

## Past Sermons

The Third Sunday in Lent  
The Sunday following the Invasion of Iraq  
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St. Paul's Episcopal Church  
Salt Lake City  
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What wars and conflicts do you bring to this service? Are you thinking about family members or friends who have been deployed to wage war in Iraq? Are you thinking about their families who are not only struggling with the emotions of being parted from loved ones and with fears for their safety, but also wondering how to survive economically. Are you remembering your own service, or comrades or friends from the Second World War, Korea, Vietnam, or more recently? Are you anxious about what has happened since 11th September last year? Are you angry and/or disgusted that the United States and Britain have made a preemptive strike against another country? All these concerns and more are here with us today. Let us acknowledge our fears and concerns and lay them before the altar of God. Let us draw strength from the body and blood of Jesus Christ that will shortly be placed in our hands.

Some 600 hundred years before Christ was born there Jerusalem was destroyed and the people taken off into exile in Babylon. The prophet Micah a contemporary of Isaiah, being an ordinary person from a small, poor village in Judea remains in the land and writes from a conquered country. Later following the war between the great city state of Babylon and the new empire of Persia, the people of Israel, who had been slaves in Babylon for seventy years, were set free and allowed to return to their country and start life all over again.

As is the case after all periods of war and suffering, it took a while for things to get back to normal. The city of Jerusalem was still pretty much a wreck. The temple which had been destroyed 70 years earlier was only half rebuilt, and times were tough.

In the midst of devastation the prophecies of Micah are edited to reveal Israel's glorious future and the restoration of the kingdom. In them the people of Israel are told what they should do:

"... they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore; but they shall sit under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid..."

This has ever been the answer of God to us when we ask the question - what is it that God wants us to do? This is the vision of hope that we must keep before us no matter what. This is the vision that the people of Israel and Judea kept before them during all the days of their devastation.

Given the history of our world it is difficult to keep that vision in front of us. Much of what I was taught at school was a history of war and conflict - beginning with Boadacia vainly defending her country against the marauding Roman Legions; Harold losing the Battle of Hastings against the Normans in 1066; Henry V at the Battle of Agincourt; the War of the Roses and the English Civil War; the Boer War; the Afgan Wars, and World War I and II.

War was the background to my early childhood, as I walked to school carrying my gas mask, listened to the sirens, slept in an air raid shelter, heard the bombs drop, and watched the V2 rockets overhead as they made their way from Peenamunde to London. Few people who have experienced war glorify it. The idealism and adventure of war is more frequently expressed by those who are far from its reality. Those who are the most hardline tend to be those who remain far away. Those who have experienced its devastating effect on the human spirit are more likely to express its heartrending anguish. Most soldiers do not want to fight. Most want to preserve peace, so that the future may be more enlightened than the past, and so that no more need to die on a battle field.

Most of the veterans I know who have served in combat have understood that they served for the cause of peace not war. When we go to war even when there is a sense of inevitability about it some also acknowledge that it is the result of failure. It is the failure of diplomacy - the failure of imagination, and the result of human sin and self-interest. We have to acknowledge that the seeds of violence and war are in all of us. On the other hand the constitution of UNESCO reminds us that "since wars begin in the mind of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed."

We know that the First World War was thought to be the war to end all wars. Yet we also know that it was followed by the Second World War, then Korea, Vietnam and the first Gulf War, and several other engagements whether declared war or not. And now we are engaged once again in war. With hindsight we can see the seeds of later conflicts in those that have gone before. There is little doubt that Saddam Hussein has oppressed his people. There is little doubt that atrocious acts have taken place. Yet we do not seem to learn from history. Both Britain and Russia tried to conquer and pacify Afghanistan. Alexander the Great a couple of millenia earlier wouldn't even go there! And, we think that we can succeed where no one else has been able to do so. Today when the only great power left is the United States, and the international balancing act is no longer, the United States has a special responsibility to maintain that balance, for whether we like it or not we live in a global society. Just as in relationships between individuals, so it is with relationships between nations We must keep in mind that might doesn't make right, and that absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Our Christian ethical tradition offers us the 'Just War' theory, a set of principles to help us decide whether a military action is morally just or unjust. These principles of the Just War can help us decide where we stand on Iraq. Depending on the list they vary slightly but are essentially the same. These principles include:

There must be lawful authority - authority at the highest possible level. In this day and age is this highest level the government of one or two countries, or is international consensus required (or at least a substantial majority)?

There must be just cause - if Iraq has weapons of mass destruction is their possession by itself sufficient cause for a war, even when in the hands of someone who can't be trusted?

Every effort must have been made to resolve the dispute first by peaceful means - has the clear moral obligation to go on persevering to find alternatives to full-scale warfare taken place? Has enough been done to resolve the dispute peacefully.

This war must not cause more evil than has already taken place - in the present situation will this action leave the whole Middle East in flames. Will engaging in war exacerbate the crisis or resolve it.

There must be a reasonable chance of success - if we are to evaluate success then the aims of war must be clear. What do we mean by success?

There must be reasonable care for the safety of non-combatants - given the lethality of modern weapons is that even possible?

Thinking people will differ on whether we are engaged in a just war or not. Faithful Christians will come down on either side of the issue. Some will consider the current engagement just, others will not. In the Christian community there is room for both opinions and we must honor and respect each other in love. When the late Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, who was awarded the Military Cross as a tank commander during the Second World War, talked about war, he said that it was always a sign of human failure. It means that more peaceful solutions have broken down or have not been tried properly. Wild west terminology and a macho gun culture should alarm us to the unimaginative acculturation of violent solutions.

These past few days the war in Iraq has been the focus of our living rooms. Iraq, the cradle of civilization - the home of Abraham and Sarah. We have all seen or heard reports from Iraq of the destruction of buildings, and of human life - made more palatable by the use of the words, "collateral damage." However, our TV sets do not bring us the real world consequences of war and violence. We do not really experience the squalor, the noise, the smell and the death that is taking place. We can turn off the TV set if it all gets a bit too much for us. One person said to me yesterday, "I can only take so much!" TV sanitizes the reality for us. There is a sense of unreality as we go about our daily lives as usual. It is one thing to keep as much normalcy as possible in the midst of bombardment, it is another to be so far away that little is affected. It is stunning to me that the Dow Jones index is rising! War is an evil, messy business, and who knows this better than those who fight in them. It is those that stay at home, or who have never experienced war, not combatants, who extol war.

Almost unanimously the Christian leaders of the world have condemned this war as immoral. To my knowledge the only exception is the president of the Southern Baptist Union. A Communique from the Middle East Council of Churches which was emailed Friday, says, "More specifically they have condemned this war for its disregard of principles of international law, its ambivalence to the most basic human values and rights, its potential for tragic human repercussions in Iraq and the Middle East, as well as its threat of aggravating tensions between religions."

Whatever our position, we need to pray for those who are serving in the armed forces of their countries. We need to pray for their safety. We need to pray for their families waiting at home. And we need to honor them by insuring that peace is more than an illusion. We need to make sure that never again can one nation vandalize another nation.

We need also today to pray for those who have the bravery to participate in protests for peace and who have the courage to speak loudly of their conviction that war is wrong. They are no less patriotic than those who either choose or who are compelled to fight. We need to remember Paul Jones, a bishop of this diocese, who was forced to resign during WWI because of his pacifism. When the current war is ended we need to sustain our awareness. For in remembering we help to heal by rekindling hope.

As I was growing up there was a tank trap close to my home. The deep ditch cut a wide swath across the country side. It was dug during as a defense in case of a land invasion, but after the end of the war it became a pretty and fun place for children to play. The bottom was filled with water in which grew reeds and bull rushes. An occasional willow bent over the edges, dragonflies darted over the surface and we spent many happy hours catching tadpoles. The steep sides were covered with grasses, foxgloves and a myriad of wild flowers.

A place of intended death that had been transformed into abundant life. That tank trap became an icon of death and resurrection, a sign of the one who laid down his life for all - ally and enemy alike. A God whose purposes are unfathomable and whose power is infinite, but in whose grace and healing love we place our abiding trust. A God who can transform death into life.

Amen.