

The Other PTSD
Isaiah 65:17-25
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Has there ever been a soldier in a foxhole, or a sailor in a gun turret, or an airman hovered over a radar screen, or a marine charging up the beach who has not hoped for what Isaiah prophecies? Knowing that they face the awful choice of killing or being killed, maiming or being maimed, which among them has not wished that it could just be over before one more bullet was fired, one more bomb dropped, one more torpedo launched? That the warriors on each side could just stand up, lay down their weapons, embrace, and share a smoke, or a cup of coffee, or a game of football. You don't need to be a Christian, or the adherent of any religion, to wish for that. You just have to be a human being. War makes for great cinematic drama but the reality is gorier than what Hollywood could ever depict, and the drama doesn't end after just two hours in a darkened room. People die. People lose limbs. People wake up screaming at three AM, reliving many times too often in nightmares what they experienced even once too often in the light of day. Families of the dead often struggle for years, decades, lifetimes with the loss of their loved ones, and families that receive home the broken bodies and spirits of those who survived a war, struggle to care for them or cope with them in the midst of their own sorrow. War is a grim reality with even grimmer lingering effects.

According to the US Veterans Administration, Post-Traumatic Stress

Disorder, or PTSD, occurs in about 11-20% of Veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars (Operations Iraqi and Enduring Freedom), in as many as 10% of Gulf War (Desert Storm) Veterans, and in about 30% of Vietnam Veterans. The term PTSD refers to a clinical diagnosis of the debilitating mental and emotional aftereffects of witnessing or participating in traumatic experiences such as war, or other acts of violence or extreme stress. Think about it; nearly one in three veterans of the Vietnam War experience PTSD. And the figures cited by the VA don't even begin to count the Iraqis or the Afghans or the Vietnamese or the Laotians who suffer from long lasting traumatic effects of the wars fought in their towns and villages. And the VA figures don't take a look at wars in which US veterans haven't served, and so they overlook, too, situations like the one in the Congo, where as in so many wars, the most victimized are the most vulnerable, and the documented rapes of thousands of Congolese women have just as surely provoked in them as long-lasting and debilitating effects as in the soldiers themselves. PTSD is a grim reality everywhere, for veterans and civilians alike.

There is some good news coming from this front, however. Last week, Gen. George Casey, the chief of staff of the U.S. Army, called PTSD "the defining military health issue of our era," and top military leaders are now addressing the effects of PTSD which were ignored for many years because they were seen as a sign of weakness. "You're fighting a culture that doesn't believe that injuries you can't see can be as serious as injuries that you can see," said General Peter

Chiarelli, Vice Chief of Staff of the US Army. Whereas General Douglas MacArthur once famously slapped the face of a hospitalized, shell-shocked vet, and told him to get back to the front, therapy, programs, and support groups for vets and their families are now commonplace, and what has been studied and learned since PTSD first began to be taken seriously, is now bearing fruit. Perhaps HBO in Costa Rica will air one day soon the new HBO Documentary called “Wartorn 1861-2010” which tells the story of soldiers and PTSD, and the new efforts to provide them relief, and we may hear their stories in their own words.

As the title of the documentary suggests, it must be noted that veterans of these most recent wars are surely not the only ones to have suffered PTSD. It may be called PTSD now, but in years past they called it shell shock or battle fatigue, or other names for the same symptoms. Indeed, the similarity across millennium is startling. Eric Dean’s extensive study, *Shook Over Hell*, reveals that US Civil War veterans experienced severe persistent psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, and flashbacks with resulting behaviors such as suicide, alcoholism, and domestic violence. By comparing Civil War and Vietnam veterans, Dean demonstrates that although the Vietnam era was largely responsible for the development of the modern concept of PTSD, Vietnam vets did not suffer exceptionally in the number and degree of their psychiatric illnesses compared to vets in earlier wars. The politics and culture of the times, Dean argues, were what propelled the acceptance of PTSD, as well as diagnosis and treatment, but that just

because the theory was developed and named only in the twentieth century, doesn't mean the experience was unknown to veterans of every era, including the Biblical era.

And so it is that we may look at the survivors of the destruction of Jerusalem and the final deportation to Babylon that occurred in 587 BC and see that they too must surely be counted among those who suffered from PTSD. In the final chapters of the book of Isaiah, from which our reading tonight comes, Isaiah is writing not to those traumatized children of God who suffered defeat and exile at the hands of King Nebuchadnezzar, but rather to their descendants, people two or three generations removed from the war, but who are arguably still suffering the disorienting effects of PTSD. Those to whom this vision of a New Jerusalem was given had returned to their homeland after being freed, only to face a shell of the city their fathers and mothers had described in all its glory. Far from a glorious return, they found themselves in a downward spiral of despair as the years passed and they couldn't seem to recover the glory of their city, or more importantly, the glory of the Lord. Economic stagnation, political infighting, threats from their neighbors, the sense that God had not accompanied them home again, you name it and the people of Isaiah's time were going through it. They were beaten down and depressed and were in need of a word of hope, a hope for their future, a word of hope God sent through Isaiah: "For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind." I want to

suggest to you tonight that in God's message through Isaiah is a new form of PTSD, not one to be avoided, but one to be embraced, not one to cure but to be encouraged, the antidote and the end to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. You see, God's message through Isaiah is that Peace Takes Something Divine, a simple notion really, but a notion we've not been able to wrap our hearts and minds around, despite having that message in our Bible for more than two millennia. We are still at war, we are still sending veterans off to war, and we are still bringing them back home in either body bags or varying degrees of wholeness.

The key to understanding what Isaiah's message of another PTSD means for us comes in the very first verse. "For I am creating," God says. "I am creating." In the Old Testament, the word used here, and in Genesis, for "to create" is only ever used with God as its subject. This kind of creating can only be done by God. Human beings may fashion idols of clay or stone, golden calves and Asherah poles, or even the Temple in Jerusalem and all its furnishings, but only God can "create new heavens and a new earth." Only God can make it so that "the former things shall not be remembered, or even come to mind," only God can create a world in which "the wolf and the lamb shall feed together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox." Although the word peace does not actually appear in this passage, you cannot help but sense its presence, not only in the absence of war, but in the joyful well being of the New Jerusalem. Remember that the word for this kind of well-being in Hebrew is Shalom, and this prophecy of Isaiah's paints a

beautiful portrait of the Shalom of God, a community which not only is not at war, but which also has no one suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

The people in Isaiah's time know that they have failed, and failed miserably, to put Jerusalem back on its feet. They have betrayed their ancestors who kept the faith. They have let down their children who seem to have no future. They are the laughingstock of their neighbors. They have shamed themselves in the cause of failure, and it has become the root of their despair. But here comes Isaiah and his word from God, a message of hope that takes the edge of the despair, helping them, and us, to realize that it is not by our own best efforts that we enter into Shalom, but only with God's help. Peace Takes Something Divine.

I hope you see the comfort in this vision, especially from the perspective of someone suffering from PTSD, or depression, or one of a host of other debilitating diseases. One of the great tragedies of PTSD is that the failure of the sufferer to make any headway against it, only contributes to a deeper and swifter descent into its despair. It is bad enough to be afflicted by something that keeps you down, but then to be a failure at getting over it doubles down the despair, especially for soldiers, sailors, airmen and women, and Marines, all of whom have been trained since boot camp with a positive sense of their own possibilities, a "we can do it, never give up" mentality which is an essential asset for the battlefield, but an ironic liability when in the clutches of PTSD. To realize then, in the depths of your despair, that the cure is truly beyond your own power, but instead is in the hands of

one who is so powerful that in those hands alone is the very power to create, should be good news. I'm not sure which is the harder surrender: to an enemy on the battlefield or to the recognition of our own inability to conquer and shape a peaceful destiny. But at least in the latter case, we surrender ourselves into the merciful hands of the God who can create for us the new future we cannot create for ourselves. That's true whether we are talking about veterans with PTSD or nations trying to build a lasting peace. It can't happen without surrender. If only we were as successful at surrender as we are in battle.

On this Remembrance Day, this Veterans Day, we still need Isaiah's good news about God creative intentions, because the seductiveness of our own abilities, even our own best intentions, is a temptation too powerful to overcome on our own. In every generation it creeps in, or pushes out its competitors, and provokes us into repeating the same broken patterns, that lead to the same broken bodies, broken hearts, and broken minds. World War One was supposedly the war to end all wars. Ironically, one of this threat's current manifestations even takes on the same acronym, PTSD, almost as if to mock those who suffer with the real thing, and to keep our minds off the truth of what Isaiah prophecies. This current PTSD is a revival of the Peace Through Strength Doctrine that was the principal extension of the foreign affairs perspective of former US President Ronald Reagan, a perspective that sees a strong military as the key to a country's peace and security. To quote former US Attorney General Edwin Meese in May of this year, in an

opinion piece in the Washington Times arguing for a renewal of the Peace Through Strength Doctrine: “American security is most reliably assured by having military forces that are fully trained, equipped and ready to deter or defeat the nation’s adversaries.” Along with nine other statements affirming that general perspective, Meese uses that claim to argue for a reversal of recent trends in military downsizing in favor of a more heavily armed and prepared military deterrent. Now, you certainly can’t debate the logic that if you are going to have a military, it should be well trained and equipped, so I won’t. But it is worth noting that this perspective clings to the idea that a posture diametrically opposed to what it hopes to achieve is the proper one to assume. And if that weren’t bad enough, it repeats again the lie that we can do it all by ourselves, that if we try hard enough, we’ll achieve the peace that only God can create.

I know it sounds rather naïve and perhaps even fatalistic to suggest that we leave all the world’s conflicts to God and just go on our merry way. This week’s events on the border between Costa Rica and Nicaragua show just how difficult it is to maintain a posture of non-violence in the face of armed aggression. But just as true as the saying that there are no atheists in foxholes, it is also true that the vision of the peaceable kingdom need not be seen as the handiwork of the God we celebrate in Jesus Christ. You can hold on to the idea that you can do it all yourself, if you can just accumulate enough power or weaponry, but just remember that it’s an idea as illusory as our efforts through war to realize peace on our own,

whether through strength, or by any other means but God's means. It is a matter of where we shall cast our anchor, to use an image which our Navy veterans might fondly recall. Shall we cast our anchor into the past, using the means and methods which have caused PTSD throughout the ages, or shall we heave it into the future, where God's creative power pulls us home to a glorious city where there is neither trauma nor stress, and where "they shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain?" Shall we trust in the failures of all of human history to build a lasting peace, or in the power and wisdom of God to create a shalom that truly endures? I suppose the sense that gives us of standing there in front of an enemy, surrendered to the creative power of God, naked and unprepared to defend yourself, is what Jesus had in mind in our passage tonight from the Gospel of Luke when he instructed the disciples about preparing to meet their fate at the hands of those who would persecute them in the end times. Remember what he said: "So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict." What words could those possibly be? You've already heard them. They are the same words from the prophet Isaiah about God's new creation, a wisdom no nation can match, and a wisdom no opponent will be able to withstand or contradict: the wisdom to count on the fact that Peace Takes Something Divine, and that God is pleased to give it. All we have to do is cooperate with it. May it be this new PTSD that future generations celebrate on their Remembrance Days. Amen.