One Black Man’s Prayer For Peace

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A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.
-Martin Luther King Jr.

The goal is to have an endless war, not a successful war.
-Julian Assange

A time of unprecedented danger: it is 90 seconds to midnight.
-Bulletin of Atomic Scientists 1/24/23

I wanted to pray for peace
and was told that these
Black man prayers
necessitate hands folded or
above my head
or behind my back
and are preferably only delivered
on my knees on the asphalt
at police gunpoint, or whispered alone
at night in my pillow
rather than into the dollarized
ears of politicians
perched on top of ballot boxes.
I was told my prayers for peace
are too unwieldy and require special delivery
of a sort that is way beyond my budget
which is nowhere near that of Raytheon,
Lockheed Martin, General Dynamics,
MacDonald Douglass, Honeywell
or Haliburton. I was told that my prayers
are too cheap and fly-by-night,
like most Black men,
they said, to matter,
that these Black man prayers are frankly
obsolete, only worth pennies on the dollar
and depreciating rapidly.
I was told that to pray for peace
it is best to wait
until after the next election cycle
and to collaborate with those who
pray for more war and less diplomacy,
less listening, less peacemaking
in the meantime.
I wanted to pray for peace
but my prayers won’t fit in the donation envelope,
too swollen and sodden with sweaty exasperation
after generations of baptisms in generational wars,
my country up to its neck in weapon sales
dividends and stock capitalization
and World Bank amortization
ever since before I was born.
I was told that my prayers for peace
do not have the advertising budget
for even one second of one commercial
on MSNBC, CNN or FOX,
and not enough cash or caché for one line
of one ad or article in The New York Times
or The Washington Post.
I was told that my prayers for peace
violate YouTube’s Community Standards,
that these mutinous prayers have been flagged
and shadow banned as misinformation
on all social media platforms.
I was told that my prayers for peace
are a political hoax, prayers puppeted
by a foreign voice not my own.
I was told that my prayers for peace are mere
propaganda, that peace movement is mere parlance
for political party, that I'm gettin' played
by our enemies, foreign and domestic.
I was told my prayers for peace are a menace
to our current war which must be fought
before we get into the next, more important war
against yet another more important enemy.
I was told that my prayer for peace is as
good as a prayer against the turning of the globe
or the clockwork running of an empire
I was told that my prayers for peace are destructive
and delusional, bad for the economy,
unpatriotic, soft headed and, even worse,
impolite dinner conversation.
I was told that my prayers for peace
will make my teeth fall out,
and my dick soft,
lower my credit score,
-drain my bank account
and toss me out on the street.
I was told my prayer for peace is, frankly,
ot a very original poetic idea, cliché,
a tired polemic done before too many times
so why even try to sing that old song?
I was told my prayers for peace
are too long and meandering,
that they need to hurry it up and get going,
that ain't nobody got time for all that.
I was told so many times, dear reader,
that I gave up my prayer for peace –
or at least I tried to. I swallowed it down
like bad medicine to swirl in my gut
and sink.

But here it is again, lifting its head
into my throat, telling its stubborn story
with all its tacky misfortune –
with all its hackneyed,
florid, simple glory
smoldering
on my tongue:

In the middle of war
for the sake of war,
this prayer for peace.

In the middle of profit
for the sake of war,
this prayer for peace.

In the middle of nation
for the sake of war,
this prayer for peace.

In the middle of chest lacerating pride
for the sake of war,
this prayer for peace.

This prayer, staggered off the knees,
stupid with hope, weathered with history,
soul clapping, striving, buying up the air
in my throat with the only thing
I can afford,
this breath I share with you,
this costliest, costless woeless bray,
this prayer to all gods
and therefore to none,
this prayer to all humans
and therefore to all gods,
this prayer above my head,
behind my back,
unfolding around me
down to the last furled flag
and unfurled fist
I surrender to you
this open palmed
melanated prayer for peace,
a prayer I can’t finish without you,
a prayer in search of amen.

About the author

Tyehimba Jess is the author of two books of poetry, Leadbelly and Olio. Olio won the 2017 Pulitzer Prize, the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award, The Midland Society Author’s Award in Poetry, and received an Outstanding Contribution to Publishing Citation from the Black Caucus of the American Library Association. It was also nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award, the PEN Jean Stein Book Award, and the Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award. Leadbelly was a winner of the 2004 National Poetry Series. The Library Journal and Black Issues Book Review both named it one of the “Best Poetry Books of 2005.”