



# MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

## **“Preaching Peace”**

*A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church*

On July 21, 2024, from Ephesians 2:11-22

On December 4, 1963, twelve days after President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas TX, Malcolm X delivered a speech entitled “God’s Judgement on White America,” which became famous not because of its content, but what he said afterward. The press asked Malcolm to comment on the assassination of President Kennedy, and he said the President’s death was a case of “chickens coming home to roost.” The media had a field day and distorted Malcolm’s words to make it seem as if he was glad the President had been shot. The circus that ensued led Malcolm to be silenced by Elijah Muhammad for 90 days, causing him to eventually break with the Nation of Islam, and ultimately to be assassinated by the FBI with help from the Nation.

Before his death, Malcolm said the press manipulated his words. He never said he was glad the President had been shot, but that the President’s assassination was “a result of the climate of hate in America,” and how the culture of violence that pervaded American society had contributed to Kennedy’s death. The nation’s sins had come back to bite it. He used the metaphor “chickens coming home to roost” to powerfully convey how our violent tendencies and oppressive policies had horrific consequences. The violence and racism America had inflicted on people of color and exported to other parts of the world had now come back to haunt us. His remarks were controversial because he placed blame for the assassination on American society, rather than the individual shooter; highlighting how structural racism, a climate of hate, and a culture of violence, created the conditions for such a tragic event. He was saying “the shooter has been apprehended, but the killer is still at large.”

There have been at least forty-four attempts to assassinate the President of the United States. Seven American Presidents have been shot and four have been killed. Our nation’s history is filled with political assassinations: from elected leaders like Lincoln, Garfield, McKinley, and both Kennedys, to civil rights leaders like Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., Fred Hampton, John Lennon, and Harvey Milk. The attempted assassination of Donald Trump in Butler PA last Saturday was most certainly a tragic event, but it was not unprecedented in American history, nor was it all that surprising. What is surprising, in this specific instance, are the shooter’s motives, or should I say, “lack thereof.”

Princeton historian James W. Clarke, a scholar of Presidential assassinations,<sup>1</sup> claims that most assassins who’ve attempted to kill the President have been politically motivated, hoping to change the direction of the government.



## MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

However, that does not seem to be the case with 20-year-old Thomas Crooks, a disaffected and politically ambiguous young white man who was bullied in school, with easy access to semi-automatic weapons and materials for bombs, yet he did not leave behind any sort of political manifesto. In fact, as far as we know, this is the least politically motivated assassination attempt on an American President in history. Even John Hinkley was more politically motivated when he shot President Reagan to get a date with Jodi Foster! However, if you've listened to the way the media and our political leaders on both sides of the aisle have responded to this assassination attempt, you'd imagine Crooks was the most politically motivated assassin our country has ever seen.

Americans swiftly coalesced around the language of "political violence," rather than terrorism, to describe this event.<sup>2</sup> In a speech immediately following the shooting, President Biden said, "The idea that there's political violence in America like this, is just unheard of, it's just not appropriate. Look, there's no place in America for this kind of violence. It's sick," he said. "Everybody must condemn it. Everybody."<sup>3</sup> And condemn it, most everyone did: "Political violence is absolutely unacceptable," wrote Bernie Sanders. "There is absolutely no place for political violence in our democracy," tweeted Barack Obama. "There is no place for political violence," wrote Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Then joining the chorus of Democratic politicians was Israel's minister of foreign affairs, Israel Katz, who tweeted, "Violence can never ever be part of politics," hypocritical given he's overseen the deaths of 150,000 Palestinians.

This caused me to ask, "What is political violence? Why are leaders of both parties coalescing around this phrase? What does it mean? How is it different from other kinds of violence?" If you look up the definition of political violence, you'll find it refers to violence that is politically motivated or perpetrated to achieve political goals. However, as far as we know, Thomas Crooks was not politically motivated. In fact, he'd recently searched for public appearances of both Donald Trump and Joe Biden, Attorney General Merrick Garland, F.B.I. Director Christopher Wray, as well as members of the British royal family. The reason Trump was chosen seems to be convenience, as the rally was only 40 miles from Crooks' home. So why have all our leaders been so quick to condemn it as political violence if the assassination attempt was not politically motivated? Well, there's a sad but simple answer. The only kind of violence all American politicians oppose is not political violence as such, but violence against American politicians.

The bipartisan condemnation of political violence reeks of self-interest and hypocrisy. As soon as the bullets started flying, every political leader in America instantly became a staunch pacifist and fierce advocate for non-violence. It was odd because I've never heard them say this much about peace after a mass shooting. Out of nowhere, politicians with the most harmful policies and violent rhetoric were suddenly preaching peace.



# MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

All at once there was a new kind of violence called ‘political violence’ that we are required to agree is the worst kind of violence, has no place in American society, and must be condemned by everyone. I’m sorry, but can we stop for a minute, “What about all the other kinds of violence? Are there certain kinds of violence that do have a place in America? Do we condemn all violence, or only the violence directed at American political leaders?” This hyper-focus on ‘political violence,’ or should I say, ‘violence against politicians’ can have a dangerous effect of narrowing our definition of violence, which is a serious problem because the narrower our definition of violence, the narrower our vision of peace.

When I heard our political leaders suddenly preaching peace, I could not help but think of the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel’s describing the false preachers of their day: “From least to greatest, all practice deceit. They dress up the wound of my people as though it were not serious. ‘Peace, peace,’ they say, when there is no peace.” When politicians condemn violence, it seems as if they only mean the violence that comes from the bottom-up and never violence that comes from the top-down, which is the backbone of the system. A protest is considered non-violent so long as there is no property damage. But what about the violence the people were protesting in the first place? There has always been a way of preaching peace that is shallow and disingenuous; a way of preaching peace as the simplistic absence of an activity the powerful do not like. But peace is not just a negative concept as in the absence of war, conflict, or political violence. Peace is a positive and constructive ethic. It is a way of life that is synonymous with the way of Jesus. We know this because “Peace on earth” is what the angels sang when the Prince of Peace was born in Bethlehem. And in his first sermon, Jesus proclaimed, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” And the very first word the risen Jesus uttered to his disciples was “Peace,” not simply as a greeting but because the good news of the resurrection is a call to embody a life of peace.

In his letter to the Ephesians and the churches of the Lycus River Valley in Asia Minor, Paul explained that Jesus came preaching peace and through his death created peace between those who were near and those who were far, between Jews and Gentiles, circumcised and uncircumcised, citizens and strangers, saints and aliens. In the average Jewish mind, the world was divided between Israel and everybody else, which means Paul was saying Jesus brought peace to the entire world. He claimed that the person and work, life and teaching, death and preaching, and every other aspect of who Jesus is and what he did for us can and should be summarized by the word ‘peace!’ Paul’s message of peace was radically counter cultural. But Paul was not the only one preaching peace. There was another story about peace going around those days. And just like today, there were people constantly preaching about it.



Every church Paul wrote to was in a city ruled by the Roman Empire and one of the primary themes of imperial propaganda was that Caesar had restored order, established unity, and brought peace to the entire world. Imperial historians, like Virgil and Horace, called it the *Pax Romana* – the ‘peace of Rome,’ that we all learned about in Western Civ. class where it was often described as the golden age of Rome, a 200-year period of unprecedented peace and prosperity spanning from England to Morocco, ushered in by the great Caesar Augustus.

People believed the *Pax Romana* was a divine miracle that Caesar brought to the world. Paterculus preached, “there is no boon that humans can desire of the gods, no conceivable wish or blessing which Augustus did not bestow on the Republic, the Roman people, and the world, including the establishment of peace.” Ovid preached, “Caesar is a man of peace.” Strabo preached, “The Romans and their allies have never enjoyed such peace and prosperity as that provided by Caesar.” Rome’s imperial propagandists were constantly preaching about the peace of Caesar and Rome, but in reality, the *Pax Romana* was not peaceful for anyone but Caesar and the Roman elite.

One historian wrote: “The volume of the *Cambridge Ancient History* for the years AD 70–192 is called *The Pax Romana*, but peace is not what one finds in its pages.” Even Rome’s own historians critiqued the *Pax Romana*. Tacitus, for example, quoted a speech from the Scottish general Calgacus where he said, “These Romans are plunderers of the world, after exhausting the land by their devastating hands, they are rifling the ocean: to plunder, butcher, and steal under false titles, these things they call empire; they make a desert and call it peace.”

Any person living in Asia Minor in the first century would have heard Paul’s message about Jesus bringing peace and would have immediately thought of the widespread proclamations of the *Pax Romana*. Paul had taken all the praises heaped on Caesar for having brought peace to the world and applied it to Jesus. To proclaim that Jesus brought peace was to proclaim that Caesar did not. It was an act of treason and sedition, and a disavowal of Roman imperial propaganda. Paul was calling the churches in Asia Minor to turn away from the false peace of Caesar and the Empire, and to cling to the true peace of Jesus, his message and ministry.

Embedded within Paul’s cosmic contest between Christ and Caesar and these two contrasting visions of peace, was a new definition of violence. Caesar and the empire promoted a narrow understanding of all violence as ‘physical violence,’ the armed conflict between individuals, groups, armies, and nations, and insisted that violence was a means to an end; that violence was the only way to make peace. Paul confronted this narrow imperial understanding of violence and its propaganda of peace with a broader definition of violence and broader vision of peace. For Paul, violence was not just the use of physical force.



## MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

For Paul, dehumanizing people is violence, which is why he said, “Stop calling each other circumcised or uncircumcised. Stop labeling each other strangers or citizens, stop misnaming each other aliens or saints, stop saying those people have no hope, no God, no home.” When we look closely, we can see that for Paul, exclusion is also violence, segregation is violence, division is violence, and so are any laws, commandments, or ordinances that reinforce these things are violence. For Paul, superiority and supremacy are also violence, inequality and injustice are also violence. And for Paul, even hostility is a form of violence. For Paul, hate, enmity, and contempt are also violence.

Paul was telling his people that the reason the empire’s vision for peace was so small was that their definition of violence was so narrow. His words sound a lot like the great civil rights leader, Coretta Scott King, who once rose to speak on Juneteenth 1968 at the Poor People’s Campaign in Washington D.C. in the wake of her husband’s assassination and said, “In this society, violence against poor people and minority groups is routine. I must remind you that starving a child is violence. Suppressing a culture is violence. Neglecting school children is violence. Punishing a mother and her family is violence. Discrimination against a worker is violence. Ghetto housing is violence. Ignoring medical need is violence. Contempt for poverty is violence. Even the lack of will power to help humanity is a sick and sinister form of violence.”<sup>4</sup>

We must expand our definition of violence beyond the narrow confines of the empire and its preachers, so that we can begin to imagine a broader vision of peace like the peace Paul declared had come to the world in Jesus. For Paul, was peace not an abstract concept. It did not mean that things are calm and copasetic, or that everyone is being nice to one another. It is not an overly spiritualized feeling of tranquility. The peace Paul proclaimed was material and concrete, practical and earthly. Peace is not a heavenly gift that drops out of the sky. Peace is something we make, something we create. And Paul called upon the life and teachings of Jesus to provide the churches of Asia Minor with a recipe and a road map of the things that make for peace.

The famous anti-war poet, Denise Levertov, once found herself at a loss for words on a panel in the 80s, when Virginia Satir called on her and other poets to “present to the world images of peace, not only of war; [because] everyone needs to be able to imagine peace if we were going to achieve it.” After years of reflecting, Levertov wrote that “if a poetry of peace is ever to be written, there must first be the poetry of preparation for peace, a poetry of protest, of lament, of praise for the living earth; a poetry that demands justice, renounces violence, reveres mystery.”





She lays out the case beautifully in her poem “Making Peace,” where she writes:

A voice from the dark called out,  
‘The poets must give us  
imagination of peace, to oust the intense, familiar  
imagination of disaster. Peace, not only  
the absence of war.’

But peace, like a poem,  
is not there ahead of itself,  
can’t be imagined before it is made,  
can’t be known  
except in the words of its making,  
grammar of justice,  
syntax of mutual aid.

A feeling towards it,  
dimly sensing a rhythm, is all we have  
until we begin to utter its metaphors,  
learning them as we speak.

A line of peace might appear  
if we restructured the sentence our lives are making,  
revoked its reaffirmation of profit and power,  
questioned our needs, allowed  
long pauses. . .

A cadence of peace might balance its weight  
on that different fulcrum; peace, a presence,  
an energy field more intense than war,  
might pulse then,  
stanza by stanza into the world,  
each act of living  
one of its words, each word  
a vibration of light—facets  
of the forming crystal.

I love this poem, but we don’t need to wait for the poets. All the ingredients for making peace are here in Paul’s letter. Peace begins with radical inclusivity; the inclusion of those who were once excluded, actively welcoming them into the household of God. Yet, for radical inclusivity to take hold, Paul offers the second ingredient of equality; the elimination of supremacy.



# MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

Welcoming and including people into beloved community, the household and commonwealth of God is not enough on its own. Any form of supremacy destroys inclusivity and is at war with things that make for peace. Peace requires not only inclusivity, but equality and justice, to be true. And the third ingredient for peace is what Paul called reconciliation. This is no “kumbaya” call for simply bringing people together or people naively saying, “can’t we all just get along.” You won’t find that kind of sentimentality in Paul’s letter. No, reconciliation requires kicking down the walls that divide us and killing all the hostility that exists between us. These are not passive verbs that Paul was using. He was proclaiming that strong and courageous acts of resistance to the everyday violence that pervades our lives is the true work of making peace.

We live in a violent world. We live at a time when there are more guns than people in America. We live at a time when you can legally buy an AR-15 before you can buy a drink. We live at a time when many are speaking out against political violence but are silent about all the other violence that besets our lives. We live at a time when many are preaching peace, yet their vision of peace is too small. As followers of Jesus, we cannot be content with the vision of peace that is being sold to us by the empire and its preachers of peace because we know that peace is larger than the absence of political violence. We are called to a broader vision of peace that is based on the active cultivation of a beloved community. We know peace is something that must be made every day, regardless of how violent the world is around us. Our chickens have come home to roost again, so, the time has come for us to double our efforts to practice the things that make for peace, remembering that inclusivity makes for peace, equality makes for peace, reconciliation makes for peace, and justice makes for peace. Making peace will require us all to kick down the dividing walls between us, to put hostility to death once and for all, and to create a society where no one is ever called a stranger, or an alien again, but where everyone is fully embraced as a beloved child in the new humanity of God.

<sup>1</sup> James W. Clarke, *American Assassins: The Darker Side of Politics*, Princeton University Press: 1982. <sup>2</sup> Natasha Lennard, “The Only Kind of ‘Political Violence’ All U.S. Politicians Oppose,” July 14, 2024. <sup>3</sup> Alexandra Hutzler, “Biden and Trump speak after he says, ‘no place in America for this kind of violence’” ABC News, July 13, 2024, 10:34 PM. <sup>4</sup> Coretta Scott King, “Solidarity Day Address,” Poor People’s Campaign, Resurrection City, Washington, D.C.