

THE GUNS OF AUGUST
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28

They [that would be the other 11 sons of Jacob/Israel] saw their brother Joseph [the favorite son of the “coat of many colors”] from a distance and they conspired to kill him. *Here comes this dreamer, they said. Let’s kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.*

Matthew 14:22-33

The boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And Jesus came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified. *It is a ghost!* And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, *Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid.*

Nan Merrill, *Peace Planet: Light for Our World*

Each of us can become a blessed channel of peace for the healing of Earth’s wounds: We can awaken from apathy and find creative, non-violent ways to transform the abuses rampant in today’s world.

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War is hell.

It may be heavenly for business, but it is hell for those in the line of fire. Let’s pray we never get comfortable with war or our nation’s economic dependence on it.

War is hell.

Yes, war may be hell, but according to the Apostles’ Creed, Christ descended into “hell,” which is both a myth and a metaphor. It’s a way of saying: *no matter how far we fall from grace, the Beloved will find us and lead us home again.* And that means you and your own personal hell. Storms may rage; your life may be about to capsize; but take heart. The Beloved is near.

The Beloved descended into hell and that means your own personal hell—whatever that may be for you these days.

But it also means hellish wars that afflict the nations and peoples of the world.

With so much war and killing going on these days, it’s hard to be optimistic. But we can be hopeful. Optimism is one thing; hopefulness is something else.

According to the gospel lesson for today, in the midst of a raging storm, within the violence of the “sea,” which in such stories typically represents the nations, Christ appears and says: *Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid.*

But we are afraid because we’ve seen this play before.

Once again the world seems on the brink of a global inferno. The cauldron of the Middle East is boiling. Who or what can stop ISIS from dominating Syria and Iraq? How long can Israel restrain its nuclear weapons? What is Russia up to, really? What about Iran? How long can China stay quiet? And how many more embittered fighters will the recent US airstrike in Iraq unleash?

Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid.

But we are afraid in part because we just don't seem to learn. We keep learning and perfecting the ways of war, but we don't seem to learn the ways of peace. We know how to mobilize an entire society and economy for war, but not for peace. Not yet. But then, humans, remember, are still a very young and immature species on the evolutionary time line. We have a lot to learn.

One hundred years ago this past Monday, August 4, 1914, England declared war on Germany after Germany had violated Belgium's neutrality. The rest is history, the history of WWI and its 35 million casualties, including 16 million military and civilian deaths. The world had never seen death and destruction on that scale.

I've been reading *The Guns of August*, Barbara Tuchman's classic on WWI. It's her telling of old grudges, deep resentments and insatiable greed-fueled military conquests, not unlike the greed and resentment that drove Joseph's brother to plot his death. Brothers killing brothers?!

What were they thinking?

Brothers who should love each other can't always. Brothers and sisters who should bless and protect each other often turn on each other. It's an old, old story and it's part of our Great Ancestors' understanding of the human heart.

Our tradition's assessment of the human heart or human nature is this: *Yes, we are created good and are capable of great goodness, but we are also capable of great evil.* That's true of all human persons and all human institutions, and thus we should never give up on either persons or institutions to get it right or to be redeemed.

As the epigram in the *Guns of August* puts it: *The human heart is the starting point of all matters pertaining to war.*

In other words, if war begins in the heart, so must peace.

One hundred years ago, so called Christian nations took up arms to kill each other and would do it all over again a few years later in what we call WWII. What were they thinking? As Hitler's propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, put it: *Once you instill fear in a nation, people will accept and do most anything.*

And so, reasonable people would insanely send the children of their nations into a slaughterhouse. Seventy years ago, in 1944, WWII reached a fiendish pitch; troops and civilians were slaughtered in unspeakable spasms of violence.

Of course, once things reached a certain point, D-Day (June 6, 1944) became a necessity. There is, after all, a certain logic to war. It may be insane but it is logical once you accept certain premises, such as, *only violence can stop violence.* Accept that premise and certain conclusions are inevitable.

And thus, 69 years ago this past week, our nation—with sound military logic—pulverized the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, indiscriminately killing civilians, including children—a *bad thing*—but also effectively ending the war—a *good thing*. The death toll of WWII, depending on how you count bodies, was somewhere between 50 and 85 million.

We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount. The world has achieved brilliance without wisdom, power without conscience. Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants. We know more about war than we know about peace, more about killing than we know about living. [Gen. Omar Bradley, a highly decorated veteran of WWII.]

Two years ago I came upon a story about George Zabelka. Zabelka was a catholic chaplain in WWII and had blessed the crew that carried the bombs to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Even though he thought he was doing his patriotic and Christian duty, Fr. Zabelka was tormented by guilt for decades.

I knew it was wrong and said nothing. All I can hope for from my God is justice tempered by mercy. I'm hoping for mercy for I was silent when I should I have spoken up.

In 1985 on the 40th anniversary of Hiroshima, Zabelka offered a public confession in a speech.

The destruction of civilians in war was always forbidden by the Church. And if a soldier came to me and asked if he could put a bullet through a child's head, I would have told him, absolutely not. That would be mortally sinful. But in 1945, Tinian Island was the largest airfield in the world. Three planes a minute could take off from it around the clock. Many of those planes went to Japan with the express purpose of killing not one child or one civilian, but of slaughtering hundreds and thousands and tens of thousands of children and civilians — and I said nothing.

All I can say today is that I was wrong. Christ would not be the instrument to unleash such horror on people.

The year before at Hiroshima, Zabelka had asked forgiveness from the Japanese survivors of the atomic bombings.

I fell on my face at the peace shrine and prayed for forgiveness — for myself, for my country, for my Church. I asked forgiveness of them, and they asked forgiveness for Pearl Harbor and other horrible deeds of the Japanese military. We embraced. We cried. Tears flowed. That is the first step of reconciliation — admission of guilt and forgiveness. Pray to God that others will find this way to peace.

War is complicated and the reasons for war are complicated and not always purely evil. In this world, we sometimes have to settle for the lesser of two evils. But as people of the Beloved we must never forget how to lament war or how to sustain hope for everlasting peace.

Yes, we must bear witness against our own nation's insatiable war machine, as President Eisenhower another decorated WWII General urged; but we must also look to our own hearts and bring the light of Christ into the darkness of greed, jealousies, grudges, and resentments that drive us to hurt others in our own small worlds. Notice the darkness in your own heart, but also notice the light of Christ there too.

Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid.

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HYMN

Make Me a Channel of Your Peace.