

Precious lives: Reflections on a post-bin Laden world
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May 4, 2011, on the fifth anniversary of my grandson's birth

I spent more than an hour Monday morning poring over the newspaper, whose oversized front-page headline boldly proclaimed “A Nation United” above its story of Osama bin Laden’s death. Rarely have I felt more disunited, disheartened, discomfited. Literally *dispirited*, the Holy Spirited pledge to make all things new now mocked by Sunday crowds awash in frenzied rejoicing over assassination. All this, barely a week after Easter morning, with its renewal of baptismal vows “to renounce Satan, and all his works, and all his promises.”

The newspaper included theological justification in the words of a local pastor, who suggested that the military’s raid “sends a message that their lives [those killed in the 9/11 terrorist attacks] counted and their lives were precious.”

Precious. Precious, indeed. Their deaths can never be undone, or justified, or written off as collateral damage, which is how Gulf War veteran (turned terrorist bomber) Timothy McVeigh rationalized in 1995 the deaths of those children in the Murrah Federal Building’s day care center in Oklahoma City.

Precious indeed. But not only those lives; not only the lives of our kind, our tribe, our sect or nationality or religious orientation. All lives, as many of us were taught to sing in Sunday school—*red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight, Jesus loves the little children of the world*. Precious indeed, not because they are innocent but because they are vulnerable.

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“There is no flag,” Howard Zinn once wrote, “large enough to cover the shame of killing innocent people.” And violence, of every sort and under whatever party motto, national creed, or religious sanction, is a form of evangelism for the Devil. No matter how secularized we become, our nation never quite sheds the notion that violence can be redemptive; that by our ingenuity, combined with fortitude, we can make history come out right. That conviction, however piously or impiously held, is the only real atheism.

Nonetheless, innocence—like beauty—always seems to be in the eyes of the beholder.

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Upon return from my first visit to Iraq in 2000, I approached the U.S. customs agent with more than a little trepidation, since our government had criminalized travel to that land, backed by the dual threats of fines and jail time.

“Why were you there?” asked the official, staring at my customs forms. I could have withheld the fact that I’d been to Iraq, since that visa was issued separately, leaving no mark in my passport beyond the Jordanian entry stamp.

“To assess the impact of the U.N. economic sanctions against Iraq,” I replied.

“Are they working?”

“Well,” I said, “they’re certainly killing a lot of people.”

In a tone of voice which seemed to say I’d told him more than he really wanted to know, the customs agent handed back my passport and said, “OK, have a nice day.”

You may remember that those sanctions, according to a 1995 UNICEF study, were responsible for the deaths of an estimated 500,000 children. Most died from simple disease, the result of the 1991 “Desert Storm” bombing campaign’s targeting of the country’s water purification, sewage treatment, and electrical grid infrastructure. In the resulting poisoned environment, diarrhea became a deadly epidemic.

When then-U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright was interviewed in May 1996 on the CBS *60 Minutes* news program, reporter Leslie Stahl said, “We have heard that a half million children have died [as a result of sanctions against Iraq]. I mean, that is more children than died in Hiroshima. And, you know, is the price worth it?”

To which Albright replied: “I think this is a very hard choice, but the price, we think the price is worth it.”

In the political calculus of hard choices, some lives are not so precious and can be balanced against other valuable commodities.



None of us is immune from the emotion of rage. Indeed, the lust for vengeance is itself rooted in the longing for justice. And the flowering of that soured root is as old as Genesis.

In its fourth chapter, the Bible's opening book accounts the threat of Lamech, great-great-great grandson of Cain, son of Adam and Eve, who famously murdered his brother Abel. By Lamech's day, the tradition of redemptive killing had inflated by a factor of eleven.

"I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold."

To restore honor and avenge the loss of nearly 3,000 precious lives on 9/11, the U.S. launched a war against Iraq, which had nothing to do with the terrorist attack. The most conservative estimates of Iraqi civilian deaths run into the hundreds of thousands, upwards of a million. For that purpose, nearly 5,000 U.S. soldiers died and another 30,000 were wounded, with the national credit card tab in the trillions of dollars. Not to mention the costs in Afghanistan. And the meter's still running.

During most of the decade past, "God bless America" became the staple benediction to our political leaders' speeches. Ironically, of its 41 appearances as a verb in the Newer Testament, *bless* as an imperative occurs only twice: "Bless those who curse you," Jesus taught (Luke 6:28); and similarly, from the Apostle Paul, "Bless those who persecute you" (Romans 12:14).

"Every war already carries within it the war which will answer it," wrote the German artist Käthe Kollwitz, censored and threatened by the Nazis. "Every war is answered by a new war, until everything, everything is smashed." We all want peace. Our problem is that we also want what we cannot get without war. Once loosed, it feeds off its own fury.

"Who," asked the Apostle, in another part of his letter to the early church living in the belly of Rome's imperial rule, "can deliver [us] from this body of death?" (Romans 7:24). The response? Disarmed lives, shaped by disarmed hearts, by the power of God and in the manner of Jesus, whose purpose openly contradicted the mighty Caesar's claim to be the "author of peace" and "lord and savior" of the world. So that all life again may be precious.