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I CANNOT SUPPORT YOU MR. PRESIDENT

I wrote this sermon in Washington D. C., where Shawn and I spent the last three days attending a meeting of the Academy of Homiletics, which is a meeting of preachers and those who teach preaching. In fact, I wrote these words with a view of the U. S. Capitol building from our hotel room – a block from K Street, where lobbyists work day and night to undermine what’s left of our democracy, and just a few blocks from the White House, where by chance on Thursday evening, while out walking, Shawn and I happened upon the lighting of the national Christmas tree.

I’m not sure how these things happen to us, but we do seem to get lucky. Without knowing what we were doing, we strolled down to the White House on a beautiful evening and noticed that a large crowd had gathered. I asked someone what was happening and he replied, “the Obama family was about to light the tree.” He said, “in five minutes.” Where upon the band started playing Hail to the Chief, and sure enough out came the president and his family, and after a few speeches and a few songs, the national Christmas tree was illuminated. I turned to Shawn and said, “How’s that for timing?”

I had already turned in my sermon title of course, and was well aware of how ironic it was that I would finish this sermon in the city where only 48 hours earlier a decision had been made with which I profoundly disagree. This may strike some of you as odd, even disconcerting, given that I am a great fan of the president, and celebrated his historic election with as much joy as any white man could muster. But I believe the change that he promised, and so many craved, especially with regard to new ways of thinking about how to defeat our enemies, is evaporating, and the man I so admire has just made the biggest mistake of his young presidency.

I'm talking, of course, about President Obama's decision to send an additional 30,000 troops (and now they say closer to 35,000) to Afghanistan in order to secure a country where we have been at war since 9/11, to accomplish with more boots what no foreign power has ever achieved there – in a country known as “the graveyard of empires.” Both the British and the Soviets tried and failed, paying a bitter price, and where we helped create the Taliban by arming Afghan fighters against our old enemy. As so often happens, our proxy wars today become our real wars tomorrow, after we train insurgents to kill a mutual enemy who end up turning the guns on us.

The complexities of Afghanistan and the agonizing decision that President Obama faced, cannot be dealt with in one sermon, but it is not an unfit topic for the pulpit – for the simple reason that in Advent, we read texts like the one I just shared from Isaiah, and pledge ourselves to work for a new reign of shalom, a new world in which old ways of being warriors are judged to be not only hopeless, but a living contradictory of the higher loyalty we have pledged to Jesus the Prince of Peace.

It's true that a lot of very smart people have decided that this is the right course of action. But some of the finest minds I know with regard to the Arab world, like Thomas Friedman, do not think this will work. The president made it clear that this is not Vietnam, but I beg to differ. There are differences of course, but too many similarities not to send a chill up my spine.

Vietnam taught us that military victory only means something if they defend a viable central government that the people trust, and in Afghanistan the government we propped up is a joke, as corrupt as the last election. Vietnam taught us that terrain matters, whether it is jungles and rice paddies or some of the most rugged and inaccessible mountains in the world.

Vietnam also taught us that porous borders are a big problem, especially when they allow an elusive enemy, which is often indistinguishable from the civilian population to melt back into safe havens and bide its time, or simply move its murderous operations elsewhere.

All these years later we learn that LBJ's indecision on Vietnam was about his fear of the political fallout of pulling out, combined with the misguided optimism of his advisors who believed that someone else's civil war could be won by fighting our old enemy on a borrowed battlefield.

Now it seems that there are two elephants in the room that nobody wants to talk about. One is that you cannot wage a war against a murderous ideology that has no physical base. No matter how many times we say it, the “war on

terrorism” cannot be won in the conventional sense because it is not possible to defeat al-Qaeda by draining one particular swamp where they are currently hanging out (which is now Pakistan, not Afghanistan). This is a fiction. All the predator drones in the world cannot kill an enemy that not only has no single address, but has an endless supply of enraged and hopeless young men to recruit to defeat the infidels who answer death rained from the sky with death wrapped around a man wearing a suicide belt disguised as a woman. There is no end to this. All that will end it, over time, is a change in the context in which so many poor Arabs live, controlled by dictators who can literally get away with murder because we must buy their oil.

Second, since the President had to announce a withdrawal timeline, as much for political reasons as for military ones, this elusive enemy can wait us out, and when the Afghan army and police are not ready to defend their country, as they almost surely won't be in 18 months, we will have no choice but to stay indefinitely - lest the whole thing collapse again - which does indeed raise the specter of Vietnam.

What's more, every American death will make it that much more difficult to pull out, lest those deaths be mocked by our defeat. I don't know what you call a situation in which winning is not really possible, and defeat is unacceptable, but I call it Vietnam - and it cost 58,000 of my generation their lives, and my generation its innocence. I come home to you fresh from seeing the endless rows of white crosses at Arlington national Cemetery, and the dramatic memorials to the Korean War and the Vietnam War - where if you do not cry when you see it you have lost your essential humanity. And there is in me a deep fear that one day my children will see an Afghanistan War Memorial, and the world will not be a safer place.

Thomas Friedman does not think that the surge is wise, even though he knows that Obama believes it can be a “game changer.” He believes too many things would have to change that won't change, and that a greater threat to American than al-Qaeda right now is our collapsing economy and our exploding deficit.

Though it does not sound so dramatic, or score so many political points, he believes that the most significant changes we could make to bring lasting peace is to pass a gasoline tax, move full speed ahead on renewable energy, and shore up our own faltering economy so that we are not supporting petro-dictators with dollars that they use to prop up corrupt regimes that breed hopelessness, despair, and a seething anti-Western hatred.

We cannot have our consumer cake and eat it too. Our day of reckoning has not just come economically, because we lived so long beyond our means and found so many new and fantastic ways to steal from one another, but because our military models are outmoded as well. Our days of being an empire, a Colossus aside the world are over. Empires always fail when they don't know this, and keep driving themselves over a cliff.

It would suit me just fine to find out in three to five years, or even ten, that I was dead wrong in this sermon. Seldom have I hoped so fervently that this might indeed be the case. But the job of a preacher is to say what he or she really believes, so that whether it turns out to be right or wrong, the audience can respect the integrity of a free pulpit – and expect honesty from it, not indecision, or worse, cowardliness.

We cannot bring democracy to the Arab world by force, and our misguided and disastrous invasion of Iraq should have taught us this lesson so vividly that the last thing we would try to do is more nation-building in Afghanistan.

What's more, I am saddened by the incongruity of our Advent liturgies in church combined with the same old failed military strategies – especially from this president who aroused such hope in so many of us that things would change. Hope deferred really can be hope denied, and I wonder when the church will rise from its long nap on the hearth of its empire benefactor and truly challenge it. This is what preoccupies my thinking these days as a minister – that we are so compliant; that we blend in so well; that nobody can really recognize Christians by their aversion to war, but rather by their fervent sanction of it, not to mention their mean-spirited and judgmental ways.

Did you know that for the first 200 years of the early church, no Christian was allowed to put on a uniform and fight for any army? Now we consider a conscientious objector in our midst to be the exception, not the rule – while we bless our warriors as if their mission is God's mission and all who question this are unpatriotic. But just listen to the words of Isaiah again:

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,

or decide by what his ears hear;
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.
The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain;
For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.

I shall cling to these with more hope than I do to even the greatest speeches of the greatest politicians. Because in the long run, I truly believe the only surge that will finally prevail is a surge in selflessness, a surge of human cooperation; a surge in the building of schools and an effort to alleviate poverty. A surge, dare I say it, of love.

And not the silly romantic love of cupid (a diapered infant and blindfolded to boot), or those nauseous jewelry ads we must now watch until Christmas - but a surge of agape love - the strong, resilient, last word in a just universe - that we love and pray for our enemies, and those who persecute us.

If you think that is too naïve, too sentimental, too soft in the big bad world then fine, let's give it up - circle the wagons, and live by the law of the jungle. But if we do that we should give up on the church as well. It would be better to turn them all into malls than to keep on reading these anti-imperial texts and singing these anti-imperial songs, and praying these anti-imperial prayers then acting like God loves the empire more than the enemy.

So, with all due respect, and much is due - I cannot support you on this one, Mr. President. You have no bigger supporter in the world, but my ultimate allegiance is to Jesus. I hope you understand.

Amen.

Pastoral Prayer for Sunday, December 6, 2009

Lord of Life, we pray for those who must make the difficult, sometimes even the impossible decisions about how to protect the nation and advance the cause of peace. The easiest thing of all to do, of course, is to throw darts from the sidelines, while doing nothing to imagine what we would do if the decision were ours to make.

We struggle with the forces of extremism and violence, forces that are determined to destroy what they hate, and with it, any chance for a world of pluralism and grace. We struggle knowing that we have been responsible in part for sowing the seeds of the very hatred that has arrived at our doorsteps as if out of the blue. We pray that we shall not be blind to our own complicity with evil, nor assume that our choices and our lifestyles do nothing to fuel the divides that threaten us.

As we move into this sacred time of the year, when we proclaim the impossible – that love itself was born into the world without sword or empire, without power or prestige, without pomp or authority, we can actually consider making ourselves over in the image of what God made perfect in weakness.

Let this holy foolishness infect the madness of our time, and make us all stop and consider the lilies of the field, and the risks we must take for peace.

In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, our Teacher and Lord we pray, Amen.