

The Rev. Wayne Nicholson
St. John's Episcopal Church
12 November 2017
Evensong Honoring Veterans

I've told you before about a walk I took through a small village in the West Country of England with my friend, David. I'd been living in England for over a month, yet that day was the first time I really noticed a plaque memorializing the fallen of World War I. I looked around – there was no memorial for World War II, nor the Northern Ireland Troubles, nor the Falkland Islands. I asked David, "What gives? Why *this* war?"

David explained it. It seems that when men were called to serve in the Great War, men of the same village would be assigned the same military unit so they could keep one another company – they'd experience a better morale, it was thought, if they could share the stories and news from their home village. Of course, what happened was that when the enemy took out a platoon all the men of a given village would be killed. And so the entire village, bereft of its young men, its sons its dads its brothers its lovers its husbands – the entire village would grieve so deeply that monuments would be carved. Names would be inscribed. Tears would fall and poppies would appear and the village was never, ever the same.

It is true that proportionately higher numbers of England's upper class were lost in World War 1, but the numbers were certainly greater among the working class. There was a Lost Generation – a generation that was impossible to recreate.

Think of it: An entire village of men. Gone. Dead. And many of those who did return came home casualties of that cruel war.

Think also, though, of the genocide of The Holocaust. Turkey. The Holodomor. The intentional spreading of smallpox by Europeans to native Australians, Americans, and the Maori of New Zealand. Think of the civilians who have died in the Middle East, the thousands and thousands trying to escape the certain death of war by escaping to Europe. Since the end of the Second World War alone there have been some **250** major wars in which over 50 million people have been killed, tens of millions made homeless, and countless millions injured and bereaved.

War is dreadful no matter how you look at it, no matter what war. War is a sin against God, a sin of humanity that is the child of pride, of greed, of power, of vanity. We humans are not doing a very good job of it, are we.

And yet we remember the fallen and we honor those who serve, promising to work again for peace, vowing to do better.

We shall, no doubt, fail again. But that should not prevent the men and women of the world, the nations of the world, from seeking a better way to resolve differences. I see the changes of climate coming and worry that future wars may well be fought over water, not oil. I hear the despotic cries of madmen (and they are nearly always men) in their bloody trampling of the innocent. I see fear and I sense a profound arrogance among some leaders that I just know is a war just waiting.

And so we pray. We pray for peace, we pray for reconciliation, and we pray for forgiveness.

We pray that God will somehow finally lead us to do right. We pray that voices of reason will drown the voices of lust.

And we pray that sometime there will be an abundance of peace. And that war shall be no more.

As we remember this evening those brave souls who survived many wars, those who did not survive, and those who serve, we also remember that November 11 was originally set aside as Armistice Day, a day of mourning and a day of hope. For at the eleventh hour on the eleventh day of the eleventh month of 1918, the First World War ended. November 11 became the day to remind us there must be no more wars, no more war dead, no new veterans. Armistice day. A day of peace.

Hope was not fulfilled. And so today we find ourselves honoring those who have died and the veterans who have been able to live and families who have survived the dead — veterans and families who have been saying in voices loud as the trumpet that blows Taps, soft as the tears that fall -- that we must make sure not only to bind up the nation's wounds, the wounds of all the world -- but also to end and to prevent the wars that send us more dead to mourn, more wounded for us to bind up. And we must remember those who have died who were *not* in military service, civilian casualties, people who were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Governments send their people – its men, its women – to war for many complicated and complex reasons. For aggressive purposes – to secure new territory or resources. To resist those who would oppress. To protect those with less power. For political reasons – to turn a society toward a different sort of government, socialist to capitalist, capitalist toward socialist, totalitarianism toward democracy, oppression toward freedom.

But war is always wrong. Always.

We have a moral abhorrence toward war, yet we continue to wage war. Right now there are wars in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, and there is the Mexican Drug War, which has left possibly 144,000 dead. In Afghanistan there have been two million casualties. And then, of course, there are the “smaller” wars – Somalia, Darfur, Yemen, South Sudan.

God weeps.

We weep.

But war continues. As long as there are broken human beings, there will be acts of aggression; a long as there are broken human beings who live in hope, there will be brave acts of heroism.

We must not let down our veterans. They have given their lives for the values we hold dear – peace, prosperity, freedom from oppression and bigotry, mercy, justice. Sometimes they have given their lives for wars we do not understand or support. Nevertheless, we must embrace their sacrifices as we honor them.

And as always, we pray for peace.

Amen.