

# “Anthem for Doomed Youth”

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*Remembrance Sunday*

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

## Reading

Our reading today is the poem,  
“Parable of the Old Man and the Young,” by Wilfred Owen,  
one of Britain’s “War Poets” from the first World War.

These poets offered commentary, usually quite critical,  
on the experience and meaning of war,  
often writing, quite literally, from the trenches.

You’ll likely recognize Owen’s poem to be  
a recasting of the ancient biblical story of Abraham and Isaac,  
but with a horrible twist.

“Parable of the Old Man and the Young,” by Wilfred Owen

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.

### **Sermon: “Anthems for Doomed Youth”**

We gather this day, on the Remembrance Sunday that falls  
one hundred years after the start of World War I,  
The Great War—the war, of course, to end all wars.

We gather this day, on the anniversary of Kristallnacht,  
the frenzy of terror against Jews  
that swept Nazi Germany and Austria, 76 years ago tonight.

We gather this day, 50 years after Canadian soldiers  
began a model peacekeeping mission in Cypress.

We gather this day, on the anniversary  
of the fall of the Berlin Wall, 25 years ago tonight.

And we gather this day, one week and one day  
after Canadian CF18s began carrying out the first air strikes  
against the Islamic State in Iraq.

This brief list serves as a reminder  
that war comes and war goes, as does peace.

So much of the human story, the epic of our time on this earth,  
is written in conflict.

History sometimes seems little more  
than an endless litany of battles lost and wars won.

Living amid the relative peace of this country,  
we are rightly grateful for the security that surrounds us, day in and day out.

We need only bring to mind names such as Donetsk, or Gaza, or Aleppo  
to be reminded of the privileged place we occupy on this planet,  
at this moment in time—and in the vast expanse of human history.

It is the deep and obvious appreciation of that privilege  
that so moves me in how Canadians observe Remembrance Day.

The red poppies pinned to lapels across the country  
signify the gratitude of the nation for the women and men  
who have served in the armed forces, with many, with far too many,  
having made the ultimate sacrifice of their lives to do so.

The quiet intention and silent solemnity of the remembrance rituals  
capture my imagination each year,  
mostly because they feel so much at odds with so much  
of my American experience of Veterans' Day and Memorial Day,  
which, while decidedly serious, have a very different quality about them.

I recall first encountering this feeling, this deep contrast,  
when I made a visit many years ago  
to the Imperial War Museum in London.

As you might expect, there were plenty of tanks and cannons around,  
and an impressive collection of missiles and fighter jets  
suspended from the ceiling.

But what most struck me about the museum was the anti-war tone  
that seemed written into so much of the museum's exhibits.

And what really got to me was an exhibition on the War Poets of World War I.

I had somehow never heard of them,  
but I became engrossed in their reflections on the horrors of war,  
and fascinated by how they articulated  
such a mixed and complicated sense of duty and disillusionment.

Wilfred Owen, the author of the reading I shared earlier,  
also composed this poem, the title of which I borrowed for this sermon,  
"Anthem for Doomed Youth":

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?  
Only the monstrous anger of the guns.  
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle  
Can patter out their hasty orisons.  
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;

Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs, —  
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;  
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.  
What candles may be held to speed them all?  
Not in the hands of boys but in their eyes  
Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.  
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;  
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,  
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

Looking back, now more than a decade after standing in that temple to war, in the very week when the U.S. and Britain and other allies— with the conspicuous absence of Canada—had begun their invasion of Iraq, what struck me about the War Poets was how their words didn't match up with words I had recently read by Christopher Hedges in his sobering book, *War Is a Force that Gives Us Meaning*.

Words that resonated as true.  
Words I recognized in the rhetoric  
leading up to the start of that war eleven years ago.

Haunting words that described—and describe even still—  
how easy it is for people to seek meaning through war,  
be it a fight between nations or clans or tribes,  
or the false but seductive promise bought wholesale  
by the most vulnerable, the most disaffected, the most desperate.

The enduring attraction of war is this, [Hedges writes]:  
even with its destruction and carnage  
it can give us what we long for in life.  
It can give us purpose, meaning, a reason for living.  
Only when we are in the midst of conflict  
does the shallowness and vapidness  
of much of our lives become apparent.  
Trivia dominates our conversations and increasingly our airwaves.  
And war is an enticing elixir. It gives us resolve, a cause.  
It allows us to be noble.  
And those who have the least meaning in their lives,  
the impoverished refugees in Gaza,  
the disenfranchised North African immigrants in France,  
even the legions of young who live in the splendid indolence and safety

of the industrialized world, are all susceptible to war's appeal.

The seduction of glory through battle,  
the promise of finding meaning through means of violence,  
are some of humanity's oldest and most dangerous enticements.

We hear them today, and swiftly dismiss them,  
often with a roll of our eyes,  
as we hear about yet another radicalized jihadist  
answering the call in hopes of a heavenly reward,  
a chance to spend eternity in paradise with 72 virgins.

It's easy to discount this or other motivations  
as strange, exotic elements from a distant and misguided culture.

But we would do well to look into our own dominant culture  
before doing so.

Take the beautiful words the choir sang a few moments ago.  
Words based on a passage from the *Gospel of John* and other Christian texts,  
which the English composer John Ireland  
set to music just before the outbreak of World War I.

Words that had an affecting power when they started to be sung  
at the funerals of soldiers during the Great War.

Many waters cannot quench love,  
neither can the floods drown it. Love is strong as death.  
Greater love hath no man than this,  
that a man lay down his life for his friends.  
Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree,  
That we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness.  
Ye are washed, ye are sanctified,  
ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus.  
Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation;  
That ye should show forth the praises of him  
who hath call'd you out of darkness into his marvellous light.  
I beseech you brethren, by the mercies of God,  
that you present your bodies, a living sacrifice, holy,  
acceptable unto to God, which is your reasonable service.

These words have been used to make meaning of the loss of life in war.  
To find the comforting reassurance that surely the dead died not in vain.

To ennoble their sacrifice with the blessing of religious authority  
and the promise of heavenly rewards.

It speaks to a motivation as ancient as the written texts of our history.  
The call to arms on behalf of some divine cause.

One of the most damning examples from our own culture  
is powerfully detailed by Rebecca Parker, who I'll quote at some length:

The idea that God saves through violence has been a core doctrine  
of Western Christianity for the past thousand years.  
At the end of the eleventh century Anselm of Canterbury  
formulated the theological idea that Jesus died on the cross  
to pay back God for the injury to God's honour caused by human sin.  
His theology, written to defend Christianity from Muslims and Jews,  
provided explicit justification for Christian holy war.  
The first crusade, called in 1095 by Pope Urban II,  
urged holy warriors to sacrifice their lives  
just as Jesus gave his on the cross.  
The Pope promised that their noble deaths would merit the forgiveness  
of debts and garner rewards to the slain soldiers' families.  
Inspired by a theology of sacrificial violence that justified the destruction  
of God's enemies as a holy act, Christian knights began murdering Jews  
in the Rhineland and Muslims in the East.  
From 1095 forward, Anthony Bartlett writes,  
"the holocaust became a possibility on European soil."<sup>1</sup>

In this light, those words from the anthem, sung by the choir,  
land for me in a very problematic way.

For they remind me of how easy it is to justify violence  
with religiously-inspired reasons that extend beyond,  
or even transcend, the reality on the ground.

I'm deeply concerned about how susceptible we humans seem to be

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<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Parker, "Against Vengeance: Witness for the Things That Make for Peace," *UU World Magazine*, September/October 2002.

to finding divine inspiration or religious sanction  
that justifies our tendency to wage war.

It's easy to spot this force at work in the lone-wolves  
who are stirred to a violent form of jihad against us.

It's harder to recognize the tendency in ourselves, and in the way  
that we've made meaning of our need, at times, to make war.

I say all of this, as we approach Remembrance Day,  
because I sense a need as strong now as ever,  
for us to pay our heartfelt respects to those who've died  
defending the values we hold dear.

But I believe we also need to resist the pull to romanticize their deaths.  
And instead look at war and its terrible, terrible costs  
without a bit of varnish.

We need to remember those who have died, and those who have served.  
We need to remember those who serve now.  
And we need always to remember what we ask them to do on our behalf.

A hundred years ago, when young soldiers boarded ships to sail for Europe,  
everyone in this country knew someone who was heading to war.

The cost of war, the sacrifice of individuals and of society,  
was palpable and personal.

With the way that wealthy countries wage war today,  
we are largely insulated from feeling war's true cost.

158 Canadian soldiers died in Afghanistan.  
Chances are that most, if not every one of us,  
didn't know any of these women or men.

Yet, they died on our behalf.

Such sacrifice deserves our undivided attention,  
and demands the highest level of discernment  
before making that most profound request of others.

It's easy to assign, or abdicate, responsibility for this to a government that we may not like.

It's much more difficult to sit with the hard fact that sending young people to war, even when the war is justified, is a collective responsibility that we all share.

That's why I believe there is no room for romanticizing what's at stake.

I long to be a pacifist. I definitely lean far in that direction.

Yet, I reluctantly believe there are times when war is the only tool left to prevent even greater harm.

This has tended to be the view taken by Unitarians through much of our history.

Though we have long worked for peace, there have been times when we have lined up in support of war.

This is sometimes a surprise to people who assume that we stand in the historic "Peace Church" tradition that's largely comprised of the Quakers and Mennonites.

Instead, we've tended more toward "Just War" theory, which seeks to ensure that war is morally justifiable through a set of criteria that verify that the goal is to protect life, and that it is the last resort.

Unitarian Universalists in the U.S. spent five years not long ago studying the question of whether they might deepen their commitment to the cause of peace and peacemaking.

That's a conversation I would very much like to see happen here, in our Canadian context, because it seems clear we're moving away from the tradition of peacekeeping which has distinguished this country in the past.

And because we're likely moving into a time of increasing vulnerability to attacks like those in Ottawa and Quebec.

How we respond to our feelings of vulnerability

will have a great deal to say about who we are and what we believe.

We need not to be naïve, but we also need not to act out of irrational fears and trade in our social liberties for the vague promise of security.

War has consequences.

The war in Iraq that Canada wisely avoided eleven years ago has arguably given rise to the violence we're contending with now from the Islamic State.

Gandhi was right, "an eye for an eye ends up making the whole world blind."

It's hard to predict where the cycles of violence will lead apart from bloodshed and heartache.

That's why Martin Luther King's words must remain with us still, that: "Peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek, but a means by which we arrive at that goal."

As we pause to remember the toll of war this week, may we rededicate ourselves to the cause of peace.

May we take up the practice of peace in our own lives, knowing that peacekeeping and peacemaking, require being at peace, in our own hearts.

Peace, then, to us all, and to our world, for the stakes are high, and there's not a minute to waste.

Amen.