

Post-War Preaching

Isaiah 2:1-5, 11:1-10, 35:1-10; Romans 15:4-13; James 5:7-10

Mark A. Jumper

Hope Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Libertyville, Illinois

“Someday this war’s gonna end ...”

(Lieutenant Colonel Bill Kilgore, *Apocalypse Now*)

Five Post-War Issues

What happens when wars end? Even Colonel Kilgore, who reveled in “the smell of napalm in the morning,” knew that his war in Vietnam would someday end.

Warriors such as Kilgore, seemingly fearless in battle, may yet fear to face the peacetime battles of everyday life at home. Adjustments can be difficult. Post-war struggles may not be as clear-cut as wartime battles. The later life in safety may be shadowed by the former life of danger. Life’s resumption of regular rhythms may make a difficult dance for one who is used to war’s “long periods of boredom followed by moments of sheer terror.” Warriors may also retain certain wartime responses, feelings, and habits, more helpful for war than for peace—that make post-war life a real challenge (Shay 2002). They will at least need some ritual of cleansing, if not work to deal with grief and guilt. It is also increasingly recognized that many warriors, in their wartime experience, may have contracted psychic and spiritual wounds.

Those at home, post-war, have their own challenges. Their lives were changed by war’s realities. This must be so in spite of official policies that attempt to minimize war’s effects on normal society. The Johnson administration, contemplating escalation in Vietnam, deliberately chose to shield America’s life from war’s effects by not putting society and the economy on a wartime footing. The George W. Bush administration, regarding the War on Terror, has emphasized the importance of “continued participation and confidence in the American economy,” albeit accompanied by “your patience, with the delays and inconveniences that may accompany tighter security” (Bush 2001). Bush says to help fight the war by buying more. However, in spite of these policies, the war was the major issue for each of these societies.

Casualties were only one unavoidable reminder of war’s reality, as all sectors—political, cultural, religious, economic, social, and personal—became involved and affected in one way or another. In many other cases, entire societies mobilized and militarized to support war efforts. In all cases, a nation cannot be involved in hostilities without its home front populace being affected. Peace therefore brings change from wartime realities, and change is seldom easy. Interrupted lives must be resumed, but the presumption of resuming former activities unchanged is usually mistaken, for time and war have both brought new realities, leaving the pre-war world *Gone With the Wind*. World War II, for example, brought several changes to the United States: African Americans expected real progress in their lot, having deferred it during their wartime support; many women had experienced life in the workplace outside the home and wished to keep some involvement with that life; many veterans received higher education through the GI Bill; and America’s stance on the stage of the world had moved from isolation to involvement. Such post-war changes present major chal-

lenges for every part of society.

Repair and rebuilding from war's destructions constitute another major challenge. Damaged and destroyed buildings, infrastructure (such as transportation, sanitation, and communication), the economy, the environment, public safety are all typically present urgent needs. Post-war famine is not unknown. Mass dislocations of populations are common. There is often a pent-up desire among people to experience gratifications that were put off during wartime. There is also a need, perhaps less expressed, to understand and deal with the ways individuals, populations, and societies were changed. War is the occasion of great sacrifice, loss, and adjustment, typically requiring some sort of rebuilding of personal and social lives, a work every bit as real and demanding as replacing bombed out buildings.

Relationships to former enemies can be a particular challenge. In some cases, the word "former" may not even apply, as the war's end may not have ended the negative relationship and may even have amplified it. Also, negative portrayals of the enemy during war may have been exaggerated, even to the point of dehumanizing. War crimes may or may not have been addressed. Rules for identification and rehabilitation of transgressors need explication and enactment. Forgiveness and reconciliation are often difficult. Yet even as hot memories of loss and abuse still burn, some form of new relationship is required after war's end. Life goes on, trade and ties may pragmatically resume, and former enemies may even become fast friends. This is true on both the national and the personal level. Warriors are often most desirous of forming relationships with those with which they had grappled in combat. Their mutual fascination may provide an opening that society at large can follow.

Many other aspects can come to mind regarding post-war realities and actions. However, the preacher will have a full task addressing even these four areas: warriors, those at home, rebuilding, and relationships to former enemies.

Justice is the fifth and overarching concern. Looking back, was war right? Was it fought for good ends, in good ways? Perhaps the war was perceived to have righted certain wrongs. If so, how may those rights be reinforced and maintained? The war may have left some issues of justice unaddressed or exacerbated. How may those issues yet be remembered, perhaps in the face of fatigue that finds it easier to forget? The war may have engendered new injustices, either in its practices or its effects. Some observers, indeed, may interpret the war itself as unjust. How may such depredations be addressed, not only with justice, but healing?

Five Advent (A) Scriptures

The Advent scriptures paint some remarkable pictures that present a rich resource for the preacher when viewed through a post-war lens.

Isaiah 2:1-5 refers to a time of Messianic rule in which all nations come to be taught the ways and paths of the post-war ruler. In other words, there will be a "new world order"—a new political and international system. There is also reference to post-war judgment *a la* war crime trials: "He shall judge between the nations, and rebuke many people (2:4)." Serious sociological and economic change will also come. It is somewhat common for swords to be beat into plowshares after a war. However, this particular post-war change goes farther: the very relationships of nations will change to exclude further war, to the point that even training and readiness for war will no longer be needed. This revolutionary change serves as a model of the best hopes

for any post-war experience. In the light of this messianic, best post-war outcome, any current situation is illuminated in hope.

Isaiah 11:1-10 expands the Messianic post-war reality. The Messiah's just rule is reiterated, but with a much more detailed description of the "ways" and "paths" previously alluded to. This righteous rule (11:2) is based on a *spiritual* foundation ("the Spirit of the Lord") that expresses itself specifically in six ways: wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, and the fear of the Lord. The description continues (11:3) with a reference to judgment that will be fair and impartial—certainly a fervent hope of many in any post-war environment. It will be a strong, decisive judgment (11:5), including appropriate punishment. Such judgments, made with equity, provide comfort especially to the poor and the powerless (11:4) who yearned for justice during the war, but had as yet no champion or vindicator. To the extent that any post-war society seeks such qualities, based on spiritual reality, it will find itself in congruence with Messianic peace. In this case though, the circle of peace is drawn ever wider. Creation itself will benefit through radical transformation, extending even to a change in the basic food chain and its aggression, "red in tooth and claw" (Tennyson). Even the patterns of prey will be eliminated. The universal nature of the peace includes residing together on the radically reformed earth, for both Jews (the Root of Jesse) and Gentiles (11:10) who live in common recognition of the Messiah. There is thus great diversity in terms of peoples, but also great inclusion and unity in terms of their new common allegiance.

Isaiah 35:1-10 repeats some post-war themes, but adds more depth. Ecological repair and renewal are prominent. As with the previous major paradigm change in the animal kingdom, there is here a major change in the ecological setting of that kingdom, with the desert both blooming (35:1-2) and bursting forth in various sources of water: streams, pools, and springs (35:6-7). Healing of wounds is also prominent, particularly apropos if one thinks in terms of common war wounds: blindness, deafness, and lameness. Rebuilding includes the all-important infrastructure—a highway—upon which all returns to normality must travel (35:8). This highway will then serve to support the return of refugees, joyfully coming home (35:9-10).

Romans 5:4-13 quotes the Isaiah 11 scripture as it focuses on an invitation and application to the Gentiles of a spiritual peace that not only brings them to God, but brings them to God in unity with Israel. This is a repeat of the grand theme of diversity in terms of the call and also of unity in terms of the response, as Jews and Gentiles come together as people under God and in God. That is, there is great reconciliation between people groups, but also between humanity itself, and God. The former enmities are beautifully subsumed in this new reality.

James 5:7-10 explicates the yearning for peace, resolution, and justice that the Messiah will bring. This yearning is especially intense during war. However this passage emphasizes that the one who hopes may also be the one who is judged. It is common for people in conflict to think themselves in the right and without fault in a matter, with most or all of the blame thrown onto the enemy *du jour*. Self-justification is practically *derigueur*. While James does reassure his readers regarding the Judge's coming, he also cautions them that their own actions will also fall under judgment. This echoes the Isaiah 2 and 11 passages, in that fair, impartial judgment will apply without bias to all, friend and foe, and also that such judgment will be strong and vigorous, regardless of who it affects. One can almost hear James saying, "Be careful

what you pray for—such as the Messiah’s coming—for you may get it, and it may include elements of justice that surprise you!” Such “bringing to earth” of high-flying pre-war self-righteousness may be a surprise, if not for passages such as this. The heartening side is that Messiah’s rule is fair, whether striking friend or foe. This makes Messiah’s coming a matter, and an object, of hope.

To summarize, these scriptures mark not only several elements of change that are not unknown in numerous post-war scenarios, but also a number of changes that go far beyond the norm. The hope of radical transformation, transcending normal cycles of violence and ending them to the core of Creation, is a glittering promise. The preacher is led to ask: “How may I take this hope and these promises and apply them in ways that reach effectively into the post-war present? It’s all well and good that war will end and Creation will change one day, but how does the final post-war paradise apply in the midst of our own brokenness?”

Applications

Advent is a time of preparation, focusing on the “not yet” of hope. It has much in common with the post-war process. Those in a post-war status hope for a better future; but they realize that it will take much preparation and work to get there. Advent thinking is founded on prior prophetic words. From those words, preparation ensues. Post-war thinking tends to refer back as response to a war just experienced. A post-war people are emerging from war’s reality. They are still in a transition phase, no longer at war, but “not yet” beyond the war. They are anchored in their recent experience of war; but they yearn and strive to fly beyond it to find a better future.

It might be said that the discipline of peacemaking is an ultimate goal of post-war activities. While post-war studies tend to work from and on those events just past, peacemaking strives, among many goals, to create structures that avoid war; to defuse conflict before it escalates; to intervene with direct war prevention; and to engender a milieu of comity that makes war unthinkable and unnecessary. In this, peacemaking could be said to be forward looking, while post-war activities refer to and respond to the past. This is so, even if post-war activities eagerly look to the future and as peacemakers take the hand that they are dealt from the past. However, for purposes of study and application, these two disciplines, post-war and peacemaking, will be separated, even though they share many common concerns.

The Advent preacher’s hearers, anchored in the present struggle, want to know of hope and how they may prepare for hope’s fulfillment. They will want to hear what God has said, what God has done and may do, and what people have done and may do. In the case of post-war preaching, we have examined some words from God that refer to future actions of God to create a reign of peace. Under the umbrella of God’s peace, we see people finding healing, rebuilding, and reconciliation. Are there some ways that this future peace may be experienced in the present? Perhaps some stories of past achievements can help.

It is helpful, from the Advent texts above, to realize that an overarching paradigm of *enemies becoming friends* does exist and is possible. A dramatic and unexpected transformation between two former enemies may be found in the case of Germany and France following World War II. These two nations fought each other three times from 1870 to 1945. Prussia humiliated France in 1870 and annexed parts of Alsace and Lorraine—part of the cause of war in 1914—and then lost those provinces in 1918.

Germany, after its own dispiriting dismantling, then toxic rebuilding, defeated France in 1940 and occupied parts of it into 1945. The Nazi occupation, besides its horror and many brutal aspects, drained the French of resources and self-respect. There was no love lost between these peoples. Enmity, distrust, and wounds were the rule. France occupied part of Germany following World War II, with revenge definitely on the agenda. The very continuance of Germany as a nation was in some doubt. However, a most remarkable alternative emerged.

Edward Luttwak has documented that amazing alternative of “Franco-German Reconciliation” (Luttwak 1993) through a group known as the Moral Re-Armament Movement (MRA), renamed Initiatives of Change in 2001. MRA sponsored a series of *reconciliation retreats* at a recently acquired hotel in Caux, Switzerland, nestled in beautiful Alpine mountain and lake surroundings. Participants included leaders from both nations in fields including government, trade unions, industrialists, clergy, and education. There, in a neutral, informal setting, performing kitchen and housekeeping duties together, meeting for intentional, intense discussions, all under subtly spiritual leadership, these leaders found their way to reconciliation and a new model for their future relationship. Numerous prominent participants affirmed that these retreats, with their revealing dialogue and the forming of warm personal relationships, formed the background basis for the Schuman Plan (1950) and the European Coal and Steel Community (1951), leading eventually to the European Common Market and the European Union. Such progress, against a seemingly insurmountable history, demonstrates the possibility of reconciliation between former implacable enemies. The preacher does well often to hold up such transformations, not only as possible examples, but realistic goals.

Among fighting forces, the curiosity to meet former foes, and even a sense of respect developing into camaraderie between them, is illustrated by the elements of the U.S. 2nd Cavalry Group and the German 11th Panzer Division from World War II. They fought each other through France in 1944 and on through Germany and into Czechoslovakia in 1945, where the Germans surrendered to the Americans they had fought so often. Since the war these veterans have held several *joint reunions*, alternating in each other’s countries.

If fighting forces and leaders of opposing nations can become friends, what of those from different sections of the *home front*? In the U.S., most of our wars (all but perhaps World Wars I and II) have entailed varying degrees of strong domestic division, including significant opposition to the war at hand. It is true that civil wars make the hardest cases for reconciliation. But whether the domestic conflict was only political, or escalated to military, obstacles to resumption of normal social interaction loom large. The preacher can be a key leader in the process of reaching mutual understanding and acceptance (if not agreement). The Advent texts prominently feature disparate groups coming under a common umbrella. The preacher can promote those of common background, likewise reaching reconciliation by common commitment to and application of those spiritual values of wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, and the fear of the Lord.

Truth and Reconciliation commissions have been one means by which participants in civil conflicts can resume living together in a common community. The commission in South Africa is perhaps the best known, but over two dozen such bodies have operated around the world (Avruch and Vejarano 2002). A typical commission

offers some level of amnesty to those who committed war crimes—if they publicly confess their actions in detail with some acceptable level of remorse. While these commissions are no cure-all and sometimes stumble with designs not adapted to the local culture (Shaw 2005), they nonetheless have provided great service in helping societies move to the healing of psychic and spiritual wounds. When memory has been hijacked by manifest evil, it must be recovered through the public telling of truth (Hedges 2003). A particular congregation or community coalition could provide a spiritual (not legal) forum for confession and communication among former adversaries who desire to live constructively together. The preacher is in an ideal position to present the moral case for such possibilities.

War crimes trials have also played a prominent role in recent post-war history. The Nuremburg trials of Nazi leaders after World War II established precedent-making procedures of internationally cooperative prosecution (even by such disparate entities as the U.S. and the U.S.S.R.). These procedures provided full legal rights for the accused, measured verdicts and sentences ranging from acquittal to death, and opportunity for victims to testify. Later, horrendous war crimes in countries such as Cambodia, Bosnia, and Rwanda impressed the need of a permanent, rather than *ad hoc*, system of international justice.

The 1998 Treaty of Rome established a permanent International Criminal Court at the Hague (Orend 2006). The preacher can note how such courts make serious attempt to reflect respect for human rights, fairness, and justice, all in the way of our Advent texts that stress the liberating value of true justice that is tough, impartial, and final. There are times when nothing will serve but a court examination and judgment of certain wartime events. The preacher performs a valuable function in stressing the need for justice—even if it falls upon those of one's own side. The James text makes it clear that such a turn can indeed come to be and can be necessary—as we see even now when our own errant soldiers are convicted for various levels of war crimes. Such convictions can cleanse a culture of culpability if they are taken to heart not simply as picking out the few “bad apples,” but as warnings for all to carefully examine themselves in order to avoid even the thought of criminal behavior. The preacher's encouragement for all to support the work of such courts can provide a powerful bulwark of social legitimacy that reflects the burden of our Advent texts.

Rigorous *self-examination* of one's own side, again according to our texts' standards of justice, can also be applied with profit by the preacher to the war's original purposes and the practices of its prosecution as the post-war phase arrives. Time and events can reveal new perspectives on events and decisions that once seemed certain, but may now seem different. The post-war pause gives an ideal moment to measure those perceptions, applying in a less pressured environment those same principles that it is hoped one lived by all along. Proper judgments can be reinforced, questionable ones exposed and corrected, bad judgments opposed and renounced, and communal commitment to act in congruence with its core principles reaffirmed. Again, our texts' standards in this regard are quite high.

Finally, what of those who fought—*returning warriors*? They will have been desensitized, by necessity, to perform their killing tasks (Grossman 1996). Now it is time, not only for them to be resensitized to the standards of society, but to renew and restore the parched springs of the spirit. Some may have responded to horrendous experiences by deadening themselves through self-medication. Others may find it

difficult to change their combat conditioning. It is time now to come alive again, both to the pain of wounds—spiritual and psychic, as well as physical—and their healing. If they went beyond the bounds of desensitization into the moral morass of breaking the ethical warrior's code (French 2003) or dehumanizing the enemy, they have problems indeed, for their very character is at risk of destruction (Shay 1995). The preacher can stress the value of *all* people's lives in God's sight, including those of the enemy, all together, as our texts teach, under the umbrella of common grace. Warriors desperately need the opportunity to renounce and discard dehumanization. The preacher has special opportunity to proclaim the reality of human dignity, bringing with it a sense of conviction in those who have dehumanized others, leading ultimately to freedom.

The common hope of a post-war era is *rebuilding and renewal*. Those of the faith community do God's work as they assist in rebuilding infrastructure and then use the resulting structures for righteous purpose, such as the highway in the desert that then carries returning refugees. While the Messianic transformation of the animal kingdom and the earth itself has not yet arrived, those paradigms are powerful enlistments for hope as we repair the damage of war with both beasts and Creation. It was impressed upon U.S. Marines deployed in the field in South Korea that the Korean park rangers knew every tree and shrub on a given mountain, having carefully nurtured them since the total deforestation that followed the war of 1950-1953. Every branch, then, must be treated with care. This care is completely in tune with the eager expectation of Creation's fulfillment, one day, in transformation.

Perhaps the most powerful tool available to the preacher, post-war, is the hope that our texts express: the job, with God's help, is not too large; even massive traumas may be healed; wrongs may be named and righted; relationships may be restored; the sinews of society may be rebuilt; warriors and civilians may all return to new life. This is a hope that preaches!

Reference Notes

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