

## A call to arms

Sara Wenger Shenk

**I**t is time for a call to arms. **No, not the kind you think.**

Not the kind that has a Christian college president calling on students to arm themselves to “end those Muslims. . . .”

Not the kind that has presidential candidates and their devotees spewing violent rhetoric against Muslims, refugees, Mexicans, African Americans, homosexuals, and women.

Not the kind that stokes fear against all manner of perceived terror threat with calls to “carpet bomb [ISIS] into oblivion.”

**NO!**

**Rather**, Mary’s magnificent “call to arms” is an exaltation of praise:

*“My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, . . .  
He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly.” (Luke 1:46, 51–52)*

**A call that rings with the fearless joy** born of resistance to despots in every age by those who stand firm within an alternative narrative, those who trust that “God’s arm is not too short to save” (Isa. 59:1).

**A call that knows true power lies with the powerless** whom God uses over and over to turn the world around.

**A call for those clad with the belt of truth**, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, wielding the most powerful of all swords—the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

It is time to end whatever complacency may have lulled us (persons of white privilege, for the most part) into a status quo stupor! Vitriol and hysteria are escalating daily with immediate

harm to refugees and to racial and religious minorities, many of whom are neighbors, co-workers, and family members.

**When brutish power bares its ugly fangs, we finally see the demagoguery of our current reality through the prism of prophetic biblical calls for justice, and our spiritual imagination is called to high alert.**

When despotic, brutish power bares its ugly fangs, things snap into focus—and we finally see. We see with a clarity that otherwise eludes those of us blinded by our privileged status. We see the demagoguery of our current reality through the prism of prophetic biblical calls for justice. And in seeing, our spiritual imagination is called to high alert.

In a *New York Times* op-ed column, “Finding Peace within the Holy Texts,” David Brooks recalled the book *Not in God’s Name: Confronting Religious Violence*, by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. Brooks summarizes several insights from the book like this (my emphasis):

*The great religions are based on love, and they satisfy the human need for community. But love is problematic. Love is preferential and particular. Love excludes and can create rivalries. Love of one scripture can make it hard to enter sympathetically into the minds of those who embrace another. . . .*

*Read simplistically, the Bible’s sibling rivalries seem merely like stories of victory or defeat—Isaac over Ishmael. **But all three Abrahamic religions have sophisticated, multilayered interpretive traditions that undercut fundamentalist readings.** . . .*

*The reconciliation between love and justice is not simple, but for believers the texts, read properly, point the way. . . . The answer to religious violence is probably going to be found within religion itself, among those who understand that **religion gains influence when it renounces power.**<sup>1</sup>*

**Imagine a world armed by Spirit-empowered learning communities**, where followers of Jesus and spiritually starved fundamentalists, and even those with little faith can gather to learn the sacred texts, the deep wisdom that has emboldened countless

people to become truth tellers on behalf of the poor, the oppressed, the alien, and the stranger.

*Imagine a world armed with the strong arms of those who link in solidarity* as communities of faith—small, intense communities where people gather and together find strength to stand firm in a counternarrative about “the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.”

*Imagine a world armed by communities with joyful chutzpah* who extend their arms to provide shelter to the homeless and the refugee, and who gladly sit at table with Muslims, Buddhists, and others who want to better understand our common humanity and desire to live at peace.

*Imagine a world where small, local bands of Jesus followers move out* from the security of church pews into the world—reaching out with sturdy arms of love to touch the earth gently, peacefully, with kindness and justice for all people and all creation.

**So Yes**—may we all present arms raised in praise, rejoicing in God our Saviour, whose strong arms lift up the lowly and guide our feet in the way of peace.

## Note

<sup>1</sup>David Brooks, “Finding Peace within the Holy Texts,” *New York Times*, November 17, 2016, [https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/17/opinion/finding-peace-within-the-holy-texts.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/17/opinion/finding-peace-within-the-holy-texts.html?_r=0).

## About the author

Sara Wenger Shenk is president of Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana. This article is reprinted from her blog, *Practicing Reconciliation* <https://www.ams.edu/publishing/blog/10153>.