



Of War and Cemeteries

In a recent editorial cartoon, Pat Oliphant depicts a dark, skeletal death figure unleashing two fanged and snarling “dogs of war” over the heads of a screaming crowd. The dogs are labeled “Religious Mania” and “Ethnic Hatreds.”¹

Must it be so, this terrifying connection between religion, hatred, war, and death? People wonder. On June 1 of this year, the Sunday closest to the fortieth anniversary of D-Day, I preached on the lectionary psalm of the day, Ps 68, including the more difficult lines omitted by the lectionary, for example, verse 21: “But God will shatter the heads of his enemies, the hairy crown of those who walk in their guilty ways.” God shattering the heads of the enemy. Do we like this? Can we sing it? People wonder. Never, in over forty years of preaching, have I received so many requests for a copy of a sermon.

D-Day is but one of the 2014 anniversaries that helped us settle on “War” as a theme for this issue, but the fact remains that, no matter the year, war anniversaries will abound. In my sermon, I noted that as a high school student in Virginia I frequently walked home from school through Arlington Cemetery. It was a shortcut that never ceased both to inspire and confound: so many crosses, so much marble, so much ritual (including the twenty-four-hour-a-day click of the heels of the guards at the Tomb of the Unknowns), so much beauty, so much death.

War and cemeteries are inevitably linked, alas. Also forty years ago, my father, as one of the first chaplains on the beachhead at Anzio, near Rome, began burying soldiers there, laying the groundwork, quite literally, for what would become the beautiful—terribly beautiful—Anzio and Nettuno military cemeteries.

We sometimes call World War II “the last good war,” apparently recognizing it as the last war that united US citizens and our “allies” in a common “good” cause. Wars since have all been messier and more divisive. So, was God on “our side” in World War II? Was God out there on the battlefields and beachheads shattering the heads of our enemies?

No matter how just the allied cause in World War II, we can no longer claim an “us” and “them” in the sight of God—certainly not since the prophets invited in the foreigners and the eunuchs (Isa 56:1–8) and called “all nations” to stream to God’s holy mountain, beating their swords into plowshares on the way (Isa 2:1–4); and the more so for Christians, since Paul proclaimed, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of

¹See, for example, <http://www.gocomics.com/patoliphant/2014/08/13> (accessed August 20, 2014).

you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28). Now all notions of “us” and “them,” all claims to “holy war” evaporate. To state the obvious, we won’t convince the ideologues and extremists—of whatever country and whatever religion—to accept that confession, but we can attempt to teach it and live it.

How to teach it? Ever since the Clinton campaign’s successful use of the slogan, “It’s the economy, stupid,” in 1992, I have had over my seminary computer the reminder (to myself)—regarding my primary courses, Isaiah and Psalms—“It’s poetry, stupid” All of that stuff in Ps 68, for example, as well as in all the other “war” or “enemy” psalms is poetry, and it must be read as such. More, it is symbolic or even mythic poetry, in which, for example, it is no longer Baal that crushes the head of the chaos goddess Tiamat to create the earth, but now Yahweh who crushes the heads of God’s enemies, like death, war, and chaos, to renew and protect God’s creation. It’s poetry, and the mythic parallels are deliberate. However elitist this might sound, people need to understand the genre and the wordplay, lest they lead themselves and others astray. To say these psalms are poetry is, of course, not to say that they are not true, but that they are true in much more significant ways than any literal, historic reading.

There are prosaic war texts in the Bible as well, as we know, not to mention apocalyptic ones, and they are not pretty. Without denying the reality of evil and the fact that some folks seem determined to make themselves enemies of anything like a just and loving God, we need to read those other war texts through the lens of texts that are more central to the Bible’s proclamation of the gospel. Simply put, some texts are more Bible than others. Everybody does something like that—as risky as it is—but some are reluctant to admit it. Near my brother’s house in Ohio, a sign in front of a local church announces in large letters: “Baptist. Independent. Fundamentalist. KJV.” They obviously want to define themselves as “true” Christians, but they make no admission of (or perhaps fail to understand) what is concealed in those words. “Baptist” is clear enough (though there are different kinds of those, as we know). All too often, “independent” simply means there are no checks and balances on what the present preacher deems to be true. More, “fundamentalist” announces straight out that the church has ideological commitments other than the Bible itself; and there is no attempt whatsoever to explain why “KJV” surpasses later (and better) translations. The sign is a blatant call to define “us” over against “them,” a pattern that often unhappily succeeds (given a peculiarly market-driven definition of success). Far better, I would say, to commit oneself to a church or denomination that has the checks and balances of the ecumenical creeds, which long ago recognized that for Christian faith some things are central and some are not—even things in the Bible. Or, in simpler, Lutheran terms: Bible (at least authoritative Bible) is only that which “drives” Christ. Such a canon-within-the-canon definition of Christianity will not so easily be led to find texts (and you can) that feed the dogs of war, the mania and hatreds of Oliphant’s cartoon.

It is long past time for all who claim to be worshipers of the biblical God—whether Christians, Jews, or Muslims—to renounce the hatred of one another, especially calls to hate and kill in the name of God. Thus, I was heartened to read the August 20, 2014, Associated Press report that a “top Saudi cleric” had said that “extremism and the ideologies of groups like the Islamic State and Al Qaeda are Islam’s No. 1 enemy.”² Despite any geopolitical self-serving overtones in that announcement, it is welcome. And Christians and Jews must be equally forthright in denouncing the separatist extremism within their own bodies. Again, we will not convince everyone of this, and we can exert no other “force” than our own words and example. But God can and will make use of that witness.

Regarding those biblical texts where God crushes the heads of the enemy, God himself comes to our rescue. Finally, I think, God doesn’t like such language either. It’s not left to us to “rescue” God by fixing the language. God has done that for us. In those Old Testament texts, God crushed the heads of those who represented evil. It was effective, but people died. God had to think of a better way. Anticipating this, an early Jewish commentary on the exodus story says this: “When the Egyptian armies were drowning in the sea, the Heavenly Hosts broke out in songs of jubilation. God silenced them and said, ‘My creatures are perishing, and you sing praises?’”³ The *Egyptians* are God’s creatures—not just the Israelites. So what is God to do if God’s mission is to save not just some but all?

What to do, for example, with that language of broken heads, crushed heads, wounded heads. What if God were to take all that pain and suffering on God’s own self? What if the “head now wounded” is not the head of the enemy, but the sacred head of God’s own son? What if God were to send God’s beloved son in order that all might be saved? That, of course, is the heart of the New Testament gospel, and it means there is no more “them”—at least not in God’s sight. We are all “us.”

In this world, not yet able fully to embrace God’s marvelous gift, war remains. Evil remains, suffering remains. We may even need to allow something like “just war,” though every side sinned against the “rules” of just war already in World War II, and in wars since there is hardly even a pretense of maintaining them. So just war, maybe, but no “holy war”—never again. The term defies all definitions of God and holiness. God is holy, and the holy God calls us to a better place—calls us all, not just some.

On the hill high above my grad school apartment in Heidelberg, Germany, lies the “Ehrenfriedhof,” the memorial cemetery to honor the German soldiers who died in both World Wars—graves and monuments marked with Christian crosses, just like those at the graves dug by my dad at Anzio, though here the crosses are red stone rather than white marble. I walked up there sometimes to remind myself that the dead on both sides belong to God. I don’t want to equate the

²See, for example, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Latest-News-Wires/2014/0820/Top-Saudi-cleric-Islamic-State-is-Islam-s-No.-1-enemy>.

³This wording appears in *A Passover Haggadah: The New Union Haggadah*, ed. Herbert Bronstein for the Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Penguin, 1982) 48.

causes for which they died. There is a profound difference between fighting to liberate and fighting to enslave. Still, most of those lying in that Heidelberg cemetery were just guys, caught up in the wars and maybe the wretched ideology of their day, and their sons and daughters who became my friends will still say that those men, too, understood themselves to be giving their lives for their country. Perhaps senselessly and certainly misguided, because no sane German today wants to defend the Nazi cause. But men and women died, and God cares. Until we come to know that God cares for all, that God died for all, wars and rumors of wars will remain.

But God offers a better way: Christ's sacred head now wounded, wounded for all, that all might be saved. All!

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