



In Trenches and at Our Tables

November 18, 2018

25th Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 46; Mark 13:1-8, 24-27

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Today we celebrate Thanksgiving. In that spirit, our next text may seem a bit strange. It's appointed by the Lectionary, which is an ancient way to structure readings in worship centering on important parts and stories of the Bible. It's a three-year cycle, with 4 readings per week, one each from the Old Testament, psalms, gospels and letters of the New Testament. I value the Lectionary for church unity and a challenge in texts I might not choose. It's a starting point, open to change, given concerns of our day. So then why these texts as we celebrate Thanksgiving? It is also 100 years since the World War I armistice. I hear y'all shared a powerful moment last week, when Chrissy prayed in that spirit and bells across the street tolled the 11th hour. I've read a lot about WWI recently to glean from Flanders Fields of the past guidance and inspiration for our present. A connection with what St. Mark writes may become obvious. We might say a central question for today is: how do we move from such great devastation to grateful celebration? Hear what the Spirit may say. {read Mark 13:1-8, 24-27}

Scholars call this text Mark's apocalypse. Beyond wars and rumors of wars he envisions more violence, persecutions, family members betraying one another, all kinds of suffering. Mark's people lived through military assault on Jerusalem, and their sacred temple torn down. You see, he doesn't forecast future events. Prophecy is a literary form used to frame and address current experience. At the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem we see and stand on huge foundation stones that remain from that Jewish temple in Jesus' time. Yes, Mark's people knew all about suffering,

persecution, wars, and the resulting famine and destruction of families. Sadly, we might say, some things in human experience seem ever the same.

As bad as WWI became, it started with glorious parties in every country—parades, jaunty expectations—like sending a soccer team to the World Cup. Surely this bit of fun would end in a few months, with spoils of easy victory! Enemy royal families were cousins, all come from Queen Victoria. Causes of war were so foolish and avoidable. Strategy and tactics were so incompetent and wasteful. Trenches quickly spread, casualties soared, horror continued beyond imagination for four long years. Human powers of freedom, intellect, and reason employed for destruction literally blew people’s minds. So many shells and bullets cratered the land that all along the front absolutely nothing survived—no trees, plants, animals, except rats. In one futile battle British soldiers attacked through deep mud into rolls of barbed wire. German machine gunners were so horrified by their slaughter, they simply stopped firing as the British walk back to their own side. War ended with Belgium literally and figuratively raped repeatedly. Germany in utter famine. Russia in revolution. Soldiers and citizens in all nations so disturbed by the experience that governments throughout Europe tottered.

A great poet of the war, Wilfred Owen, was killed just days before the end. In “The Parable of the Old Man and the Young”, Owen pierces the heart of the horror and its cause, and maybe inspires a desire for more measured motives in all times, through allusion to the scriptural story of Abram and Isaac.

So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went,
And took the fire with him, and a knife.
And as they sojourned both of them together,
Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,
Behold the preparations, fire and iron,
But where the lamb for this burnt-offering?

Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,
and builded parapets and trenches there,
And stretchèd forth the knife to slay his son.
When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,
Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,
Neither do anything to him. Behold,
A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;
Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.

But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.ⁱ

As much as the First World War affected people around the globe, continued into the Second, and shaped the course of the whole 20th Century, still I wonder are causes, casualties and stresses then relevant now? Should we just let it go? Maybe. Then I remember some good friends back in Marshall. Strong family, committed parents, loving home, success in eyes of society. He flew for United Airlines, and for the Air National Guard A-10 squadron in Battle Creek. In the Iraq war, flying low, slow, and very heavily armed their job was to destroy anything that moved. He said they did it well. And once, while on a few weeks of leave, he struggled mightily with all he saw through gunsights and triggered. Our lively young children cut short our conversation. Still I see him shifting unsettled, holding back tears, that betrayed deeper pain. As if every bullet and bomb exploding on the outside, did so on the inside, as well. Within a year, of 27 pilots in that squadron, all but two had broken marriages and families, some with a complex of other addictions. Casualties of war included his wife whose lupus raged amid stresses out of control, their twelve-year-old son suddenly man of the house, daughter eight, and second son four. As we observe the end of WWI, friends, we see how similar horrors continue still.

So, today I honor and lament, but I don't intend to debate pacifism, just use of force or any particular conflict. Causes, justification, and conduct of war should always be soberly considered and many people I've known who prove most judicious, suspicious, and reluctant to go to war are career officers who spend their lives around it. Today I really want to find good news, especially for people among us who face horrors in their own lives. Veterans and related casualties of war. People who've known persecution and prejudice, traumatic violence, or who face effects of illness beyond imagination.

Good news for people in Northern California who've lived through something akin to John Milton's famous *Paradise Lost*. So it looked and felt this week after raging fire consumed everything in its path—a war zone, leaders called it, as human body counts keep rising.

Good news for people in Yemen and so many other places where Owen's parable of the old man and the young keeps getting relived as horrific human proclivity for destruction never ends.

Friends, here's good news God promises: I will come to you in lonely silence, in fear or despair, in shadows of the night, bringing light, bringing strength and healing, freedom and peace the world cannot give. "God is our refuge and strength in times of trouble," the Psalmist assures. Though the climate of Earth should change, though highest social institutions like mountains shake and quake into chaos like the sea, though nations totter and tremble amid tumult, *God is ever in our midst*. The Lord of heaven is with us, the God of Jacob—who knew a thing or two about family conflict, greedy choices and injurious consequences—the God of Jacob, Rachel, and Leah is *our* refuge, too. Come behold how Holy Love makes wars cease. Be still—that Hebrew word isn't really like watching the sunset, feeling the breeze. It's bold, strong, silencing chaos like Aslan's lion-ous roar, or Dumbledore's

bellow amid excited Hogwarts students, or guns on the Western Front firing incessantly in final hours so they didn't have to carry shells home, suddenly quiet as clocks struck 11:00 am.

It's Jesus' voice—gentle, steadfast, clear amid anxiety, loss, confusion, illusions of grandeur like the old temple in all its glory; resounding from his disciples to Mark's people and over centuries to you and me. Saying you will hear of wars, earthquakes, famine, nations falling, people claiming to be savior, as if they are my very presence and power. Don't be deceived. Don't despair. Amid the suffering, it is the beginning. Where sun is darkened by smoke and ash of war or wildfires, moon gone, wishes and dreams like stars fallen, even trust in heavenly powers shaken, then you will see me coming. Then God will send angels to gather in ordinary people like you and me at the farthest ends of life in earth and heaven.

Angels like Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. As a French Jesuit priest he served as a medic stretcher-bearer among the Zouave North African regiments. He said mass for soldiers right in trenches while shells exploded all around. Once he crawled into no-man's land after dark right in front of an enemy machine gunner, to come for a wounded soldier, appearing at dawn with the dead man on his back. Amid horrors of gas and human stench, he found it possible to breathe the air of heavenly love. Born in such hours of crisis, it always lives within us, he says. And when it does, we see through the “scab of banalities and the crust of convention” to deep layers of humanity beneath daily monotony. We know what really matters. And we pursue in God and for God a kind of holiness that can only be fulfilled in the fullness of peace.ⁱⁱ In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit, we strive to serve Christ in daily tasks and so live holy and joyful lives!ⁱⁱⁱ

Truth is, after World War I, many prejudices between races and classes simply would not stand. Women took major steps toward liberation, including the right to

vote. For all the horrors of war, friends, truth is the military remains about the most integrated and equitable institution of our society. Yes, inhumanities and atrocities occur. And we hear stories like George Coles a British prisoner of in WWI. His plane got shot down, captured, held for months back in Germany. In the final days Bolsheviks took over his camp, barely holding chaos at bay. In a way the security of prison bars was his sanctuary. On November 12 parades and crowds passed beneath his window. So he dropped some of his Red Cross biscuits through the bars to streets below. Within minutes starving children massed and they passed ten boxes of their precious rations.^{iv} God is our refuge and strength in times of trouble.

At men's group this week, one of our friends told us about a person who walked across Afghanistan, even through the most violent parts. Wherever he went he received gracious welcome, shelter, refuge and food. Strange as it may seem in such a bloody, chaotic land, hospitality (even for alien strangers) is at the heart of their life and faith. Another friend was moved by a book about clean-up of the space shuttle Columbia in Texas. 1500 people from around the country came to sift through material and human remains. In that part of rural Texas there weren't any hotels or restaurants. So people took them into their homes and at the VFW—the VFW Hall—they served over 50,000 meals ... and cracked over 25,000 eggs, he confirmed this morning while serving us breakfast! You will hear of wars and stars falling from heaven, then you will see the Son of Humanity coming in glory.

In a few moments we'll give thanks for and dedicate our east transept chapel space. People have given time, effort, expertise, and money so that here others may find a refuge in times of trouble and hear good news proclaimed. May the Holy Presence of Love be felt and lives healed, inspired, transformed. May sacred hope and committed purpose in Christ move us all from pride, greed, foolish arrogance and selfishness to humble, grateful, generous living as thanks-giving.

In a few days we'll be gathering around other tables with family or friends and neighbors. Pilgrims long ago fled persecution, survived months aboard a tiny ship, even through winter just off-shore. Something like half of them died. They faced potential enemies then overcame fear to share a feast. Christian and Native American both, the God of Jacob and the Wampanoag people was in the midst of that village that day. And so may we feel the Holy Spirit as abundant in our gatherings as the cornucopia here in our chancel.

Trenches in the war of words gripping our society may pass through our tables, dug within our hearts. Maybe some people dear to us won't come, casualties of conflict in one form or another. For some as this weekend begins a holiday season, it will be a difficult time. I wonder what Thanksgiving was like here 100 years ago, after all fell quiet on the Western Front and it was still. I believe our ability to give thanks, to live abundantly with gratitude in good times, is stronger, deeper, richer for all the tragedy we've known, trauma that may linger, and people we love even still to whom we open our broken hearts. For what do we give thanks today?

Even in our most difficult times of life, dear friends, the Spirit of Jesus Christ who gave his life to love, through what were the criss-crossed trenches of his day, rises again within each of us and among us and comes to our tables. Listen for his voice of grace and peace—bold, strong, gentle, steadfast, clear—and be still. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, and so much other suffering, he urges, do not be deceived. Do not despair. You will see God come with great power of compassionate love and the glory of sacrificial service. Then God will send out angels to the ends of the earth and human experience, just maybe including you and me.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/parable-old-man-and-young>

ⁱⁱ Nicholas Best, *The Greatest Day in History* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008), 61.

<http://www.vlib.us/wwi/resources/teilharddechardin.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ From *A Brief Statement of Faith* (Presbyterian Church (USA))

^{iv} Best, 258-259.