

“To Bless the World”

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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.

Meditation

“In the Ruins” – Lynn Ungar

A man sits on the rubble—
not just in the rubble, but on the pile
of what remains. No people
in the bombed-out houses.
No dogs. No birds. Just ragged hunks
of concrete and loss. And on his perch
he is playing an instrument constructed
of what is left—an olive oil can, a broom handle,
a bowed stick and strings. It sounds
exactly as it is supposed to sound.
The instrument cries, but the man sings.
Because sometimes loss is deeper than tears.
Because sometimes grief is resistance.
Because, somewhere down the very long road,
music is stronger than bombs.

Sermon: “To Bless the World”

I’ll always remember the day after “The Day After.”

It was the 21st of November, 1983.

In my grade eight science class, our teacher talked about the movie
so many of us had watched the night before—
a two-hour film aired on ABC that still holds the record
for the largest audience in history for a made-for-TV-movie.

At the height of the Cold War, the movie depicted the before and after of a nuclear war between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.

The movie didn't show who started it, but it made clear that there were no winners.

It was a deeply affecting film.

There are reports of it leaving executives at ABC in tears.

It left President Reagan and Joint Chiefs of Staff depressed and stone-faced.

The following year, a study presented here in Toronto at the gathering of the American Psychological Association, showed the film caused people to turn against the idea of nuclear war.

It caused them to decrease their estimates of the chance of survival, diminished their personal desire even to survive, and moved many to engage in anti-nuclear activities.¹

As large-scale infomercials go, the movie made a compelling case for finding a way out of the stalemate in which the world's nuclear powers had been mired for years.

For me, as a kid, I recall often thinking that nuclear war was inevitable. That the world would end—or at least my life—in an excruciating flash of light.

It was a terrifying notion to carry, barely a teenager. But it wasn't entirely misplaced.

Nuclear deterrence offered an unsettling sense of security that with so many weapons actively aimed at one another—more than 65,000 at the time,

¹ Janet Schofield and Mark Pavelchak, "Fallout from *The Day After*. The Impact of a TV Film on Attitudes Related to Nuclear War, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, April 1989.

with the vast majority held by the U.S. and the U.S.S.R.—
that the primary nuclear powers would never actually risk
what was termed “mutually-assured destruction.”

It was self-interest that kept a country from dialing in
the launch codes for all those missiles.

No one in power—or, frankly, anyone taking orders—
would really want to attack, the sacred theory goes,
knowing that they would surely seal the fate,
in just a matter of minutes—of themselves,
and everyone and everything they loved.

Such thoughts were likely lurking in the background for Stanislav Petrov,
a colonel of the Soviet Air Defences, when he,
just three weeks after the Soviets had shot down a Korean airliner,
and only a few weeks before “The Day After” aired,
decided to ignore the report coming across his screen
that a handful of missiles had just been launched from the United States.

As the on-duty officer at the command centre,
he made the call that rather than alerting his superiors
to the need for an immediate, retaliatory attack,
this was probably just a false alarm.

He later said the software that ran the early-warning system was new,
that the pattern of just a few missiles didn’t match
what they had been taught to expect in the event of an attack—
an all-out barrage of missiles—and, besides,
there was no confirmation from on-the-ground radar.

In time, it became clear that there was, indeed, a malfunction.

Still, Petrov is credited, at a very tense time,
with having kept his cool when it mattered most.

Though he reports he was neither punished nor rewarded at home,
he’s been recognized by other countries and the U.N. for his actions—
or, rather, his decisive lack of action on September 26, 1983.

Blessed are the peacemakers, even when their actions are small.

The movie “The Day After” aired in the Soviet Union in 1987, as Gorbachev’s reforms were taking hold.

At the end of that year, the U.S.S.R. and the U.S. finally signed the INF Treaty that promised the elimination of all intermediate-range missiles with a reach between 500 and 5,500 kilometres.

It was an important step to deescalating, and eventually ending the Cold War.

Since the end of the Cold War, the stockpiles of weapons have been greatly reduced.

Today there are 15,350 nuclear weapons held by the core members of the nuclear club: Russia, the U.S., France, the U.K., and China— as well as by newer members: India, Pakistan, Israel, and North Korea.

In many ways, this is a good-news story. Things are arguably better than they were a generation and a half ago.

We’ve been on a downward trajectory for some time, as many nation states dismantle a significant share of their arsenals.

And, yet, (as you heard Rob mention earlier,) the threat of danger from nuclear weapons is still very real.

As long as any of these weapons exist, there is the risk they could be launched, by accident or by ill intent, causing massive destruction and a catastrophic loss of life.

The Non-Proliferation Treaty of 1970 called for states to enter into “good faith” negotiations to dismantle their stockpiles of nuclear weapons.

Again, we’ve been steadily moving toward the elimination of these weapons from the world for decades.

But as Ban Ki-moon put it last month, these good faith efforts have “come to a standstill”

amid the growing tensions between the largest nuclear powers.²

“Last Friday, Russia’s U.N. ambassador Vitaly Churkin said tensions with the U.S. were ‘probably’ at the worst since the 1973....”³

And, just a few weeks ago, visiting an air force base in North Dakota, U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter said, “the modernization of the U.S. atomic arsenal had top priority.”

With these tensions on the rise, NATO and Russia have no interest any further talk of reducing their arsenals.⁴

But as Douglas Roche, the former MP, Senator, and Canadian Ambassador for Disarmament to the U.N., puts it:

“To wait for the world to become a perfectly peaceful place before abolishing nuclear weapons completely misses the point that it is the maintenance of nuclear weapons that destabilizes world conditions.”⁵

After all the progress that has been made, it’s deeply disheartening that the major nuclear powers are acting in “bad faith” in regard to non-proliferation.

As both the U.S. and Russia seemingly take steps out of compliance with the existing treaties—and are increasingly faulting each other—it’s hard to have any hope they will ever support the current International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, or ICAN.

And, yet what I find most troubling is that our own government has failed to support the effort underway by 107 nations to pressure the major nuclear powers to eliminate their weapons.

At the Geneva Conference on Disarmament in August,

² “Draft U.N. nuclear treaty facing detractors,” *Deutsche Welle*, October 20, 2016.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Douglas Roches, *Peacemakers: How people around the world are building a world free of war*, James Lorimer & Co., Toronto, p. 41.

Canada voted against the emerging U.N. plan to abolish nuclear weapons. Canada did not abstain, as did Norway and the Netherlands, but voted against.

The Prime Minister and Stephanie Dion, as the Minister of Foreign Affairs, have chosen to sustain the stance of the previous government, in apparent support of NATO, as tensions rise with Russia.

This has not always been Canada's approach, even within NATO.

In 1998, the government under Jean Chretien successfully pressured NATO to review its nuclear weapons policies.

In 2000, the same government played the role of chief negotiator in NATO's Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference.

Of late, however, it seems this is a role we have relinquished.

As a country, we cannot promote ourselves as peacemakers while undermining the work of peace in the world.

I understand that NATO sees the cache of nuclear weapons held by France, the U.K., and the U.S. as central to our collective self-protection.

And yet I believe that narrative has to change. The work of peacemaking is hard and messy, and it has to be ongoing.

With tensions rising, this should be the very moment we double down on dialogue rather than abandon it.

As a Middle Power, Canada has limited influence in this conversation.

But it has used what power it has in the past, and it must use it in the present, to pressure our partner countries to take another path.

The friendship between Canada and the U.S., and more specifically between Trudeau and Obama, has gotten a lot of attention over the past year,

as their “bromance” has blossomed.

But true friends call each other to account.
Genuine friendship is rooted in calling our friends to their highest selves.

My fear, instead, is that we are egging each other on.
That we are enabling escalation.

I should add here that I have become increasingly troubled as I come to better understand the vast extent of the Canadian weapons industry.

By some estimates, we are sixth largest exporter of weapons in the world.⁶

How can that be?

What are the unintended consequences
of sending arms out into an already conflicted world?

How does this compromise our national conscience?

How does this weaken our voice—
or our ability to be a trusted broker in fair dealing as we work for peace?

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This may all seem theoretical.
The threat of nuclear war, or even the detonation of a bomb,
may be relatively remote.

There is part of the argument for deterrence.
That carrying a big stick is the way to keep the peace.

I will concede that it is a way.
I do not think, however, that it is the best way.

⁶ Steve Chase, “Canada now the second biggest arms exporter to Middle East, data show,” *The Globe and Mail*, July 12, 2016.

Aside from the threat of physical violence, to my mind, the most compelling argument against our present level of defense is the staggering collective costs.

One of the most powerful voices on the subject of the humanitarian price we are paying for a militarized world is Rob's daughter Ray, who, (as you heard earlier), is a prominent part of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, an organization that turned 100 last year and is focused on peacemaking across the world.

She points out the fundamental unfairness of nine countries possessing weapons that could so devastate life on this planet.

In her book, *Assuring Destruction Forever*, Ray writes about how these countries are now modernizing their arsenals.

She says, "At the same time as they commit billions of dollars to their nuclear weapon arsenals, most of these states are simultaneously making significant cuts in their social welfare systems, such as health care, education and child care."⁷

And that is the most immediate and obvious form of violence nuclear weaponry is taking out on our world.

Over the next decade, nuclear states will spend \$1 trillion to upgrade and modernize their weapon systems.

That comes at a tremendous cost to the commonwealth of nations.

There simply has to be a better way. Disarmament, dismantling, and deescalating is a much less pricy path.

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In 2004, the Canadian Unitarian Council passed a resolution calling for the abolition of nuclear weapons.

While it may have been a pragmatic decision,

⁷ Quoted in Roche, p. 47.

based purely on a calculation of risk,
I hope the debate was undergirded by deep moral reasoning.

For we who seek to honour and uphold life,
for we who see that our lives are bound up irrevocably
with those of all others,
the development of such overwhelming weaponry
in the name of self-defense is quite simply immoral.

Living in one of the world's most diverse cities,
we know our neighbours live not only down the street,
but half a world away.

The loved ones of the person next door may well be the people
on whom the weapons we sell, or the weapons of our allies, are trained.

We know this is no way to live.

Our interdependence calls us to mutually assured well-being,
like the brothers with the wheat in today's story,
not the incredibly costly stand-off of mutually-assured destruction—
which destroys, even as it promises to protect and keep the peace.

As I end, I invite you to meditate on the words
by UU minister Rebecca Parker:

Your gifts—whatever you discover them to be—
can be used to bless or curse the world.

The mind's power,
The strength of the hands,
The reaches of the heart,
The gift of speaking, listening, imagining, seeing, waiting

Any of these can serve to feed the hungry,
Bind up wounds,
Welcome the stranger,
Praise what is sacred,
Do the work of justice
Or offer love.

Any of these can draw down the prison door,
Hoard bread,
Abandon the poor,
Obscure what is holy,
Comply with injustice
Or withhold love.

[We] must answer this question:
What will [we] do with [our] gifts?

Choose to bless the world. . . .

None of us alone can save the world.
Together—that is another possibility waiting.

The choice to bless the world is more than act of will,
A moving forward into the world
With the intention to do good.

It is an act of recognition,
A confession of surprise,
A grateful acknowledgment
That in the midst of a broken world
Unspeakable beauty, grace and mystery abide.

There is an embrace of kindness,
That encompasses all life,
Even yours.

And while there is injustice, anesthetization, or evil
There moves a holy disturbance,
A benevolent rage,
A revolutionary love
Protesting, urging insisting

That [that] which is sacred will not be defiled.

Those who bless the world live their life
As a gesture of thanks
For this beauty

And this rage.

May we do likewise.