

## Meditation in Time of War

### Sermon for Lent 2, March 13, 2022

*Readings:* Genesis 15:1-12,17-18; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35;  
Psalm 27

*Sermon text:* Though an army should encamp against me, yet my heart shall not be afraid; And though war should rise up against me, yet will I put my trust in him. Psalm 27:3

First a little background to the gospel reading. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. He has set his face to go there after the Transfiguration—where he apparently received divine confirmation of his call and a premonition of his death: Let these words sink into your ears, he told the disciples, “The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands” (Luke 9:44).

It is not a happy band that sets out south from Galilee. Thomas has doubts about the wisdom of going to hostile territory and Peter refuses to even discuss what will happen when they get there. Along the way they encounter Samaritans who refuse him lodging. His disciples James and John, who had been with Jesus on the mountain, ask Jesus if he wants them to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them (9:54). Jesus rebukes them—but later notes that it will be like Sodom and Gomorrah times ten for those Jewish towns and villages that reject his proclamation of the coming kingdom and offer of peace (10:12-15). The kingdom of God is coming, but a hard rain’s also gonna fall. The gospel is not good news for everyone.

As he goes from town to town teaching and healing, sending out his disciples to do the same, Jesus argues with and forcefully rebukes the Pharisees and scribes who confront him. Finally in chapter 12, he exclaims, Do you think I come to bring peace? No, I come to bring division and fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism to undergo—a baptism of fire and death—and what stress I am under until it is completed! (12:49-50).

So, in this morning’s gospel portion, toward the end of chapter 13, when some sympathetic Pharisees (for they were not uniform in their opposition) come to Jesus and warn him about Herod, the son of the tyrant who had ordered the slaughter of the innocent children at Jesus’ birth, Jesus snaps at them: Tell that

snake he has no power to stop me from getting to Jerusalem—for it is there that the prophets go to be killed.

Yet he continues almost with a sigh: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (Luke 13:34).

It is God speaking in the first person here, and Jerusalem is none other than the collective identity of humanity, understood as chosen and beloved of God.

God wants to gather the nations of the world under her wing, protect and nurture them—but they were not willing. We are not willing. See, Jesus says, your house is left to you. Our ancestors have made our bed. We must lie in it now. We have built our houses, but not like those of wisdom, built on the foundation of the word of God, but built on sand and self interest. The storm will come, the flood sweep through and all will fall, even the Temple, toward which Jesus makes his determined way.

Thursday morning I stepped outside the Rectory and looked up to see a large cargo plane flying fairly low overhead. I am not used to seeing large low-flying planes around here—only distant passenger planes and their contrails high above. I imagined bomber doors opening and thread of bombs falling from the sky, followed by massive explosions.

The reality of life in Ukraine as we sit here this morning. Bombs, shells, missiles. Pitched battles. We have seen the pictures but we cannot imagine the actual terror misery and grief and fierce determination and the willingness to fight and die. At least I can't, for I have never been in such a situation.

But history is full of such terrible things, so easily swept into a small word: war.

“War, what is it good for? Huh, absolutely nothing. Say it again... War...” (Edwin Starr, 1969): “War I despise 'Cause it means destruction of innocent lives. War means tears to thousands of mothers' eyes. When their sons go out to fight and lose their lives... Good God, y'all.”

But it happens. And how should we think about war as Christians? Of course this is a huge topic but the short answer is, it's complicated. As you have just heard, Jesus himself was not conflict averse. And of course the Bible is full of stories of war. The biblical King David was the original David versus Goliath story. Of course he was not king then, just a shepherd, youngest of seven sons, yet he stepped up to face the giant Philistine warrior when no one else would—and defeated him. Stones against javelin and shield. Later he fought as a guerrilla insurgent, then as king commanding an army. Many psalms are attributed to him, including the psalm appointed for today, Psalm 27. The third verse reads: “Though an army should encamp against me, yet my heart shall not be afraid; And though war should rise up against me, yet will I put my trust in him.”

What is it like to so trust in God that you will not fear even in the face of an enemy army encamped on your border, preparing to invade?

The takeaway from David is that warriors are needed, as shepherds are, to defend the flock from the wolves. Kings and their armies defend the land from imperial aggressors throughout Israelite history—and that's fine. But not all wars are so justifiable, including the war of the Israelites to conquer the land of Canaan. Nowadays we do not approve of imperial aggression—a couple of world wars proved a devastating lesson; once let slip, the dogs of war turn rabid. Our whole postwar global order is built on the principle of stopping territorial invasion. Though America, as a quasi-imperial power, has not always abided by this principle, we nevertheless espouse it and even now are defending it in the case of Russian territorial aggression. And Christian just war theory has led to a general acceptance at the UN level of principles such as: Not targeting civilians, responses with force disproportionate to grievance, refusing other means of conflict resolution and so on—all matters of just war theory from those Christians who do not adopt a purely pacifist position like the Quakers and Mennonites. And all of these Russia has wantonly broken. They must be stopped for the sake of humanity, not just Ukrainians, though they should be supported as far as possible without drawing the great powers into total war. It is a terrible war that can easily become far worse, and a very narrow road to a just peace and brighter future for Ukraine and Russia.

But let us trust in God. Let us pray and work for peace.

For however much a realist in geopolitics, a Christian must still consider and take to heart the teaching and example of Jesus. True, he boldly confronted his enemies and warned of dire consequences for rebellion against God. But he

always practiced the primacy of love, the need for humility, the need to be the one who breaks the cycle of revenge and violence with forgiveness and non-violence. He trusted in God to be the judge. And so instead of calling on the twelve legions of angels at his command he submitted to the Jerusalem mob and the Roman army. He sacrificed himself. Not others. He was not only being courageous in this, he knew it was a kind of war of the spirit he was waging against a greater enemy still: Satan. and death. And these he defeated on the third day of the final battle.

So though an army should rise up against us, let us put our trust in God. Believe in Christ and the power of love to conquer hate, life over death. Let us strive to do the good and just thing, support the embattled forces of good, comfort the widows and orphans, house the refugees, pray and work for peace.

In Christ's name, Amen.

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W. B. Yeats, Meditation in a Time of War (published 1921)

For one throb of the artery,  
While on that old grey stone I sat  
Under the old wind-broken tree,  
I knew that One is animate  
Mankind inanimate phantasy