

**HOMILY FOR REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY**  
**Ecclesiastes 3:1-11**

*A homily given by Larry R. Hayward, on November 10, 2019, the Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia, as part of the congregation's annual remembrance of veterans who have given their lives in service to our nation and to honor those who serve today.*

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*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:*

*a time to be born, and a time to die;  
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;  
a time to kill, and a time to heal;  
a time to break down, and a time to build up;  
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;  
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;  
a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;  
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;  
a time to seek, and a time to lose;  
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;  
a time to tear, and a time to sew;  
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;  
a time to love, and a time to hate;  
a time for war, and a time for peace.*

*What gain have the workers from their toil? I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover, he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.*

Within a few days of 9/11/2001, I arranged a meeting with a Presbyterian elder in my congregation who had spent her life studying international relations. In that conversation, Dr. Margaret Haupt remarked that she had entered graduate school shortly after the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 and had begun the process of retirement after the Fall of the Berlin Wall. I remember her saying: "As a nation, we have not sufficiently recognized the significance of the collapse of Communism."

I thought about her comment this week as I went from meeting to email to teaching to pastoral visit. We laud soldier and civilian alike from the Greatest Generation who defeated Nazism by land and sea and air. We laud people who have fought in our day in Afghanistan and Iraq, even as we may have differed at times concerning the wisdom of aspects or stages of those efforts. And we have learned more than we did at the time to respect and appreciate the people who fought and died in the many years of our involvement in Vietnam. Yet as much our nation has changed since the collapse of communism in 1989, I do not believe we have fully appreciated the historical significance of the demise of Soviet Communism. It has been wise to receive that reminder this week.

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I shared recently in an Adult Education class that much of my thinking on matters of war and peace is influenced by the pastoral relationships I have had with veterans and with people (primarily in our congregation) who serve in the military or defense industry, Foreign Service or diplomatic corps, or who study these matters for a living. These interactions are sometimes a mixture of the tragic and beautiful.

They include:

- Deep *respect* I have for military officers, enlistees, and retirees I have known in my churches in Texas, Iowa, and here.

They include

- The *funerals* of 25-30 WWII veterans I have conducted
- A counseling relationship I had with a *young veteran in Houston* who clearly said he had been ordered to do illegal actions while serving in Granada and had followed such orders
- An intense pastoral relationship with a *Vietnam Veteran in Houston* whose PTSD and alcoholism led him to be the first of four suicides with which I have dealt in my ministry

In addition, they include

- The admiration I have for people a little older than me in this congregation who *served* or were injured in Vietnam
- The admiration I have for people a little older than me who deeply believe that the effort in Vietnam was *wrong* and who *wrestle with what part* they may or may not have played in that effort

I derive great hope from seeing people in our congregation in the military, defense, national security, and diplomatic agencies and industries whose political views, candidate choices, and opinions concerning when to commit or refrain from deploying our military are as *varied* as those of our congregation and society at large. And I am grateful that I have had the luxury of that diversity of opinion coming to me as an *intellectual exercise* rather than a *personal moment of truth* in which I might have to decide whether to take a human life or be willing to give up my own.

But I would like to share briefly two things that I have come to appreciate from this pastoral contact with people who serve.

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First, as we face matters of war and peace, and the life and death that such matters entail, we find ourselves poised ever so precariously between heaven and earth, between eternity and time, between the divine and human realms.

No human victory – military or otherwise – can bring us as close to God’s will and way for the world as we might initially believe; but many human battles are *necessary* for the survival, and occasional flourishing, of people and nations. That is why the work of those who place themselves in danger do is so important and tragic at the same time.

As the Book of Ecclesiastes concludes its seven verses – seven being a number for divinity – naming contrasts that lie within “every matter under the heavens,” the seventh is most haunting and beautiful: “a time for war and a time for peace.”

Indeed, since the Fall of the human race and the subsequent inception of our days outside Eden, many a day has been deemed “a time for war.” That is the necessity and tragedy of our existence. It is not always clear which these two times our time needs to be, but for those whose calling and vocation it is to serve in a time of war, such service is a tragic necessity.

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Second, at the end of this well-loved rhythmic poem, there is a profound double meaning to one of the Hebrew words. The line we read is translated this way:

*[God] has put a sense of past and future into [our] minds.*

Robert Alter, the Hebrew scholar from Berkeley I often quote, writes that the word translated “*past and future*” is ‘*olam* in Hebrew, which means both “world” and “the idea of eternity.” We can thus read this verse:

- God has put a *love of the world* in our minds
- And God has put a *sense of eternity* in our minds.<sup>1</sup>

Love of the world. Eternity in our minds. God has given us both.

As we remember those who have given their lives in service to our nation, those who have survived and struggled, and those who have served without injury, our prayer is that the people who make decisions concerning whether ours is a *time for war* or a *time for peace* will do so with a both a *love for the world* and a *sense of eternity*. Our prayer is that they will have both a sense of hope for the world and all its people, as well as a humility before the consequences of any decision to move from peace to war, or from war to peace. Such decisions are by their very nature a matter of life and death, of potential human flourishing and potential human failure. They call for the greatest humility, the most clear-eyed thinking, and the most prayerful wisdom.

As with the Fall of the Berlin Wall, the world is worthy of our love – for it is worthy of God’s love – and thus the decision to endanger some of its land and many of its people must be made out of a deep awareness of eternity and a humble attentiveness to it.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Alter *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 355.