

Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church, November 5, 2017 – Remembrance Sunday  
Hymns: 330 – O God Our Help; 800 – O Canada; O God of All the Many Lands  
Scripture: Micah 4:1-5; Luke 2:25-35  
Sermon Title: Remembering the Mothers – Rev. Douglas Rollwage

Micah 4:1-5

*In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised up above the hills. Peoples shall stream to it, and many nations shall come and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths."*

*For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; 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 all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken.*

*For all the peoples walk, each in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of the LORD our God forever and ever.*

Luke 2:25-35 - The Prophecy of Simeon (New Living Translation)

*At that time there was a man in Jerusalem named Simeon. He was righteous and devout and was eagerly waiting for the Messiah to come and rescue Israel. The Holy Spirit was upon him and had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Messiah. That day the Spirit led him to the Temple. So when Mary and Joseph came to present the baby Jesus to the Lord as the law required, Simeon was there. He took the child in his arms and praised God, saying,*

*"Sovereign Lord, now let your servant die in peace, as you have promised. I have seen your salvation, which you have prepared for all people. He is a light to reveal God to all the nations, and he is the glory of your people Israel!"*

*Jesus' parents were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them, and he said to Mary, the baby's mother, "This child is destined to cause many in Israel to fall, but he will be a joy to many others. He has been sent as a sign from God, but many will oppose him. As a result, the deepest thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your very soul."*

This past week has been for me a time of stories, as my family, gathered

around my mother's bedside, told the stories of her life which had been told and told again around dinner tables and family events. My mother and father were good storytellers, and since I grew up in an age when people still took the time to tell stories and to listen, those stories found a place in our hearts. This past week, my mother was no longer able to tell her stories, as the family gathered around. So we told them to one another for her.

Many of those stories which were retold this past week filled the room with laughter. Those were my mother's favourite stories to tell. Others, less often told, filled our eyes with tears. A few, like a sword, pierced our hearts.

Like the story of when a telegram came. Some of you may be old enough to remember what a telegram was. You'll remember that sometimes telegrams were good news. But in 1944, the news a telegram bore was seldom good. My grandmother – my mother's mother - took it from the postman, and walked alone to her bedroom, the telegram unopened in her hand. She closed the door, as the family, stood in silence. Two days later, emerging for the first time, she came downstairs for breakfast. She said nothing. Nobody asked. Nobody had to ask, for upon her face, within her eyes, was written the news that had come. Her twenty year old son was dead, his body somewhere on the bottom of the English channel, the scarf around his neck his burial shroud, the aircraft in which he was flying his tomb. A "casualty" of war. All written in the telegram, all written in the eyes of a mother whose son was no more. Did I mention? The telegram came on Christmas Eve.

He was decorated posthumously, awarded some heroic medal or other. For bravery, etc. Something about never being forgotten. That was in the telegram too, that same telegram. Somehow, that didn't seem to make much of a difference to my grandmother. All she knew, was that the son whom she loved, whom she carried, whom she birthed, whom she brought for baptism, whom she nurtured, cuddled, taught to walk, taught to talk, watched grow from a baby to a young man, a young man tall and strong with twinkling eyes and a quick wit which always made his mother laugh - all she knew, was that her son, his life, that "love you forever" part of her, was over. All from a telegram. All from a telegram.

Remembrance Day is for the soldiers whose bodies lay scattered upon the vasty fields of France, the beaches of Dunkirk, the green hills of Korea, the jungles of Vietnam, the sandy wastes of Iraq, the harsh mountains of Afghanistan, upon countless landscapes once believed worth fighting and dying for. Remembrance Day is for the sailors whose bodies descended to the uncharted ocean floor.

Remembrance Day is for the airmen whose miracle of flight ended in a tumbling ball of fire. Remembrance Day is for these, and for all who gave their lives in answer to their nation's need, in answer to their nation's call, a call for a future, for a hope, for peace. It is for "Our Heroic Dead." Remembrance Day is for these.

If Remembrance Day is to have meaning, however, it must also be for those without uniform, without quarrel, whose lives ended in the crossfire. Remembrance Day must also be for the unremembered "collateral casualties." And Remembrance Day must also be for the countless mothers who stood upon unnumbered doorsteps holding in their hands a telegram of tidings that their children are no more. Remembrance Day is for the mothers whose hearts lay broken, minds tormented by images of their now dead warrior daughters and sons. Remembrance Day is, yes, for our heroic dead. And it is, no less, for their mothers. Their mothers, with a sword piercing their very souls.

Those for whom war is a glorious thing need to talk to, learn from, these mothers. Those who seek for peace need to seek out these mothers, and learn from them the cost of peace won at so grievous a price. Those who have not tasted a war on their very doorstep, who have known only peace in our time, need to talk to these mothers and maybe, for a moment, understand the unacceptable alternative to peace, which is sons and daughters laying in unmarked graves far, so very far, from home.

There aren't too many of these mothers left. The veterans themselves grow fewer every year, fewer and more frail. The very last of the survivors of the First World War are long gone. Survivors of the Second are still among us, but in fewer numbers, saluting in the rain as the trumpeter plays, as the drums roll out their thunder. The Korean war? Who, in our day, knows anything of the Korean War other than a slapstick TV comedy in reruns, as Hawkeye chases the girls? Vietnam has, to Canadians, always seemed like someone else's war. Iraq is closer to our time, of course. And Afghanistan, as per ancient tradition, never really ends; it has always and continues to this day to simply wear an invader down. And the mothers? Not too many left of the big wars. But all too many of the recent. Over 150 heartbroken Canadian mothers, telegrams in hand, from the Afghanistan mission alone, not even mentioning the mothers whose children returned alive but with broken bodies, with shattered minds. If we want to know about the true cost of Remembrance Day, of who we're really remembering, and of the real price that was paid, it is to these mothers that we must speak. Because when you speak with a mother, they will not speak of war. When you speak with a mother, they will speak of their children. And if we're going to remember anything, mothers will tell us, let's remember the

children.

To remember the children is to think of the children who sat at home waiting for Father to come back, Father who would never return. To think of the children is to think of the lost ones wandering, looking for parents buried in the rubble. To think of the children is to think of the empty, hard eyes, eyes that would never again trust, eyes filled with visions of atrocities that would drive an adult insane. To think of the children is to feel the pain in your heart that God must feel as his own child met as horrible an end as could be imagined; as his own children continue their cycle of war.

To think of the children is to slam your fist on the table, to cry out “there must be a better way,” and to abhor war in all circumstances.

Most importantly, to think of the children is to transcend the bounds of that dark word which can make Remembrance Day an ugly, leprous thing: nationalism. For, easy as it is to hate a flag or a uniform or an ideology, it is astonishingly difficult to hate a bleeding, crying, wounded child. A child, torn by shrapnel or shot in a crossfire, can stop us dead in our tracks, can stop the flags from waving, can uncover the lie of nationalism.

Nationalism. An insidious evil, one which successfully masquerades as good, wrapping itself in the flag or its religion and loudly proclaiming, “Liberty or Death! Better Dead than Red! My Country Right or Wrong!” Nationalism is that which sees only good in itself, and only evil in the other. It is that which can state in no uncertain terms that it would be better to end all life on this planet than to live under an opposing political ideology or a contrary religious faith. It is that which can excuse the most vile prejudices in the name of national or religious purity. It is that which has been the root cause of the majority of wars in our memory. And it is a lie.

Remember the story of the Garden. Remember how the serpent lied, telling Eve how she would know the difference between good and evil? And look how human history has proven that lie to be the greatest of all, for our history is a tragic one of the inability to discern right from wrong, justice from injustice. Political and religious nationalism is based upon this lie, based upon an “us/them” system of truth, a system which says, “We are right and you are wrong, because we are we and you are you.”

Jesus was having none of it. A central part of Jesus’ ministry was devoted to the unpopular cause of racial, political and religious tolerance. The people of his own

town wanted to throw him off a cliff when he reminded them that God often blesses those outside of the Hebrew faith. He scandalized the people by stating that the Gentiles, too, were to be included in the blessings of the new age. He was forever telling stories where the hated and resented Samaritans were the good guys. He healed the sick of the oppressing Romans, and of the pagan Gentiles. He commended the faith of those from lands and cultures utterly foreign to his own. And most importantly, he gave us the Great Commission, which instructs us to go into all of the world - to be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria (there he goes with the Samaritans again) and to the ends of the earth. For Jesus, there is no nationalism. There is only the family of God. Remember, he called himself the Son of Man. It was Pilate who demoted him to King of only the Jews.

Yet we have had hard lessons. The lessons of war are never easy. The lessons have been written with blood, the blood of millions. The lessons of war have been written with grief, with the tears of countless wives and mothers. The lessons of war have been written with a heavy hand and under that hand have been crushed the hopes, the dreams, the lives of people not that different from you and from me. The lives of children not that different from our own. Hard, hard lessons.

Do not ask me what we should have done in wars of the past. I simply do not know, for I too tremble at the alternative. If any war was justified, it was the Second World War, lest the world be put in the hands of a madman. Yet we must also remember that the Second World War arose from the ashes of the First World War, known as the War to End All Wars. War has never been very good at ending war. As with the current situation in Iraq. As with the rise of Isis. As in Afghanistan. As in Syria. In speaking of the wars of our own day, I see no solution as having arisen, I see no prospect of peace. War, it seems, no longer works the way it should. There comes a time when we have to think beyond the old logic of two men holding a rock over each other's heads, and that time is now.

The time is now, to speak forth the Gospel. The time is now, to speak sense to leaders who would carry us ever further along the road of destruction. The time is now to say No to further weaponry, to further warring amongst ourselves, and Yes to joining together to fight against the crushing poverty which cripples the vast majority of the world. After all, what we in the Western world call defence eats up more money and expertise than it would cost to feed, clothe and house every starving man, woman and child on the face of the earth.

Hard words. Hard lessons. And if this logic makes no sense to you, well, abandon logic for a moment, and go speak to a the mother of a soldier on active service in a conflicted land. Or speak to a lost soldier's mother. She will tell you of her child. She will show you photographs of a face that will never smile again. And she will tell you to think of the children. Think of the children. Our veterans, those who have been there, have thought of the children, and they have found an answer, and have made it their slogan: Never forget. Never Again.

Let us, this Remembrance Day, remember those who have given of themselves for the cause of justice, the defence of the defenceless, and peace. Let us remember those of other lands, those who were deceived and who gave themselves in a hopeless cause, their blood spent for empty dreams and hollow words. Let us remember those whose lives were extinguished, those in and out of uniform. Let us remember those who have grieved, and those whose wounds of grief plague them still. Let us remember the countries tottering on the brink of senseless war even today, motivated by the evils of greed, power, prejudice and nationalism. Let us remember those lost in countries currently engaged in the atrocities of political, cultural and religious genocide. Let us remember the great majority - those caught in the middle - who have no voice but who suffer worst.

Above all this morning, let us remember the mothers. Let us remember the mothers, tears on faces, telegrams in hand. May God help us to hear the voice of the mothers of the world, that we might never be content, but together be found striving for justice, striving for peace, until we too are in the Kingdom of God's peace.

*Then they will beat their swords into ploughshares, their spears into pruning hooks. No more shall nation lift sword against nation; and they shall not learn to make war anymore.*

For those who experienced the horrors of war that we might know peace, thanks be to God. For those who struggle and strive and sacrifice for peace here and around the world, thanks be to God. For mothers throughout time who shall open a heavenly door and find not a telegram, but their sons and daughters brought back to life eternal, never to die again; thanks be to God. Amen.