebrated its seven-hundred and fiftieth birthday. Sitting there unobtrusively on the base of a pillar was a woman of uncertain years, wearing a slightly strange head-wrapping. We didn’t mean to go there twice, but something drew us back to the cathedral the next day—perhaps it was that there isn’t much to do in Salisbury, with a rainstorm going on! The same woman was there, in the same position, almost as though she had never left. Was she a statue? But no, she was jotting something on paper, and staring into the middle distance. I thought—this woman needs this place—it is her

place. Glancing at her—I tried not to stare—I just felt, this is where she finds hope and solace. She lives here. There was a woman named Anna, who never left the temple in Jerusalem.

And Anna saw the child and began to talk to everybody who would listen—maybe even to some who wouldn't listen—about this child, about hope for those who longed and waited for the redemption of Jerusalem. The woman who had been waiting since the death of her husband, many years before — Anna – spoke out to prophesy some kind of peace for humanity, in this child. She spoke to anyone who would listen. She spoke to them words of the redemption of Jerusalem.

When we try to arrange our Hallmark Christmases, we fantasize about a world that takes a few days of break from the usual suffering and hardship. But it simply doesn't happen by itself. Every year at Christmas I remember Christmas Eve of 2008 when our family was reminded in a brutal way that Christ came into a world torn by violence and hatred—we were reminded on Christmas Eve. On Christmas Eve, #202 Trafalgar Street, where our next door neighbors lived, received gunfire from two men on foot shooting guns into the wood frame house and its well-lit windows. Inside were adults and youth and little children—including a baby. It happened while I was still at church listening to our youth sing. I got home to discover that Luke and Ben had looked out the front windows when they heard the shots and had seen the guns blazing in the night. Lynn got home before I did—she went immediately to our neighbors. And yet the event was soon over.

We had, strange to say, a lovely Christmas. We had just gone to bed at midnight Christmas night when it happened again, this time gunfire in back of that same house, with bullets that tore right through the interior of 202—boring through less than ten feet from where the family was playing scrabble—I know because they showed me, sometime around one-thirty in the morning. Thankfully no one was physically injured. I wish I could say the same was true spiritually and psychologically. Sometime around four, the family left the house altogether. This action of someone trying to inspire fear, even terror, worked.

Christ Jesus did not come into a greeting card world. Sometimes, if we are honest, we wonder just exactly when things are going to change! When will the bombs and the landmines and the torture stop? When will the senseless killing in our city streets stop? When will Jerusalem finally be redeemed? When will Peace finally break out?

Yet I find myself today inspired afresh by Simeon and Anna: Simeon who wandered into the temple, guided by some Spirit from God to see a child, before he died; Anna, who never left the place, and spoke in prophecy and hope—Anna, whose own life had taken a tragic turn more than half a century before, and yet spoke of hope restored, for those longing for the redemption of the city.

A little child, given to us as a sign of hope for a new kind of Peace: His birth still raises the question, what if peace, rather than war, were to break out, in the least likely of places? And we need to get back about the business of daring to hope, and daring to put our hope into words and action! We need to get back into working out the methods and goals and results of breaking peace out of its chains, and into the light of day.

The bullet holes in the house next to us in 2008 were scattered up and down, in the front and rear of the house. Someone wasn't aiming too carefully. It is up to us as followers of Christ to aim carefully with the tools of peace, not war: refuse to aim low or live aimlessly. Like Simeon and Anna we can open ourselves to the possibility of good news, of redemption for a broken humanity, of liberation for the captives, of peace for a world at war. We can find the wellspring within—and remember the coming of that child long ago, and start once again to aim higher and truer.

In the face of violence and wrong-doing, we may have three very different responses—the first is to give in, in defeat. The second is to respond with a reaction equally violent and wrong. And the third? The third is to refuse to be governed by what has been, and insist that something better can be. In this Christmas season, the little child remains a sign for us, as he was for Simeon and Anna. This child remains our inspiration for saying—no we will not back down in defeat, no we will not respond with reaction and hatred. We will start over! We will build up. We will reach out in love. We will seek the redemption of Jerusalem, all our Jerusalems. We will aim high. We will attempt ourselves to live lives that are signs of hope restored. We will BE the time and place when Peace breaks out.

Not long ago I adapted some words for a hymn that I wrote quite a while back. I want to close today by sharing a few of them...

### **Peaceable Kingdom**

The wolf shall with the lamb lay down,  
the cow and bear shall feed,  
In place of tyrants with their swords  
a little child shall lead.  
Upon the mountain of our God  
none shall destroy, nor harm  
And earth itself shall know such Love  
as can't be overcome!

Isaiah saw a wilderness  
    which grace could bring to flower  
Young Mary felt a rising joy  
    and spoke with holy power!  
Our God will overthrow the proud  
    who trample meek folk down,  
And raise up those of low degree  
    to wear a wondrous crown.

The prophet voices raised of old  
    announce a shining day  
When aching fear and sharp despair  
    At last are swept away.  
Across the long and weary years  
    through failure, grief and pain,  
The poetry still echoes sweet  
    that promises God's reign.

The wolf shall with the lamb lay down,  
    the cow and bear shall feed,  
In place of wealthy men with guns  
    a little child shall lead.  
Upon the mountain of our God  
    Bombs shan't destroy, nor harm  
And earth itself shall know such Love  
    as can't be overcome!