

Working for peace in a world of war

Message for Sunday, November 8, 2015
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Isaiah 2:4; Joshua 10:8-14

Children's Message: Allow children to ask some of the veterans their thoughts about Remembrance Day, and about their colleagues who died. If they're shy, I can ask on their behalf:

- You're still here; some of your friends were killed in battle. How do you feel about that?
- What does Remembrance Day mean to you?
- Do you have hope for peace in our world?

Sermon: "Working for peace in a world of war"

Let me tell you my own experience of war. It has profoundly affected how I look at life. It was thirty-six years ago, in 1979. I was living in Bolivia, a country in the middle of South America. I had gone there to see how the other half of the world lives.

For the twelve years before that they had been ruled by a military dictator who was finally overthrown in a coup. An interim government promised free and fair elections, to happen on July 1. When election day came, it was like a huge party. It didn't matter so much who won. Just simply being able to vote was an emotional experience in itself.

The new government set about trying to restore order to the country. But at the same time, another general wanted power, and secretly got the support of the top officers in the armed forces. The excuse these dictators always give is that the elected government is not doing a good job. But the real reason is greed: whoever controls the treasury soon becomes a millionaire. The next in command get their share, too, and so on down the line.

Four months later, on November 1, people in the capital city of La Paz were awakened at three o'clock in the morning by the sounds of trucks and tanks going by their windows. The Bolivian Armed Forces had invaded their own country. The ordinary soldiers didn't have much choice: it was either obey orders, or be shot by your commanding officer.

The people there are very poor, and don't own weapons. Nevertheless, they are not powerless. Later that day when I was out walking, I found a

group of men who were using shovels to put a pile of dirt in the middle of their street. They told me they were building a barricade so the army trucks couldn't get through their neighbourhood.

The next morning I went back to the same area. The pile of dirt was scattered in all directions. The ground was stained red over a large area. I asked some of the people nearby what happened. Can you picture men armed with shovels trying to stop a tank? Someone had placed a cross on the side of the road to mark the spot. Over the next few days, all over the city there were more than a hundred crosses.

War is not pretty. Some movies have glamorized war, made war into a sport where the handsome hero wins the battle against impossible odds. I think William Sherman, a general in the American Civil War summed it accurately: "War is hell."

World War I was supposed to be the "War to end all wars." World War II was thought to be a fairly clear battle of the free world against the powers which sought to dominate it (although I don't know if you'd call Stalin's Russia a "free" country).

1) People see war as "good guys vs. bad guys"

When people go to war, they often believe they are fighting for the good guys, against the bad guys. They believe God is on their side and will bless them and give them victory.

We even see this in the Bible, in chapter 10 of the book of Joshua. There is a battle between Israel and some enemies.

Joshua 10:8, New International Version:

The LORD said to Joshua, "Do not be afraid of them; I have given them into your hand. Not one of them will be able to withstand you."

Joshua 10:10, New International Version:

The LORD threw them into confusion before Israel, who defeated them in a great victory at Gibeon. Israel pursued them along the road going up to Beth Horon and cut them down all the way to Azekah and Makkedah.

Joshua 10:11, New International Version:

As they fled before Israel on the road down from Beth Horon to Azekah, the LORD hurled large hailstones down on them from the sky, and more of them died

from the hailstones than were killed by the swords of the Israelites.

Joshua 10:12–14, New International Version:

Joshua said to the LORD in the presence of Israel:

“O sun, stand still over Gibeon,
O moon, over the Valley of Aijalon.”

So the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, till the nation avenged itself on its enemies, as it is written in the Book of Jashar.

The sun stopped in the middle of the sky and delayed going down about a full day. There has never been a day like it before or since, a day when the LORD listened to a man. Surely the LORD was fighting for Israel!

Whether or not you believe it really happened like that is an interesting topic. But the point for today is: they believed that God blessed their war, that God was a soldier fighting alongside them.

In the Middle Ages, the Crusades were fought between Christians and Muslims, both sides believing that God was on their side.

Pierre Burton, in his book *The Comfortable Pew*, gives examples of sermons preached during World War I:

- On the Allied side: by Dr. Holmes Dudden, Chaplain to the Bishop of London: “we are fighting for the triumph of Christ, the salvation of Christendom, the preservation of all that is holiest and best in Christian civilization.”
- On the German side: a Pastor Lehmann: “The German soul is God’s soul and it shall rule over mankind.”

2) God’s ultimate plan is for all wars and fighting to cease

Isaiah 2:4, New International Version:

He will judge between the nations
and will settle disputes for many peoples.
They will beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not take up sword against nation,
nor will they train for war anymore.

That hasn’t happened yet. So we find ourselves in that awkward in-between time. We have this ideal before us, the but reality is quite different.

It is easy for me to say these things, from my safe and comfortable position here in Stirling, Canada. Today we pause to remember men and women from Canada and other nations who accepted the ambivalence of war, who offered themselves in the fight for right, and whose lives were sacrificed in that struggle. It is because of them that we have the luxury to be able to ponder the question of war. They, too, had questions, but they went ahead nevertheless. We honour them and thank them. In the meantime, we commit ourselves to work for peace. Peace is not merely the absence of fighting; it is the presence of goodwill and justice for all. That means more than just having nice thoughts. It means:

Next Steps:

- Practise forgiveness.
- Really listen to others with whom you disagree.
- Pray for enemies.
- Do kindness to everyone.