



NEWSLETTER

Interfaith Peace Working Group

SPRING 2023

Holy Week and the Reign of God

by Jerry Folk

Christians and churches around the world recently observed Holy Week, a time in which they remember, reenact, and vicariously participate in Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection.

From the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus was in conflict with the religious and political authorities, because he announced the coming into the world of a new order that welcomes all people in a universal community of love which he called the Reign of God. Jesus initiated God's Reign on earth by acts of forgiveness and reconciliation. He created a community that modeled it by welcoming social outcasts like morally disreputable people, lepers, prostitutes, and foreigners, and by empowering powerless groups like women and the poor. He also promised that this new social order would, in the end, replace the present oppressive order maintained by the religious and political authorities.

Throughout this conflict, Jesus was courageous and bold, but he also remained steadfastly committed to nonviolence, the only method of "fighting" consistent with God's Reign of love that he proclaimed. We see this commitment most clearly during the last week of his life when his conflict with the authorities came to a climax. The week begins with a mass, nonviolent procession into Jerusalem that Jesus carefully planned as a public challenge to the Roman authorities and their Jewish collaborators. Words of the prophet Zachariah with which Jesus identified inspired this procession.

*"Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Lo, your king comes to you...humble and riding on a donkey...
He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem
and the battle bow shall be cut off,
and he shall command peace to the nations."*

–Zechariah 9:9-10

This was not the only procession into Jerusalem that day. As Jesus rode into Jerusalem from the south on a donkey surrounded by women who had followed him from Galilee, Galilean peasants, and other "nobodies," historical records tell us that the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, rode in from the North on a war horse, surrounded by soldiers dressed in splendid military attire and armed with the latest weapons. This militaristic display of imperial power was intended to intimidate the Jewish people. These two processions dramatize the difference between God's reign of love and the Empire's reign of violence.

INTERFAITH PEACE WORKING GROUP

consists of members from communities of faith and conscience committed to working for justice and peace. IPWG promotes education in nonviolent direct action and its use in peace and social justice campaigns and advocates for significant reductions in U.S. military spending and the demilitarization of U.S. society.



Jesus went directly to the Temple, where he engaged in an act of civil disobedience by overturning the moneychangers' tables and chasing them out of the Temple. But, unlike other young, Jewish messianic figures of his time, he was not violent in ways that could wound or kill. Jesus then spent several days teaching in the Temple, and his teaching spellbound the people who heard him. (Luke 19:48) When the priestly authorities, with the help of Judas, finally arrested Jesus, his disciples tried to defend him with swords, but he rebuked them, "Put your sword back into its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword," he said. In a final act of nonviolence Jesus prayed from the cross, asking God to forgive those who had crucified him.

The liturgies of Holy Week and intended to be not only a time merely to remember, contemplate, and be moved by the events in the last week of Jesus' life. These liturgies also call the Church and each of its members to reflect on the conflict between Empires' reign of violence and God's nonviolent Reign of Love. It is this proclamation and this conflict that led to

Jesus' arrest, suffering, and execution. The liturgies of Holy Week, rightly observed, also remind the Church and Christians that this conflict is still going on and compel us to reflect on our relationship to it. Are we neutral bystanders, observing this struggle from a safe distance? Or are we, in a way that is consistent with Jesus' message of love, active participants in it. To what extent, as ecclesiastical institutions, and as individual believers, are we willing to share in Jesus' suffering and death for the sake of God's Reign on earth?

The last step in our observance of Holy Week is to move from reflection to active participation in Jesus' work to make the Reign of God real in the world. This means challenging the Powers and Principalities of this world in one way or another. As we reflect and act on this ongoing struggle, it is important to remember that Holy Week does not end with Jesus on the cross or in the tomb. It ends with Easter and Jesus alive and in our midst. May the hope of Easter sustain and empower us as we walk the Way of Jesus together in the world!

Jerry Folk is a retired ELCA clergyman.

Toward Peace in Ukraine

The war in Ukraine rages on, killing and wounding tens of thousands of soldiers on both sides and many Ukrainian civilians. It's also destroying Ukraine's infrastructure and environment.

There is much difference of opinion about this war and its causes among people and groups in the U.S. Nearly all condemn Russia's invasion. However, some argue that the U.S./NATO decision to move NATO troops and weapons to the Russian border and U.S. involvement in the 2014 coup in Ukraine, which replaced a democratically elected, Russia-friendly President with an unelected pro-western leader, were unwise. It is understandable, they say, that Russia sees these acts as provocative.

After reading a lot of arguments on both sides, the most reasonable

conclusion seems to be that the situation in Ukraine is far more complicated than either the U.S., Ukraine, or Russia portrays it. In any case, these arguments are irrelevant, because what really matters in this war isn't who is to blame but finding a way to end it. We can only do this through negotiations, hopefully with a ceasefire in place. Some oppose a ceasefire, arguing that it will allow the "other side" to reinforce its troops. If we can't agree on a ceasefire, let's begin to negotiate anyway and make a ceasefire agreement the first item on the agenda.

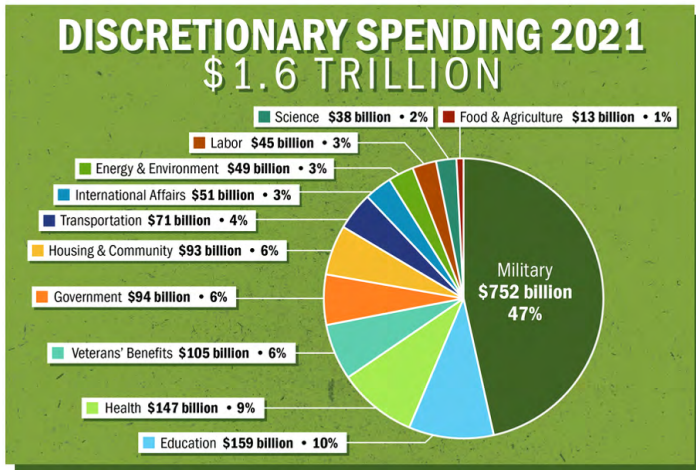
Convinced that "you can't negotiate with a man like Putin," some even oppose negotiations. But, since neither side is likely to achieve victory in Ukraine any time soon, the alternative is an indefinite continuation of this brutal and

bloody war with more deaths and destruction. Sooner or later, we must find a political solution and that requires negotiating. The sooner negotiations begin, the sooner we can find a way to end the war and the enormous suffering it's causing.

CODEPINK and the Peace in Ukraine Coalition are circulating a petition that calls on the Biden administration to work vigorously to initiate diplomatic negotiations aimed at ending this war. Since commitment to peace is central in the culture and teaching of faith communities and communities of conscience, it is logical to think that these communities would want to support this effort. If you or your faith community want to do this, the Interfaith Peace Working Group invites you to [sign this petition](#) demanding vigorous diplomatic efforts to end the war in Ukraine.

President Biden's Record Military Budget

On March 9, President Biden submitted his **\$846 billion** 2024 Military Budget to Congress. If past years are any indication, it's likely Congress will increase it significantly. No decision of the federal government is more important or has more effects on U.S. society than the decision about the annual U.S. military budget. Yet, unlike most other expenses, the nation's military spending is rarely a point of political debate. Whatever the Pentagon requests and often more is simply accepted.



nationalpriorities.org

Congress will be debating and acting on President Biden's military budget in the months ahead. A decision as important as this one deserves widespread political debate. But if U.S. citizens are to deliberate intelligently on the military budget, they must have important and relevant information that enables them to think critically about the military budget. Citizens need to know, for example, that the U.S. spends half or more of the nation's discretionary money, which is money not designated for a specific purpose like Medicare, Social Security, or interest on the national debt, on the military. (See the graph above of the 2021 discretionary budget, which is the latest one available. The 2024 discretionary budget graph would look much the same.) They also need to know that the U.S. military budget is **greater than the next nine highest military budgets in the world combined!**

Useful and intelligent debate about the U.S. military budget also requires some knowledge of the effects spending such

a large proportion of the nation's money on the military has on society. First, the enormous military budget of the U.S. contributes significantly to the national deficit, yet in conversations about reducing the deficit, no one ever suggests cutting the military budget. Spending half or more of the nation's discretionary money on the military also deprives the nation of funds needed to address other urgent threats to our wellbeing like climate change, health care that is unaffordable for many, and economic inequality.

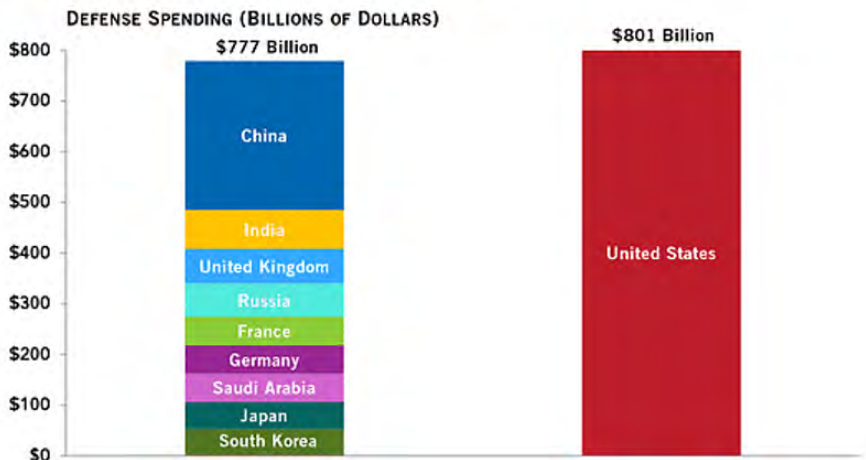
We all want to be safe and secure, but surely none of us wants to spend one penny more than necessary on the military, especially since we face so many other threats that we need to address. Does national security require the nation to spend over half its discretionary money on the military? Does it require a U.S. military budget that exceeds **the next nine highest military budgets combined?** Would the nation be more secure if it spent some of this money to address other urgent threats confronting the U.S. and the world.

If your answer to these questions is "no" and "yes" respectively, we invite you to sign CodePink's petition in support of the *People Over the Pentagon Act*, which would reduce the President's proposed 2024 Pentagon budget of \$846 billion by \$100 billion and use this money to address other urgent threats to national security. To do so, click on the link below.

[#CutThePentagon](#)



The United States spends more on defense than the next 9 countries combined



SOURCE: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, April 2022.
 NOTES: Figures are in U.S. dollars converted from local currencies using market exchange rates. Data for the United States are for fiscal year 2021, which ran from October 1, 2020 through September 30, 2021. Data for the other countries are for calendar year 2021. The source for this chart uses a definition of defense spending that is more broad than budget function 050 and defense discretionary spending.
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Slash Military Budget Faith Groups Urge

In response to Biden's proposed record military budget of \$846 billion, the National Council of Churches and 61 other faith-based organizations sent a letter to Congress urging it to cut dramatically U.S. militarized spending and put the money toward health care, housing, education, and other areas of human wellbeing.

"The country is sprinting towards a trillion-dollar budget for weapons and war—propping up an expensive and harmful militarized foreign policy while people struggle to meet their basic needs," the organizations, led by Quaker group the American Friends Service Committee, wrote. "We cannot continue down this morally bankrupt path." Read the whole letter [here](#).

WCC Urges Support for Funding Firearm Measures



WISCONSIN COUNCIL
OF CHURCHES

The Wisconsin Council of Churches is urging people to support funding

for measures to protect our children and others from firearm injuries and deaths that the governor has included in his budget. These measures include the following:

- Sales tax exemptions for gun safes, trigger locks, and gun barrel locks
- Funding for suicide and violence prevention programs and 988 call centers
- Expanded background checks for gun purchases
- Extreme Risk Protection Orders (ERPO or "red flag" orders)

The state legislature and its Joint Finance Committee will decide whether to include any of these in the final state budget. For the safety of everyone in this state—no matter who we are, where we live, or whatever our age or circumstances—the WCC invites you to urge your legislator to support funding for these measures.

[Please tell your legislators to keep these measures in the state budget!](#)

Back from the Brink Update

by Paula Rogge

LOCAL ACTION

Sixteen different community and faith groups have called on the City of Madison to support a Back from the Brink Resolution which calls on the U.S. to move the world back from the brink of nuclear war by:

- actively pursuing a verifiable agreement among nuclear-armed states to mutually eliminate their nuclear arsenals.
- renouncing the option of using nuclear weapons as a first option.
- ending the President's sole authority to launch a nuclear attack.
- taking the nuclear weapons of the United States off hair-trigger alert.
- canceling the plan to replace the nuclear arsenal of the United States with modernized, enhanced weapons.

The coalition has also asked the City to commit to nuclear weapon free investments and contracts.

The Resolution has the support of a majority of City Council members and the City Finance Director just completed a preliminary plan for divestment. The coalition expects very soon to bring the Resolution to the City Council for a vote.

NATIONAL ACTION

To date, 71 cities and municipalities and four state governments have passed *Back from the Brink* Resolutions. Twelve members of congress have also co-sponsored House Resolution 77, which calls for the U.S. to embrace the goals and provisions of the United Nations Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and act on the five *Back from the Brink* recommendations listed above. Representatives of the Madison Back from the Brink coalition recently spoke with Rep. Mark Pocan and urged him to support HR 77.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

- Endorse Back from the Brink as an individual.
- Ask your organization or faith community to endorse Back from the Brink.
- Ask your City Council members and County officials to pass a Back from the Brink Resolution.
- Ask your elected representatives to co-sponsor HR 77 in the House and a similar Resolution in the Senate.
- To endorse and get more information, go to the Back from the Brink website: preventnuclearwar.org



Turning Guns into Garden Tools

by Jeff Wild

Inspired by words of the Prophet Isaiah “They shall beat their swords into pruning hooks,” (Isaiah 2:4) the *Guns to Garden Tools* Movement sponsors safe surrender of firearm events all over the country. In these events, blacksmiths forge firearms into garden tools. The Wisconsin Council of Churches is pleased to announce that two congregations in Madison will be participating in such an event during Gun Violence Prevention Month in June. First United Methodist will host a safe surrender on Saturday, June 3, and Midvale Community Lutheran Church will host a safe surrender on Saturday, June 10. Both events will run from 9 am to 12 pm. Individuals

planning to anonymously surrender firearms are asked to transport them in the back seat or trunk of their vehicle. People surrendering firearms will be offered gift cards in appreciation for their donation to Guns to Garden Tools.

For more info, contact Jeff Wild at jtwildwi@gmail.com. Wild is available to give presentations and forging demonstrations to faith communities and other groups that are interested in reducing gun violence.

Jeff Wild is a retired ELCA pastor and a blacksmith who participates in Safe Surrender of Firearms events in the Madison areas.

Eyewitness Account of COP27 Climate Conference

by Steve Watrous

The United Nations held its 27th annual climate change conference last November in Egypt. The 195 nations involved in official negotiations took at least a baby step toward a future that gets the world back in tune with nature. I journeyed to Egypt to join over 45,000 participants for the most important annual meeting at which all interested parties meet to talk—and sometimes act—on our climate crisis.

The best thing at COP27 was the presence of Indigenous peoples, all kinds of communities, civil society organizations, and others that showcased their projects, networked, and made plans in caucus meetings. Not so helpful was the presence of many lobbyists for the fossil fuel industry.

“Keep 1.5 alive!” pleaded speakers during two weeks of the Conference. That means **limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius** above pre-industrial levels.



Exhortations to do more and faster to avoid disaster rang out in every presentation. One speaker said that, on our present course, it appears that “we are trying to make ourselves extinct.” I saw many good projects, great ideas, and tremendous youthful energy. But is it enough?

Participants at COP 27 made promises, but no mechanism forces countries to live up to the promises they made at COP 27. That's where citizens of the world come in. Only you and I can prevent global burning. We humans have the technology and money to do the job, but it requires serious political will and lifestyle changes.

Steve Watrous represented the United Nations Association of the U.S.A at COP27; he is president of the Milwaukee chapter of this citizen organization. Steve also works with IPWG.

Wisconsin Against World War Three (WI vs. WW3)

by Jim Carpenter

Wisconsin vs. World War Three, a "big-tent" organization that includes representatives from diverse groups like the People's Party, the Libertarian Party, and the Milwaukee End the War Coalition, opposes the U.S.' hostile foreign policy towards Russia and China. This policy increases the risk of a global nuclear conflict that could lead to the deaths of billions of people, the destruction of the environment and the end of human civilization as we know it. We advocate a policy that includes the following commitments:

1. No more U.S. money for military involvement in the war in Ukraine.
2. De-escalate tensions with Russia and negotiate a ceasefire in Ukraine.
3. No military conflict with China over Taiwan or any other issue.
4. Re-enter nuclear non-proliferation agreements.
5. Reallocate a significant proportion of Pentagon funding to civilian projects.

We will picket Senator Baldwin's office at 30 W. Mifflin Street on Saturday, May 6 at 10 am to urge her to support these points and then march down State Street to urge all of our elected leaders to support them as well. We invite everyone who is interested to join us.

Find more information about WI vs WW3 [here](#).

Jim Carpenter is a Milwaukee leader in Peace Action, WI, a member of the Interfaith Peace Working Group and co-chairs CODEPINK's Peace in Ukraine Coalition.



The U.S. military is one of the largest climate polluters in history, consuming more liquid fuels and emitting more CO₂e (carbon-dioxide equivalent) than most countries.



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