

Let us pray: Loving God, we come to you this morning for guidance. You are the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, and we come to learn how to follow you in this troubled world. In the Psalms, we learn that “you make wars cease to the ends of the earth. You break the bow and shatters the spear; you burn the shields with fire.” We come with minds and histories full of war and conflict, and ask that you would send your spirit now to lead us to a time of peace. In the name of Father, Son, and Spirit, Amen.

I have always found myself particularly affected by Remembrance day. I am always glad to hear some of the stories that come on the radio, or pop up in the paper or online, that provide a human connection to the realities of war, as veterans and their families, or historians, recount particular events or memories of those dark days. I am always aware of the truly blessed time that we live in, when I hear stories of those who died, or when we recite poems like “In Flander’s Fields”. I am aware, with complete certainty, that had I been born in a different era, I would, like so many young men, have listened to the urging of my country, my peers, and likely even my church, and enlisted to go overseas and quite likely never return. It is grace to me that my life looks different today. I am certain it could have been otherwise.

So many wars have been wars of certainties, haven’t they? I remember in seminary doing a book report that analyzed the Presbyterian response to the First world war, and particularly a young man who had taken a break from his studies at Knox Seminary in Toronto to join the army and wrote back to his fellow students, saying: “What we are fighting here is merely a local phase of the world wide struggle against evil and injustice which you are training to enter. While we are trying to let daylight into the

powers of darkness over here, you are helping to spread the Word which gives light.” It was certain that this was a war of Good versus Evil.

The sad realization for us in retrospect is that the Germans were not, in fact, monsters. It is heartbreaking to hear of the Christmas truce of 1914, an unofficial ceasefire in the horror of trench warfare, where the men of both sides set aside their weapons for only a short time to meet in no-mans-land and mingle, united by the season of Christmas, even playing soccer together in the mud. But then the war went on, and most of those men, no doubt, would never make it home. From letting daylight into the powers of darkness to soccer and back again. I remember those who gave their lives, whose bravery and courage was sacrificed to ensure my freedom today, but I still struggle, when I think back on that war, to frame it in the same strong terms as my fellow seminarian. My certainty is not that strong.

Following the second world war, many German civilians were taken on tours of concentration camps, and there are photos of their shock and shame at realizing what had happened in their own country. Their certainties were broken, too.

Our scripture readings today are difficult ones, aren't they? From the book of Amos, we hear the Day of the Lord described as darkness, not light. It's described as running away from a lion only to run into a bear, or finally escaping back home, only to be bitten by a snake in the safety of your own house. What a terrible image! This was the message Amos preached to a people who were full of certainty: don't be so certain, you might not be in the position you think you are in.

I learned a lesson about certainty recently. This was it: I am lying in my bed, and it is late at night, or possibly very early in the morning. I am

asleep. Suddenly, from the baby monitor on my bedside table, comes some little cries that begin to wake me up. Now, Michelle usually gives me one bottle to feed Oliver per night: I get one shift, and then I'm done and can cozily snooze away until morning. So when I hear these cries, I am certain of one thing, and I poke Michelle and say "it's your turn, the bottle's empty" and I get ready to drift off again, when she says to me "no it isn't". I glance over, and that day of light turns to darkness for me, because staring back at me are five ounces of "It's your turn" in the bottle.

I can be wrong. I often am, and I need to remember that. We can all be wrong. The parable from Matthew that we read shows this as well: the foolish bridegrooms only brought enough oil to last until the time they were certain the groom would show up, while the prudent ones admitted they might be wrong and brought extra, saying to themselves "you never know".

So this is our situation: we are people who are often wrong, and so perhaps we should be a little more hesitant to claim we are always on the side of good fighting against evil. But we are also keenly aware of evil, of the darkness in our world. We remember the names of those who died this morning as men who showed courage and a willingness to sacrifice, and we know that those are good things, worthy of our remembrance and our respect. We know that the world is still in need of that same character. We see darkness in the world, and so we know that the world needs more goodness.

But my friends, this is the good news this morning: God is good. The words in Amos and in Matthew were preached to a stiff-necked people who had turned from the good to their own ways. The day of the Lord is unwelcome for those who are unwilling to reconsider themselves, who are unwilling to repent and accept the ways of justice, peace, and love. But all

throughout scripture, we know that it is a good day. A day of peace, with broken bows and shattered spears, with swords beaten into ploughshares. It is a day when the lion will lie down with the lamb, when there will be no more crying, and we will be with God. It will be a good day. Having studied the scriptures in their entirety, and knowing the presence of God personally, Of that I am certain. It will be a good day, and so I hope I will be ready to accept it.

As we remember the loss of life that surrounds war and the sacrifices made, we long for a day of peace, and we place our future in the hands of a God who scripture tells us is good, who is working all things together for good, and who is faithful to see it through to completion. We have found ourselves to be uncertain and prone to making mistakes, thinking we are fighting monsters and forgetting they are human or thinking the bottle is empty and it isn't our turn to get to work, it is the hope of our faith that we will never find God's heart empty, or God's purposes evil.

So let us cling to that rock, the promised and unchanging goodness of God, and let us serve as best we can. May we remember, and, remembering, learn better how to be willing to sacrifice and to serve, to love others better than ourselves, but may we never be so certain of our way that we drift off unknowingly and without second thought and end up going the wrong way entirely. May we be humble enough to admit we may be wrong and courageous enough to try our best all the same. In the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit, Amen.