

Are We Being Good Ancestors?

Genesis 1.1-5; John 1.1-5

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On July 16, 1945, the first nuclear bomb, code named Trinity, was tested in the desert in New Mexico. On August 6, 1945, the first atomic bomb was exploded over Hiroshima. Today we are almost midway between these two seventy-fifth anniversary commemorations. Very few Americans today have a lived memory of those events and, I suspect, there aren't many who are noting these anniversaries this year, preoccupied as we are with a pandemic. But we should not let this moment pass by without some reflection.

Some of us are old enough to remember the duck and cover drills in school, or the presence of Nike missile bases around the country including at Belmont Harbor and Jackson Park here in Chicago. Or perhaps we can still feel the visceral fear prompted by the Cuban Missile Crisis or the citizen energy of the Nuclear Freeze Movement of the 1980s. Or maybe we've passed by the sculpture by Henry Moore on the University of Chicago campus commemorating the spot where Enrico Fermi and his team unleashed the power of the atom for the first time, setting in motion the march toward Trinity and Hiroshima. But for the most part we have moved on, grown comfortable with the Bomb's presence, perhaps even oblivious to the nuclear weapons in bombers patrolling overhead, or in silos in the northern plains, or lurking quietly under the ocean's surface. We conveniently forget that only two nuclear weapons killed more people in Hiroshima and Nagasaki than have died from the Coronavirus Pandemic in the United States to date.

How odd that weapons that for the first time in history could kill most living things on our planet occupy our attention so little save for those moments when Kim Jung Il launches a new test missile, or Israel and Iran engage in saber rattling, or India and Pakistan clash in Kashmir? Is it that we are resigned to the inevitability of eventual nuclear war? Or do we live with the belief that it is an impossibility, that accidents won't happen, that our leaders are too smart, or wise, or sane? And yet frightening accidents, miscalculations, and near misses have happened numerous times and we know that not all the world's leaders are either smart, wise, or sane. Maybe it's because the problem is so enormous, beyond our limited capacity to make a difference. And yet we protest inaction on climate change and demonstrate against America's persistent racism, both problems of massive challenge and complexity. Why our relative silence about the planet's most existential threat?

In 1961, in New Delhi, Lutheran theologian and University of Chicago professor Joseph Sittler gave an address to the Third Assembly of the World Council of Churches. He concluded with this probing reflection: "Ever since Hiroshima the very term light has ghastly meanings.

But ever since creation it has had meanings glorious; and ever since Bethlehem meanings concrete and beckoning.” Light. The Bible begins with light: “God said, “Let there be light. And God saw that the light was good.” The writers of Genesis had no notion, of course, of photons or about the physics of light’s particles and waves. Nor did they know about light’s essential part in the process of photosynthesis and thus its fundamental role as a building block of all living things. Yet they must have intuited the importance of light not simply in ordering time, but in the very structure of creation itself. And John the Evangelist begins his account of the Gospel of Christ with light: “What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

Ever since, guided by these texts, the synagogue and the church have used light to symbolize wisdom, inspiration, divine presence, comfort, hope, spiritual energy. And yet, as Sittler noted, seventy-five years ago light took on awesome, even ghastly meaning. One of the physicists at the Trinity site recalled:

The most striking impression was that of an overwhelmingly bright light. I had seen under similar conditions the explosion of 100 tons of normal explosives in the April test, and I was flabbergasted by the new spectacle. We saw the whole sky flash with unbelievable brightness in spite of the very dark glasses we wore. Our eyes were accommodated to darkness, and thus even if the sudden light had been only normal daylight it would have appeared to us much brighter than usual, but we know from measurements that the flash of the bomb was many times brighter than the sun. In a fraction of a second, at our distance, one received enough light to produce a sunburn.

On August 6, in Hiroshima, a young seminarian at a novitiate two kilometers from Hiroshima remembers this:

Suddenly--the time is approximately 8:14 in the morning--the whole valley is filled by a garish light which resembles the magnesium light used in photography, and I am conscious of a wave of heat. As I make for the door, it doesn't occur to me that the light might have something to do with enemy planes. There has been an interval of perhaps ten seconds since the flash of light. I am sprayed by fragments of glass. The entire window frame has been forced into the room.

Ever since those two events the church has had to confront the reality that light represents something both life giving and life destroying, a holy gift and a sinful distortion, that the energy we have both received and extracted from that light can sustain life but also has in the past, and could in the future, annihilate life, even all life. And the church has had to learn that we ignore either the ghastly or the glorious meanings at our peril, that the energy emanating to this day from Creation and Bethlehem is the very energy that must be used to prevent another Hiroshima.

Jonas Salk, the medical researcher who developed a vaccine for polio in the 1950s, once said, “Our greatest responsibility is to be good ancestors.” Most of us aspire to be good parents,

good grandparents, and if we're lucky, good great grandparents. But the concept of being a good ancestor stretches almost beyond our imagination deep into the future. How is it possible to think in these terms? And yet we know that decisions today about climate change will affect our descendants centuries after us. That the arrival of captive Africans in Virginia four hundred years ago continues to afflict the very soul of our nation to this day. So it is with nuclear weapons.

Today, far beneath the surface of the earth on the coast of Finland and under the salt flats in New Mexico engineers and miners are digging enormous vaults to entomb spent nuclear fuel from reactors and bombs that will remain deadly to the human species for millions of years. One of the intriguing questions is how to warn ancestors who might stumble upon this cache millennia into the future. What language, what symbol, what story to tell beings that will have evolved in ways we can't envision, assuming the species survives that long? Are we being good ancestors?

In spite of that, today the United States is spending billions of dollars modernizing its nuclear weapons force. We are developing new generations of weapons that make it more imaginable that we might actually use them, and other countries are following suit. Meanwhile, we are allowing the international treaties forged in in the 1980s and since, treaties and inspections that have dramatically reduced cold war stockpiles and provided some protection against nuclear madness or miscalculation to expire with no successors even proposed. Are we being good ancestors?

The Jesuit priest Daniel Berrigan taught us that "in the Gospel peace is a verb. You make the peace. You do not inherit it, or sit on it. You make it." Let these twin commemorations this summer – Trinity and Hiroshima – call us back again to the urgent task of making peace. Let them inform our prayers, end our complacency, inspire our advocacy, determine what leaders deserve our support and votes, and inspire our public witness. And let them make of us better ancestors, honestly facing the ghastly dimensions of Hiroshima's light, but also faithfully, and in hope, embracing the glory and the hope that beckons from the light of Creation and of Bethlehem.