

Series: Shalom

July 10, 2016

Title: Peacemakers

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Text: Matthew 5:9

Prayer

South Africa: 1994

It was Aristotle who is credited with first saying: "Nature abhors a vacuum."

In 1994 a vacuum was forming fast in a country that had long been under systematic oppression. By the 1960s the minority white population of South Africa had managed to completely impose a political system called apartheid upon the entire population. Through apartheid's oppressive and increasingly absurd racist laws this minority was able to maintain power and control over the much larger black and mixed race majority.

The leader of the opposition to apartheid was an African activist named Nelson Mandela. Mandela was imprisoned by the white government for 27 years, but continued to lead an underground resistance through the African National Congress (ANC). Finally, when the government realized that it could no longer rule with impunity, it released Mandela from prison and scheduled general elections.

And so it was that in 1994 the oppressive white regime was on the verge of passing into history, and a new day of majority African rule loomed on the horizon. To put it another way: an immense political and social vacuum was forming. With the removal of the entire machinery of white rule, who and what would take its place?

Nature abhors a vacuum.

Filling the vacuum:

So just what kind of story would history write for the people of South Africa in 1994 and beyond? How would the vacuum of power be filled? There were two major contenders for power:

- Mandela's African National Congress

- The Independence Freedom Party, a political movement made up of the Zulu tribe its Chief Buthelezi.

The battle for power was now between these two parties. Mandela's election as the new president was a foregone conclusion. But Buthelezi threatened to forbid his tribe to vote – thus effectively rendering the election illegitimate. With no true mandate, Mandela would never be able to truly govern and the entire country would slip into chaos and bloodshed.

So real was this threat that Henry Kissinger, from the US, and Lord Carrington from Great Britain, were invited by the two parties to mediate the conflict. The mediation went nowhere, and 13 days before the election Kissinger boarded a plane to head home, predicting that a million people would die in what he saw as a coming civil war.

The moment that had offered freedom and justice was now on the verge of becoming a horrible and bloody nightmare.

Prayer

You could say that South Africa was at the "bottom of the U." It had gone from a form of stability and order down into a power vacuum which threatened pure chaos. The world's most distinguished statesmen could do little more than predict the horror to come.

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But behind the scenes another story was happening. A man named Michael Cassidy realized that this crisis needed far more than high level mediation; it needed God's intervention. With that in mind, he reached out to a Christian professor from Kenya named Washington Okumu, and asked him to join the negotiations.

Meanwhile, Cassidy rented a stadium in Durban and called the nation to prayer. Prayer meetings sprang up all over the country. While people prayed, Okumu worked through the night with the Independence Freedom Party to reach an agreement that the chief would endorse. Finally, with the agreement in hand, Okumu raced to the airport in Johannesburg to get Chief Buthelezi's endorsement. He was too late. The chief's plane had already taken off.

But then, a few minutes into the flight the pilot said that they had an instrument problem and would have to go back to Johannesburg. Washington Okumu had his meeting with Chief Buthelezi.

On April 17, 1994, 25,000 people filled the Durban stadium to pray. They were joined by smaller prayer meetings around the country. And while they prayed, Okumu and Buthelezi were hammering out a plan for full participation in the upcoming elections.

Ten days later South Africans voted Nelson Mandela and the ANC into power. Buthelezi's Zulus were allowed to vote. And not one person died from tribal conflict. (from www.worlddea.org, May 20,2014)

The Bottom of the U

Dallas, June 7, 2016:

Every so often we find ourselves "at the bottom of the U." It seems like we are there as a nation right now. Earlier this past week young African American men were killed by police fire. And then on Thursday night a march protesting their deaths was interrupted by sniper fire that left 5 policemen dead and 6 others wounded.

Once again, our leaders call for calm. Once again, hateful voices call for death to the police. Once again, the specter of racism raises its ugly head. Tribe against tribe. Black lives versus Blue lives.

And as a nation we stand like a deer in the headlights.

Nature abhors a vacuum:

The Old Testament prophet Jeremiah would have understood. He lived in a time of social and political disintegration. Judah had abandoned God and His commands. Their society had descended into corruption and idolatry. They were racing headlong to the bottom of the U.

Jeremiah could see disaster coming. He wrote:

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Jeremiah 4:19-20a NIV

Oh, my anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain.

Oh, the agony of my heart! My heart pounds within me, I cannot keep silent.

For I have heard the sound of the trumpet; I have heard the battle cry.

Disaster follows disaster; the whole land lies in ruins.

Jeremiah goes on to describe his society and its ruin in terms of a reversal of the Creation Story:

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Jeremiah 4:23-26 NIV

I looked at the earth, and it was formless and empty; and at the heavens, and their light was gone.

I looked at the mountains, and they were quaking; all the hills were swaying.

I looked, and there were no people; every bird in the sky had flown away.

I looked, and the fruitful land was a desert; all its towns lay in ruins before the LORD, before his fierce anger.

The Bottom of the U:

There it is: the bottom of the U. It is the place where God's good Creation has become unglued, unhinged. It is a place where order is replaced by disorder, law by anarchy, goodness by evil, love by hatred. In the absence of God's good rule the vacuum is filled by its opposite. The bottom of the U.

Yet this is the place where Jeremiah was commanded to stand and speak. This was the place from which would emerge a new people, truly devoted to the LORD alone. This was the starting point for the journey into God's new work of creation.

And this is place where we find ourselves today: at the bottom of the U. How shall we respond?

Peacemakers

The gift of Shalom:

God offers us the only path forward out of the bottom of the U. Jeremiah wrote these words to his countrymen from Judah now in exile in far-off Babylon:

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Jeremiah 29:11 NIV

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

There it is: God's *Shalom*. A journey from the chaos at the bottom of the U into God's place of blessing and peace.

He offers us that same journey today. In times like these we must remember that this is God's world, and He is firmly committed to restoring what is broken. He brings His peace, His *shalom* into the most broken corners of His world. In a much darker time, with His people suffering under Roman oppression, He sent His Son to be born in Bethlehem. And the angels sang: "Peace on earth!"

Peacemakers:

So how do we move forward and become God's bringers of *Shalom*?

Listen to what God says through Jeremiah says in the next verse:

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Jeremiah 29:12-14 NV

"Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart."

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"I will be found by you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile."

Our mission is to call upon Him and pray to Him, to seek Him with all our hearts. There is no other way.

On our own we will get swept up into the chaos. With Him we become part of His solution.

Prayer:

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So let's seek Him right now. I've asked the elders and Penny to help lead us in prayer as a congregation.

- Prayer for our leaders
- Prayer for minorities
- Prayer for law enforcement personnel
- Prayer for the Church

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Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."

It's time for us to stand up and be what God called us to be: Peacemakers.