

*Holy One, Lord of all creation, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts catch a sliver of the slather of gifts you bestow upon us all.*

Protestants take our name from the word protest. Many Christians today are protesting the violence in the Middle East, such as the horrific facts that over 15,000 Palestinian children have been killed; 90% of schools in Gaza have been leveled by bombs; more than half of all homes have been destroyed; there has been a 300% increase in miscarriages; and one-third of all infants are starving to death as the international community struggles to provide basic humanitarian aid. Thinking about the recent events on other college campuses, including down the street in Chapel Hill, I understand why students wish to rally. They are passionate about change.

But protesters should not commit violence while calling for a ceasefire. No one of any age should repeat the antisemitic vitriol of the past. It matters most that innocent lives are being lost in Gaza; the *manner* in which we protest this injustice also matters.

For those who want peace, criticism of the war as well as Middle East policy is rightly directed at the Israeli government's military actions and not to encompass an entire nation, much less all of a religion's believers, many of whom are equally horrified by the deaths of innocents. In a news release this past Tuesday, the Jewish Voice for Peace of Chapel Hill highlighted the group's focus on "collective liberation" for all people. At its best, the Protestant movement has also focused on equity and justice for all; this is when we Christians are most like the rabbi we follow.

One of my spiritual disciplines is to walk the labyrinth outside of the UNC hospital. A labyrinth is neither a maze nor a race. You follow the path that winds in and out until you finally reach the center. Your feet will carry you there eventually, even though there are times when you are actually moving away from the center.

While I also love to walk in the peaceful woods around the church, this labyrinth is smack dab in the middle of the busy hospital complex. There are sounds of construction, traffic, and helicopters. Rather than as a distraction or nuisance, I try to think of such noises as further opportunities for reflection. To find the stillness within the noise; to discover the peace in the storm.

What I see clearly is that our national media has little interest in portraying compassionate views of the other side. We live in a culture where click-bites are driven by "gotcha" moments, where viewers salivate over video clips of someone

on the other side making a fool of themselves. People are “torched” and “slammed.” Others “fire back” and “destroy.” With such violent language, is it any wonder that we cannot have a substantive debate about, well, *anything*? Today’s college students have come of age in this toxic environment of a war of words. And Christians, people whose fundamental belief is in the compassion of God who chose to suffer for us, are sometimes the worst offenders of this violent rhetoric.

There are more faithful voices in our history and our tradition. If we could parse through all the talking heads, pundits, and posts, what is the core message to be heard? Where is the peace within the storm?

In rabbinic literature, the question was asked: if all other sounds on Earth were silenced, what would be heard? One rabbi argued that it would be the sound of bigger things chewing on smaller things. This can seem like the way of the world.

But citing Psalm 98, another rabbi claimed that the sound behind all sounds is the song of heaven and earth singing. And to discover this “new song,” we often have to listen to old messages time and time again.

Dawn Landes, who will give a concert here later this summer, is performing songs from the past 200 years that document the struggles faced primarily by women. From the antebellum South to the factories of the North to the Civil Rights Era, people faced raging storms of violence and oppression.

Dawn’s fellow performer is gospel singer Mary D. Williams, who sings for today’s audiences what the protesters in the Civil Rights movement sang: hymns like “Ain’t Gonna Study War No More” and “In the Storm, I Pray.” Williams said, “The thing about the songs of the enslaved is that they always looked upward. I’m not in slavery, but there are still issues and concerns of our day and trials and tribulations, and the power of a song is a way that you can deliver your own soul.”

In our complicated world with all its tragedies, let us listen with compassion and raise our voices to make peace so that we may be able to protest what is wrong and follow Jesus’s command to love as friends. Let us find ways to edge out of our political fortresses and media silos to tiptoe toward holy ground where we might hear creation sing and all God’s children may live in peace. Let me end with the words from the Village Voices, who gave a concert here on Thursday: go in peace; walk in hope; live in love. Amen.

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