For almost a decade now, Americans have been repeatedly warned that we are at war. However, yesterday, we celebrated a new vision, not only for ourselves, but hopefully for the world, a vision that begins with preparing ourselves for peace.

Are those merely words? Looking around at the horrific events taking place daily in many corners of the globe it certainly seems so. Thinking about the seemingly endless cycles of violence in the Middle East can make it seem that way.

But I want to believe that it is more than words; I want to believe that we are, indeed, on the precipice of an important international paradigm shift away from conflict and war to one of dialogue, diplomacy and peace. Yesterday, Barack Obama made some ambitious promises. He told us – Americans and members of the international community alike – “know that America is a friend of each nation and every man, woman, and child who seeks a future of peace and dignity, and that we are ready to lead once more.”

What President Obama is proposing is a national vision in which power is defined as much through its restraint as through its exercise, and greatness is defined through service. As I listened to his inaugural speech, delivered one day after the national remembrance of Dr. Martin Luther King’s extraordinary service to the Civil Rights movement and to non-violent struggle for political and social change, I know that people will say that in some cases violence is necessary, and I will not disagree, but I think we need to stop – and ask ourselves some hard questions. When is violence necessary and how much is the right amount? What do we owe the children who are dying, whose innocence we continue to sacrifice? And most difficult, perhaps: do we really want peace?

Of course, many will say, we want peace! But is that true? Peace is not a state that can be achieved by crushing an enemy into the ground. Peace is not something we have in the absence of violence. It is an active process, an engaged state of being, a conscious way of seeing. Peace forces us to think beyond what we require others to surrender – to what we are willing to give up. Not in some vague future time, but now. What are we willing to do now to create peace? Do we have the courage to give as much as we demand in return, and to possibly make the first gesture in that exchange?

Peace is not easy; in fact, it may be more difficult than war. We tend to be too comfortable seeing peace as an ideal rather than a reality, even as we measure the costs in horrifying human suffering and loss of innocent lives. Peace, of course, is rather patient, allowing us to fumble around and analyze all the reasons for our failures, no matter how valid those reasons may be. The problem is that there is never just one story, never just one truth, and at some point even the best reasons start to look like excuses.

So as we pause here tonight, let us ask what each of us is willing to do to pursue peace rather than conflict. And let us begin by asking if we even want peace – if we genuinely, wholeheartedly, unfailingly desire peace – because only when that answer is yes can we begin to engage the process. And until then, we will continue to blame each other, and accuse each other, and hate each other, and fight each other, until – perhaps one day it is only our absence from this planet that will end our violent conflicts – and ultimately, those very ideals we are fighting so hard to protect. The moment is ours to choose. And the choice is ours to make.