

“No More War”

Sermon by Dan Harrison, Pastor, Church of the Covenant 3/17/18

It was April 15 2004; it was my second semester teaching at Kuwait University, and it was nearly the one year anniversary of the US invading Iraq. Eleven years earlier, as a freshman in college I had enlisted in the Army Reserves. I was a Bible College student at the time, and inspired by my roommate who had joined the Reserves, I felt a tug to do the same, and so I did. When the recruiter explained the training to me, I said, “Wow, it sounds exciting. But I can’t kill anyone, ok?” He said, “You mean you want to be a contentious Objector?” I asked him to explain to me what that was, and he did. He said, “You’d train with everyone else but would be exempt from all weapon’s training. They will mark you with chalk on your helmet, so that everyone knows who you are. They will give you a very, very hard time. Is it worth it for you to go through all that?” I paused, and contemplated the scenario. I felt conflicted inside. I quietly whispered a simple, “Never mind.” And that was it. I became a soldier. I was fortunate enough not to see any combat. However, a few years later, while serving as the Pastor of Missions at Pueblo Nuevo Community Church in El Paso, TX, another associate pastor and a dear friend of mine Rick, decided, based on an economic need, to re-enlist in the Army Reserves. I even encouraged him, saying how good my experience had been and how beneficial the pay was. With his family and a recently answered call to ministry, he definitely made sure to change jobs (or MOSes) from his original one, Infantry Scout, to Laundry specialist so as not to be in a combat role if he were to be called up. I thought it was a good plan.

Now back to that day in April 2004... It had been just over a year since the Iraq war had started, just 8 months since two ballistic missiles had been fired by Saddam’s Republican Guard at downtown Kuwait, near where my family was now tucked away, and here I was combing the US Army’s makeshift camps somewhere in the endless desert between Iraq and Kuwait, searching for my dear friend. His unit was called up to active duty and had spent months deployed in Iraq, and I had heard he was in one of these camps. An associate minister at a church now brandishing his M-16 in Army fatigues. I knew this was a paradox I would wish upon no one. By some miracle and the workings of friends with military contractor connections, I was allowed onto the base and found Rick. He looked different. Aged. Tired. Emotionally distraught. As soon as other soldiers around saw me in civilian clothes, they surrounded me and in desperation began to ask me if I could help get them home quicker: Like I was a civilian contractor with connections too. Rick and I had to work at getting a little time alone. He couldn’t look at me in the eyes, but we hugged almost like old times. He said, “You don’t know what I’ve had to do. You don’t know.” His voice filled with more emotion than I had ever heard before. I told him, “It doesn’t matter. You’re going home now, right?” He said, “Yeah. But it was so hard out here. So hard.” I joked, “I guess it’s hard cleaning everyone’s laundry, right?” At that, he looked down. Others around us just stared at me. He whispered, “None of us do that out here. We all just guard the supply lines.” With tears in his eyes, he tried to connect with mine. “We just shoot. We just shoot.” With that, he trailed off. And I couldn’t bring myself to ask him anymore about it. He was a fellow minister of mine, caught in the worst of the world’s

problems. I tried to encourage him, pray for him. Love him. I could tell he was eaten up with self-loathing.

After a while, I ran out of words. Then the worst possible thing happened. On TV sets that had been set up in the scattered tents, live-streaming CNN, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld appeared live from the Pentagon, and announced from the podium that he would be keeping 20,000 troops that had been previously scheduled to leave Iraq (of which Rick was one of them), and using them in a strategic military surge to ultimately defeat their enemy once and for all. The dull sound of voices that had been commonplace in the crowded tents was now absolutely silent, apart from occasional gasps. Then, all hell broke loose. The underlings, mostly younger soldiers seemed most desperate of all-- going to their higher ranked fellow combatants, begging for answers. "Is this true? We're going back in? They're sending us back to that hell-hole?" Rick was one of the sergeants being drilled with questions. One soldier even came to me, a young boy (a teenager) with a freckled face, and asked "Sir, are they seriously sending us back?" His voice cracked with emotion, eyes teared up in a mix of confusion and anguish. Rick was in disbelief as well. He sat in silence. I just sat with him. The last thing he said to me was, "We just burned our tents and gear because of the sand fleas. That's what they do right before they return back to the States. We really thought we were finally going home." He just looked off as he said that. I was stunned. I couldn't believe that they had just received their new orders from CNN, and not from the commanding officers in their units. I didn't know what to say. I said one last prayer, this time several other soldiers joining with us. Then I left, broken.

As most of you know, this church and our partner church in DC, Church of the Saviour, were founded by two brothers who had served in WWII, and as their sister Ida Gordon said that they "returned home from the war as pacifists, with the conviction that they could never with a clear conscience participate in another war." The older brother, Gordon, had earned two Bronze stars as an army chaplain in the European front, braving bullets and munitions to save soldiers' lives. And Bev, the youngest brother, staring death into its eyes narrowly being missed by a Kamikaze pilot while serving on fuel supply ships in the Pacific. These were formative moments for both men. They came back from the war committed to a greater peace, a greater good. And Bev's successor, David Edwards took a stand when it was still unpopular as a contentious objector during the Vietnam War, relegated to civilian service stateside. He took a stand that I was too weak to take. But unlike my friend Rick, I was somehow spared from violating my conscience. I narrowly missed having to be in the war. However, I saw all the effects of the war. I had been on the littered fields of war after the battle—reminded of the pain it causes. By scripture's own direction, I am called to be a peacemaker. Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called God's children." With the horrific events in Christchurch, New Zealand this past week: 50 Muslims dead. Where a Muslim worshipper turned to the shooter before being killed, and kindly said, "Welcome brother." Martin Luther King said, "Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that." I like to think that we are in essence reservoirs of love, waiting to break our own dams in order to flood this world with it. And the only way to do such a thing is to be willing to do the unthinkable: To love those who do not deserve it. To bring peace to chaos, we must be willing to bring peace to everyone.

David Edwards shared in his April 11, 2010 sermon: *"The world desperately needs communities of faith that are working with being at peace, that are taking Jesus seriously when he says, Peace be with you.*

We have enough religious communities that are always in turmoil and conflict, or lost in a flurry of activism. We have more than enough religious communities that are aggressively seeking to extend their power and influence over others, engaging in spiritual domination or abuse. The community of Jesus has nothing to do with such things. It is known by the peace that is present and practiced within it. Over thirty years ago I took my first silent retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, Thomas Merton's monastery. I admired Merton, and since I was only a year out of seminary and already burning out, I thought I might as well give it a shot! This was the beginning of my taking spiritual practice seriously. It was the point at which I stopped running from my fears, anxiousness, and anger. As I drove away from Gethsemani after three days of silence, I felt a profound gratitude for that community. It was not a community without tensions and conflicts. Merton's writings about life there tell us that. Yet it was a community devoted to living in the peace Jesus commands us to have, a peace within a world that is tumultuous, lost in confused values and directions. It was like an anchor for the world, or a wellspring of spiritual sanity and clarity. You don't need to be a monastic community, however, to live in and out of the peace of Christ. The Church of the Covenant has felt called to be such a community. People come here for worship or to walk the grounds or to spend time in retreat, and say such things as, "This is such a peaceful place." I think it is true. We try to create places--in our mission groups, and in the missions with which we work--where people can touch the peace of Christ, the peace of God, places where we can more clearly touch the sacred dimension of our lives. Yet it can be this way only as we continue to strive to be a community of Christ's peace. We make a commitment to work in our individual lives with spiritual practices that help us touch peace. Our mission groups need to continue to commit to spiritual practices that ground the group in peace, as well as in the vision to which it feels called. We may not do it perfectly, but that's not the point. The point is the desire, the commitment, and the effort to keep touching the peace of Christ in the midst of our fears, conflicts, and the tremendous needs of the world. This is all the work of the inward journey, individually and together."

So, I believe as with David and with Gordon and Bev, true peace in this world starts with us. We must be people of peace. We must be willing to take a stand for peace. This will manifest best when we can truly love all people. But to be a people of peace, we must practice peace, both internally and externally. Be at peace inside yourself and at peace with those around you. No more war. No more pain. Just peace. This is our lasting legacy. This is Kum Ba Yah. This is the heart of the covenant: Love and peace, together.

Shalom