

“Remembering”  
Based on Psalm 127  
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Preached November 12, 2006 at San José, Costa Rica  
On the Occasion of Remembrance/Veterans Day

The Bible, in neither the Old nor New Testaments, is not known for its presentation of the God of Israel or of Jesus, as particularly magnanimous towards God’s enemies. It is true that the Israelites were charged with caring well for the foreigner, but it is just as true that the foreigner, in the context of war, was spared no mercy. King Saul, Israel’s first king, was toppled from his throne because he did not slaughter every last citizen, women, children, elderly and livestock included, of the Amalekite town he had just conquered. It is true that the Jesus came proclaiming the Kingdom of Heaven even for Gentiles who were previously considered unclean enemies, but King Herod, whose guts spilled open after he ordered the death of John the Baptist, Judas Iscariot, who committed suicide after betraying Jesus, and Ananais and Sapphira, early disciples who were struck down by God for withholding some of the proceeds of a real estate transaction, are just a few of the characters from Jesus’ time who met rather gruesome ends as enemies of God. It is customary for soldiers, and nations, at war, to seek God’s favor and blessing of their efforts and their outcomes but invoking God’s blessing on “our” side has a Biblical history that far predates any of our countries of origin.

Be that as it may, the Bible is also very clear about the costs and unintended consequences of war and violence, noting God's mindfulness that it is not just soldiers on the battlefield but every member of the community who is hurt or killed in the midst of war. In the 27th chapter of Jeremiah, God instructs the prophet to tell King Zedekiah to submit to the yoke of the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar who was threatening Jerusalem, to surrender so that the suffering of innocents might be lessened. After Judah was defeated, and the people carried away into exile in Babylon, through the prophets, God tells the people to settle down in Babylon, intermarry, build houses and make homes, rather than resist and suffer yet more death and destruction. And on the night of his arrest, Jesus chastises Peter for using his sword to try to defend Jesus, knowing that Peter had more important duties to fulfill after the resurrection that would have been cut short hanging on a cross beside Jesus. "War is hell," General Sherman is quoted as saying, and I think the Bible can agree with that.

Psalm 127 is one of those Biblical texts that notes, I think, both of these tendencies, on one hand the idea of a "Holy War," or at least a "Just War" and on the other, a reality check on involvement in war in any form. As such, the psalm invites, nay, demands that we undertake the broadest and deepest self-examination of our motives for seeking peace between nations through the violence of war, as well as our use of the language and inspiration of faith to justify our actions. In perhaps no other arena of human endeavor is Jesus' call to remove the log in our

own eye before the speck in another's so important to heed, for there is simply too much at stake to ignore or disregard self-reflection. For I believe that in the end, we will be judged by God and history as much for our motivations and decisions for war in the first place as for our actions on the battlefield.

Psalm 127 has been described as depicting God's blessings in the home with its reference to the vanity of building a house without God's participation in the endeavor, and the blessings of children. But it also speaks of the city and its protection, and the laborer in his activities, each needing the providence of God to avoid meaninglessness and failure. To my ears, then, the psalm speaks to the welfare of the entire city and even the nation, for these elements of kin, city, nation, and God are inseparable in the Old Testament context. God's history is unfolded through the great families of the Biblical story, the Noahs, the Abrahams, Isaacs, and Jacobs, the root of Jesse. God's activity with Israel is lived out in the great city, Jerusalem, Zion, the dwelling place of the Most High. Israel is called to be a nation that is a light unto other nations, through the divine blessing of God. When we remember that families populate the city, and the city is the center of the nation, and the nation a witness to God, we see the interconnectedness of these elements and we see how the Psalmist can say, "Happy is the man who has a quiver full" of sons like arrows. The metaphor is apt, as the dedication of these sons to God's enterprise, as warriors in the King's army, is crucial to the welfare of the city and all society.

The same logic, however, applies to the welfare of the city in times of peace. The tragedies depicted frequently in Scripture of infertility and widowhood speak to the importance of the survival of children to both provide for the family's long term economic well being but also to carry on the family name and history. Indeed, the story of God's people ends without the birth of Isaac to a once-barren Sarah. Thus, the blessing of children is a key element in God's provision for God's people. All of the commandments to care for widows and orphans in their distress stem from the reality that life was hard and when everything didn't go as God had intended, it was left to the rest of the community to provide for those who could not provide for themselves. Much of this comes to a point when the drums of war are beating, for certainly a nation's sons (and daughters) are needed to maintain the security and welfare of all, yet many orphans and widows are created as spouses and children respond to those same drums. The sons and daughters who with the Lord's blessing successfully build houses and keep watch over the city, and work to provide for their families, are the same sons and daughters who must be remembered after the battle is over, in ceremonies such as this one, on this Remembrance Day, this Veteran's Day, this Armistice Day. As important as these remembrances are, however, surely we must agree that it is better to have no need for them, or at least to need to read fewer and fewer names of those whom somebody loved. "Sons are indeed a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb

a reward,” a heritage and reward not to be squandered recklessly, but to be cherished and preserved.

It may well be that some measure of this perspective is what drove voter sentiment in the US elections held this week, the perception by some that a nation’s inheritance and blessing is not being used wisely. It is not to offer my own commentary on the war to note that it appears as though the war in Iraq is being seen more and more as too great a sacrifice for the perceived benefits to the families, cities, and nations that have contributed the arrows from their quivers. It may be that those disaffected may not truly realize what is at stake in the Iraq war and the broader war on terror, that they are only reacting to the horror of the deaths of their family members, fellow Americans, or world citizens. They may not realize the interconnectedness of which the psalmist speaks, that without the contributions and sacrifices of our children there can be no peace in the land. But it may also be that they have seen the cost of war in that other Biblical category, and have started paraphrasing aloud the opening lines of Psalm 127, “Unless the Lord fights the war, the soldiers die in vain,” and wondering if they can truly see God’s hand in this military exercise. I do not envy those charged with the decision for war.

No matter where a Christian stands politically on the world’s current military activities, it remains true that the spectre of war does indeed raise its head in almost every generation. And thus we are called, each generation, to that kind of

honest self-examination to which I referred at the beginning of my remarks tonight. For inasmuch as many parts of the Bible do not hesitate to condone a nationalistic mentality of Holy War, Christians have come to an understanding that the costs of war are not borne only by “our side,” whichever side that may be. We hold Remembrance Day/Veterans Day commemorations largely for the purpose of honoring our own fallen, yet the reality of war is that there are fallen on all sides; widows and orphans created on each side of the battlefield; horror, distress, anguish, and loss experienced by every nation, and not just our own. It is this fact that we can neither avoid nor afford to forget if the moral compass we cherish is to point us in the direction of the Kingdom of God. If we let down our guard and confuse the purposes of God with the aspirations of nations, it is all too easy to find ourselves offering prayers or making policy which take on the tone or sentiments of that sarcastic take on patriotic prayer penned by Mark Twain, entitled, “The War Prayer.” It will not be hard to pick out Twain’s pointed message on a misaligned nationalism:

O Lord our Father, our young patriots, idols of our hearts, go forth to battle; be Thou near them! With them, in spirit, we also go forth from the sweet peace of our beloved firesides to smite the foe. O Lord our God, help us to tear their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells; help us to cover their smiling fields with the pale forms of their patriot dead; help us to drown the thunder of the guns with the shrieks of their wounded writhing in pain; help us to lay waste their humble homes with a hurricane of fire; help us to wring the hearts of their unoffending widows with unavailing grief; help us to turn them out roofless with their little children to wander unfriended the wastes of their desolated land in rags and hunger and thirst, sports of the sun flames of summer and the icy winds of winter, broken in spirit, worn with travail,

implored Thee for the refuge of the grave and denied it -- for our sakes, who adore Thee, Lord, blast their hopes, blight their lives, protract their bitter pilgrimage, make heavy their steps, water their way with their tears, stain the white snow with the blood of their wounded feet! We ask it, in the spirit of love, of Him Who is the Source of Love, and Who is the ever-faithful refuge and friend of all that are sore beset and seek His aid with humble and contrite hearts. Amen.

The greatest danger of war is, of course, that when we successfully dehumanize our enemy, we successfully dehumanize ourselves. That dehumanization takes on an ironic double meaning, firstly that we are then free to play God since we are no longer bound by our humanity, and we thus perpetrate the direst form of idolatry, that of idolizing ourselves, but even more tragically that we reject the incarnation of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who came to reveal to us God's purpose for humanity: shalom, the well being of all of God's creation, not just our side. Shalom is not the property of any nation, but the blessing of God for all nations.

I can neither judge nor begrudge the feelings of anyone whose loss has made it difficult or even impossible for them to see a respectable humanity in the eyes of the individual or nation that has taken from them their beloved. I thank God that on this Remembrance Day, I have no sacrifice of my own family to remember. But if what Christ has done for me is to have any meaning in my life, I must remember that Christ did not die and rise just for me, or citizens of my nation, but for all people, and that my humanity is no more or no less valuable in God's eyes than anyone else's.

The final stanza of the poem Flanders Fields contains the charge, “Take up Our Quarrel with the foe: To you from failing hands we throw The torch: be yours to hold it high.” Tonight let me suggest that it is the challenge to Christians to view the torch of Flanders Fields as much a torch of peace, as a torch of vengeance. It is the challenge of Christians to remember the words of former U.S. President Jimmy Carter: “War may sometimes be a necessary evil. But no matter how necessary, it is always an evil, never a good. We will not learn how to live together in peace by killing each other’s children.” Carter’s statement seems to suggest that going to war to defend ourselves may be that necessary evil, but I daresay that our lives and the lives of those we love are not worth defending if they are not lives worth living, and that they are not lives worth living unless they are lives lived defending the humanity even of those who, from time to time, our nations call enemies. For when we defend the humanity of even our enemies, we proclaim the power of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, he who dwelt among us that our humanity might not be held against us by God. May God help us in that endeavor. Amen.