

# “War and Peace”

a sermon by

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*Texts: “Glorious things are spoken of you, O city of God.” (Psalm 87:3)*

*“For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.” (Ephesians 6:12)*

This week has brought a strange series of events to the attention of our community. Along with all other Americans, and with many people around the world, we remember that five years have passed since the September 11 terrorist attacks killed 2,973 people, with 24 others still listed as missing. This week our community was the location for a very different event. Our nation’s newest nuclear submarine, the USS Texas, was commissioned just a short distance from this sanctuary.

With the convergence of these two events – the 9/11 anniversary and the commissioning of a submarine – our homes have been filled with conflicting images of war and of peace.

There are the images of heartbreaking tragedy as we re-live the moment when we witnessed airplanes being flown into buildings. Then there are the competing images of dignitaries in business suits and sailors in summer white uniforms. There are the images of a panic-stricken crowd running away from the destruction of the World Trade Center. Then there are the competing images of picnickers applauding politely at the remarks of the First Lady, Laura Bush, and enjoying the reception.

Our nation continues to struggle as we are learning to live in this new era of war and peace. Five short years ago, we were at peace. Then, without any warning it happened that men and women in office towers, and even children in childcare facilities, all found themselves in a moment of fierce and bloody combat. Then, there are weekends when sailors, some of whom are battle-hardened warriors, enjoy a peaceful celebration while aboard the most fierce warship ever built.

The images are filled with the incongruities of today’s tenuous relationship between war and peace. But, when you think about it, all of us, especially our children, live in these incongruities.

We send our children to school telling them that they are safe and expecting them to learn important life lessons. The first week they learn how to gather inside a room and to wait through an event called a lock-down. This drill is necessary to protect students from dangers that are *outside* of the school building. During the first week of classes students also learn how to follow instructions to evacuate the building and, if necessary, the neighborhood. That drill is needed to protect students from dangers that are *inside* the school building.

When I was a young student we spoke of learning the three-R's – 'reading, writing and arithmetic.' Today young students continue to study the three-R's. Now they are learning 'Retreat to safety, Run for your lives, and to Repeat the drills over and over again.'

### *Hope*

The world is broken. There is something foundationally faulty in a world where young children are required to learn life skills inspired by tragedy. But that *is* the world in which we live.

Come to think of it, our world was been broken for quite some time. Many of us are old enough to remember the day before lockdowns, to the era of the "duck and cover" drills. But, even before the birth of our generations, the world was badly broken.

Saint Augustine was among the generation that witnessed the weakening and imminent demise of the Roman Empire. Like many people of his era, Augustine shared in the concern for the uncertainty unleashed by the political and economic instability. Augustine may have been concerned, but he was not dismayed. More than most, Augustine understood the difference between the City of Man and the City of God. When he wrote of the City of Man, he depicted the worldly enterprises that occupy our attention. But, when writing of the City of God, Augustine perceived the invisible presence of the holy. The City of Man would meet its certain demise. But, the City of God will meet its certain fulfillment.

So, even in the midst of a great worldly chaos, Augustine found reason for confidence in the unfailing love of a faithful God. He found reason for hope.

Can the same be said of us, of the people of our nation and of our time? Surrounded by the worldly chaos, can we find reason for hope?

Over the past century, our Presidents have spoken of their faith and woven Biblical images into their speeches. In his First Inaugural Address, Franklin Roosevelt spoke of the evils that had led the nation into the Great Depression. He spoke specifically and eloquently of money managers as money changers to be driven out of the temple. Roosevelt spoke of himself as the economic savior. In great contrast to Franklin Roosevelt's confidence in himself and in the American government, John Kennedy demonstrated his confidence in the American people. His words continue to challenge each person to "ask not what our country can do for you, but what you can do for your country."

Dwight Eisenhower and Jimmy Carter recited the oath of office and began their respective speeches with a humble prayer. Bill Clinton often alluded to his boyhood home, calling us all to remember "a little place called Hope."

Those Presidents with their hopeful confidence were inspiring. But they all served in the time that existed *before* 9/11. What about today? Is there still reason for hope?

## *Inspired by Faith*

People who are inspired find their inspiration in a variety of places. Many of our Presidents have been inspired to greatness, in part, by their faith and by the witness of scripture. That same thing may be said of Augustine of Hippo.

Whenever we speak of Saint Augustine, there is an inclination to focus on the holy, righteous aspects of his life. But Augustine was, by his own estimation, a deeply flawed, fully human person. His youth and young adulthood provided countless reminders throughout his life of his own frailty and sinfulness. As an adult, Augustine experienced a conversion, a change of heart and an acceptance and understanding of God's grace. With his new-found faith in God, the life of this worldly man slowly but certainly was transformed into a life of faith and understanding. As a person of faith, Augustine never forgot his own sinful inclinations. But more than that, Augustine found reason for hope. He found inspiration in the words of the Bible.

This morning's Old Testament reading was the 87<sup>th</sup> Psalm. For countless generations, the text of this Psalm has confounded its readers. Countless years ago – no one knows exactly when – the words of this Psalm were confused or lost. We do not know, we simply do not have, the original words of Psalm 87. Scholars describe this predicament by saying that the text of the Psalm has been corrupted.

So, the question must be asked, if we don't know the original words of the 87<sup>th</sup> Psalm, why is it still included in the Bible?

We may not have all of the original words, but the meaning of the 87<sup>th</sup> Psalm continues to speak with perfect clarity.

“On the holy mount stands the city he founded; the LORD loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwelling places of Jacob. Glorious things are spoken of you, O city of God.”

These are the words that encouraged and inspired Augustine to his great faith and confidence in the Lord our God. “Glorious things are spoken of you, O city of God.”

This brief statement is the catalyst and inspiration for Augustine's faith and confidence in the City of God. Augustine lived in a time of turmoil. He knew that the Roman Empire was at its end. His generation knew the tenacity of war and the frailty of peace. Augustine chose to respond in faith with the words of an ancient song. “Glorious things are spoken of you, O city of God.”

Augustine is not alone. The pages of history are filled with the confidence that is inspired by faith. Martin Luther King, Jr. knew all too well that certain people wished him harm. In June, 1964 he learned of very credible threats against his life. Dr. King could have reacted with fear. He could have placed his faith in worldly protection. Instead, his response revealed the faith that inspired his greatness. Dr. King said, “If physical death is the price that I must pay to free my white brothers and sisters from a permanent death of the spirit, then nothing can be more redemptive.”

Even our televisions have been filled with the confidence that is inspired by faith. Five years ago our nation stood together and watched as terrible images of death and destruction were broadcast from New York City, from Washington, DC and from Pennsylvania. Throughout the images of chaos and destruction, there are also images of faith and of hope.

In New York City, as people ran out of the building towards safety, many others ran into the burning buildings to save the lives of many others. New York's police officers and firefighters did not delay in their race to bring people to safety. In the days that followed, someone remarked that their lives were not taken by the terrorists. Instead, the lives of New York's finest and bravest were given for the benefit of others.

At the Pentagon, the alarms sounded and many people flooded out of the burning building and into the safety of the parking lots. Upon reaching the safety of their location, they looked back at the building and knew that people were trapped and needed help. Instinctively and without hesitation, the women and men in uniform ran back into the burning building. They ran to the aid of others who were in need.

In the skies over Pennsylvania, a life and death struggle erupted on United Flight 93. Todd Beamer, an account manager for the Oracle Corporation attempted to call his wife. He was connected with a phone operator, Lisa Jefferson. Together they spoke the words of the Lord's Prayer. Todd Beamer then turned his attention to the work at hand with that now famous phrase, "Let's roll."

### *Inspired to Act*

We saw it at the World Trade Center and at the Pentagon. We know that it happened in an airplane over Pennsylvania. Ordinary citizens stepped up and ran towards the danger. Many of these citizens gave their lives for the benefit of others. We witnessed many heroic acts on 9/11. Many of those heroes were inspired by their faith and confidence in the Lord our God.

On that day, our streets may have been filled with violence. But, of the City of God, "Glorious things are spoken." The images of 9/11 are graphic reminders of the dirty work of living in this broken world. And make no mistake about it, we live in a world that is broken and bloody. But we also live in a world that is filled with hope.

We read the words of Paul that describe the "whole armor of God" and we are inclined to associate these words with children wearing handmade costumes at Vacation Bible School pageants. Perhaps, if we consider the militaristic nature of the image, we may think of a soldier standing in formation.

The breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit are all glistening in the sun. The uniform is complete, perfect, and unblemished in any way. This image may warm our hearts, but it also pollutes our minds and dilutes our faith. In writing this letter to the Christians in Ephesus, the Apostle Paul is very clear that we are, in fact, at war against evil forces, "For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places."

Douglas MacArthur was very conscious of his war-time image. He is reported to have owned some 23 uniforms and to have changed clothes at least three times each day. His shoes were always shined. His trousers were crisply pressed.

Contrast the uniform of General MacArthur with the attitude of German Field Marshal Erwin Rommel. When Rommel went into battle, his only uniform was the one that he was wearing. His shoes were notoriously dull and muddy. Rommel enjoyed the luxury of clean clothing as much as anyone else. But Rommel believed that wars were not won by staff officers and their perfectly shined shoes. Rommel believed that wars were won by soldiers at the battlefield; soldiers with lice and diarrhea, who were homesick and frightened.

As Christians we don't like to talk about war and we are repelled by the images and discussions of its place in this world. But, in a rare moment of honest self-reflections, we may acknowledge that we, as the people of God, are at war "against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places."

The wars of this world are violent and messy. Their horrors can not be escaped. Their outcome can not be predicted. Yet, even as I speak these dreadful truths, I also tell you that we can, and must, continue to act with faith and confidence in the Lord our God.

Over the next few days you will see images of hate. Look closely and you will also find images of love. You will see images of war. Look closely and you will also find images of peace. Of the cities of this world, you will hear speech of destruction. But, of the City of God, glorious things are spoken.

## END NOTES