

THE BEAUTY OF THE EARTH

Sermon On the Occasion of War

Sunday evening, I joined forty men, women, and children from Bolton and Harvard stretched out along the sidewalk in front of the church. We lit candles and maintained a silent vigil for peace. In more than two thousand cities and towns in more than ninety countries around the world others held candles as well. From the cars that sped by us, some drivers sounded their horns in solidarity, but other drivers rolled down their windows and shouted "*Kill them all.*"

I looked to the sky, and the stars, and the moon that was almost full. It seemed that the light they shed reflected not just the hidden light of the sun but also the small flames flickering in the wind on Main Street, as if the universe was keeping vigil with us.

We have been at war now for five days. Four major Iraqi cities have been taken. Coalition forces are a hundred miles from Baghdad. We have fired more than two thousand missiles and bombs. The missiles and bombs cost us an estimated two billion dollars. Two dozen coalition soldiers, three British reporters, and hundreds of Iraqis are dead. And the stock market had one of its best weeks in twenty years. The Dow Jones industrial average gained more than 660 points.

In the Bible, "shock and awe" were words that described an encounter with God. Now they refer to what reporters call "last night's show." War has become television's latest "reality show."

I assume that by now most of you know how I feel about the war. I also know that if the polls can be trusted, most of you have a different opinion. And I have been chastened by another poll taken this week, which suggests that what I or any other religious leader may believe and say about the war is unimportant. The pope, the archbishop of Canterbury, the Dalai Lama, the leaders of the Unitarians, American Baptists, United Church of Christ, Quakers, Lutheran Church in America, Episcopalians, United Methodists, Disciples of Christ, and Presbyterians have all condemned the war. It doesn't matter. A Pew poll indicated that in answer to the question "who most influenced your belief about how to deal with Iraq?" 40% of respondents said it was the media. Only 10% said they had been influenced by religious leaders. We pay more attention to Bill O'Reilly than the pope. I'm sure Mr. O'Reilly thinks this is as it should be.

So I am shouting into the wind. Anything I say is insignificant. I always suspected that this might be the case. I am glad to have a poll that proves it.

The polls taken this week do not, however, capture the extraordinary sense of ambivalence that characterizes even those who say that they support the war. We feel many things.

We love our country. We believe in the ideals that the United States has upheld. We are angry that people in countries we have rescued are against us now. We long for the days when things were simpler and clearer, when it was obvious what was right and what was wrong. We know we are vulnerable. We need want our leaders to protect us and defend us. We are worried about the forces this war may unleash, that even as we liberate Iraq we might also be providing terrorists with more reasons to hate us. We are

concerned that North Korea may pose a far greater threat than Saddam Hussein and wonder why we are doing nothing. We hate the thought that many of our soldiers will not return. It is painful for us to acknowledge that we may kill thousands of innocent Iraqis. We are fearful of the future and of the world our children will inherit. We are not, in Abraham Lincoln's phrase, "all one thing or all the other." We are many things. It's not that you disagree with me or I disagree with you. We disagree within ourselves. The war is taking place in us. We live in the shadowlands, the realm of double messages and competing values. At the same time, very different beliefs and responses to experience may be operative in our lives.

Theologians describe this as wrestling with the difference between our "espoused theology" --- what we say we believe, and our "real theology" --- what we actually do. And this is nothing new.

Evangelical Christians have been heard on television this week quoting one saying attributed to Jesus in an effort to prove that the teacher who said "Love your enemies," would sanction the war with Iraq. "Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth. I have not come to bring peace but a sword." That's the quote. But Jesus was not talking about war. He was speaking metaphorically, and he was talking about the inner, spiritual war that occurs when each person is confronted with the choice to act on what they say they believe or what they really believe. (Either this, or Jesus was just as confused as we are.) Jesus, as usual, was trying to make those who were listening to him uncomfortable. Jesus, as usual, was forcing them to confront their competing values, and uncover the real reasons why we claim to believe one thing, but when it gets right down to it, we don't get down to it. "What keeps you from doing what you say

you believe you ought to do,” he might ask. He wanted those who heard him to understand what really motivates them and why and. He wants us to do that, too.

We call ourselves Christians. We claim to be followers of the one who said, “love your enemies...be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.” These are not ambiguous statements. They mean exactly what they say. Why, then, is our response to Jesus’ words confused and conflicted? Jesus would want us to answer that question. Some of us try --- some of us spend our lives trying. But some of us respond by retreating from the questions like this and the hard work of answering them. We pretend that everything is as it always was and as it should be, that there is no difference between the words we say and the way we live, that what is happening really isn’t happening, at least to us, and this is, of course, the most important consideration. We are like the people in Denise Levertov’s poem “Tenebrae,” written in 1967 during another war.

“Heavy, heavy, heavy, hand and heart.
We are at war,
Bitterly, bitterly at war.
And the buying and selling
Buzzes at our heads, a swarm
Of busy flies, a kind of innocence.
And picnic parties return from the beaches
Burning with stored sun in the dusk;
Children promised a TV show when they get home
Fall asleep in the backs of a million station
 wagons,
Sand in their hair, the sound of waves
Quietly persistent in their ears,
They are not listening.

Their parents at night
Dream and forget their dreams.
They wake in the dark
And make plans. Their sequin plans
Glitter into tomorrow.
They buy, they sell.
They fill freezers with food.
Neon signs flash their intentions
Into the years ahead.
And at their ears the sound
Of the war. They are
Not listening, not listening.”

Refusing to see, refusing to hear, refusing to ask, ignoring the challenge --- these are ways some of us manage in the shadowlands. There is a better way. It is engagement. It is choosing not to live in a make-believe world but rather opening ourselves deeply and intently to things as they really are. It is choosing to examine our response to that reality. It is choosing to ask hard questions of ourselves and embrace the challenge of making meaning of that reality in a way that allows what we say we believe and how we actually live to cohere.

I am still working out what I believe about the war and my response to it. But there is one thing that I am sure of --- I will never understand how someone can see beauty and seek to destroy it. How can someone see a swift, blue river and think to turn it brown and sluggish with human waste? How can someone see the love binding two persons or a community of people together and deliberately subvert it? How can someone see a child --- open, free, and laughing --- and regard that child as an object to be manipulated and controlled and abused? How can someone see another's happiness and want to end it rather than participate in it?

How can someone see another life and wish to take it rather than help it fulfill its promise? How can someone see the deaths of men, women, and children as less significant than satisfying a dictator's whims or a politician's agenda? Why do I sometimes see beauty and seek to destroy it? This is one thing I will never understand, in anyone else and in myself.

I am used to telling you exactly how I feel, even though I know you may not feel the same way. We don't always agree with each other, but we can always affirm each other, and we usually do. This small meeting house is large enough to hold our differences. We are not all here for the same reasons this morning. We disagree about who is wrong and who is right and what the United States is doing and what it should do. Our definitions of patriotism clash. But we all share, I believe, the hope that we may yet find our way to the holy mountain of which the prophets spoke.

That journey will demand much of us. It takes more time to build than it does to destroy. Forgiving someone is harder work than seeking retribution. Hate is easier than love. And we are, most of the time, lazy people who choose convenience over completion. So we pray together to the source of life whom some call God and others call Love that we will not think of how much that journey will cost us, but of where it will take us --- to the sacred hill where wolves will lie down with lambs and none will hurt or destroy --- to the day when, in spite of us or because of us, the earth will be full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea. It will be the day when what we say we believe and how we live cohere.

Amen.

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