

November 8, 2015
An Alternative To War
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Psalm 127

[God's Blessings in the Home - A Song of Ascents. Of Solomon.]

1 Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain. ² It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives sleep to his beloved. ³ Sons are indeed a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward. ⁴ Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the sons of one's youth. ⁵ Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them. He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate.

Mariah has a good friend who missed her wedding. He was in alcohol rehab -- again. He's 26 but looks 40. He can't keep a job. He disappears for weeks or months at a time. He's a veteran, you see, of Iraq and Afghanistan. Sometimes people thank him for his service -- which he hates. I asked him why.

"Because I was a sniper," he said, "and I was really, really good at it."

Just sitting at my kitchen table he told me this, eating chips and salsa, like we were talking IU basketball or something. My aim today, friends, is to try and draw a line between Psalm 127:3-4 and a Christian mindset about war. Here in this week our country marks Veteran's Day, in the year we mark 14 consecutive years of fighting two wars and in the season that our president dips his toes into yet a third.

What does the Bible say? Frankly, the Bible says just about everything anybody wants it to say about war. A more narrow question: what does the gospel we believe teach about the morality and the usefulness of war? How are we to speak and to live in a world so wracked by war as the world is today?

Psalm 127:3-4 reads, *“Sons are indeed a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward. ⁴ Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the sons of one’s youth.”*

I have a son. He’s a college student and - get this - the new Math Olympiad coach at Bloomington North High School. Club meetings consist of doing math problems in preparation for a half-day math test in February. The top scorers take another test in the spring. The big prize is math camp in California this summer. Most of his club members are Chinese girls who call him “Mr. Ben Briggs.” In 1941 his grandfather was his same age, only he was in the Navy stationed in Pearl Harbor. He had a front row seat for the whole show called World War 2, first day to the last. *“Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the sons of one’s youth”* - it’s a heartbreaking line of scripture for me, posing the question: for what cause would I kiss this boy good-bye and send him off to war?

Am I playing a bit loose with the text? Absolutely. I’ve used this text for a house blessing and baby dedications. It’s a praise song sung by Jews on their way to Jerusalem for festival. But this one line bumped up right here before Veteran’s Day. I would be ashamed to dishonor Mariah’s friend or my father-in-law or any veteran. At the same time, it’s not my job to speak on behalf of a grateful nation, but rather on behalf of Christ for whom our nationality is of no account and who, I believe, is begging us to stop sending our sons and daughters to kill one another. For when we gather, friends, we gather as citizens of his kingdom, to hear with his ears and see with his eyes. To think with the gospel as our filter of criticism.

The world tells us wars are fought for freedom, for security, for democracy, for peace. Occasionally someone lets economic interest slip into the discourse. Christian theologian Stanley Hauerwas wrote that *America continues going to war to justify the wars we’ve already fought*. He marks the Gettysburg Address as having etched into the collective

American conscience the notion that we owe it to those who die in war nobly to continue that struggle for which they died.

“The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain.”

Lincoln thought no one would remember, and 150 years later every American school child still memorizes it. We require a constant generation of new veterans to maintain our identity as the nation ready and willing to sacrifice itself for whatever cause each generation consecrates as holy. But it is war itself that is holy and essential to our identity as a nation ever willing to sacrifice itself for the good. Thus, war is a constant requirement -- more so in that we are wealthy, in that we have so many interests around the world that must be protected, however patriotically those interests are sometimes cast.

But the thing is, friends, as heretical as I know it is to say in some places, we are not Americans who are also Christian. We are Christians who happen to also be Americans. His is who we are, the beloved, citizens of another kingdom where sacrifice means something very, very, very different.

The gospel teaches, friends, that the single necessary sacrifice for the salvation and redemption of humanity was accomplished in Christ Jesus. Once and for whom? For all. For all people. For all time. Nothing else is necessary. Nothing else is effective. Nothing else is lasting. America, at its very, very, very best, cannot and will not save humanity from itself, and most definitely not -- never -- by going to war. My daughters already think their brother is the biggest nerd ever, and they don't even know

about the Math Olympiad team yet. Once they hear it, they'll never quit calling him "Mr. Ben Briggs." They are still awesome daughters and he's an awesome son.

Anybody else here have awesome daughters? awesome sons? Think they are more awesome to us than Palestinian kids are to their parents? Than Somalian kids to theirs? Syrian kids to theirs? Of course not!

I have a hard time imagining God watching a world of armies slaughtering each other and weeping over one more than all the others. Friends, if we believe Jesus' sacrifice is salvific for all people for all time, then by default we believe in the uselessness of war to accomplish anything but more war. Like some enormous war factory, the only product of which is more war. Young, healthy human beings march in the front door. Dead and broken ones fall out the back. And as long as the machines keep running, the world keeps believing its own insane myths -- of national security or global democracy or whatever is selling by any given government at any given time. Hauerwas writes that the alternative to war is not some brokered peace; but rather, the alternative to war is the church. This. Here. Now. Our life together. Where all the necessary sacrifices has been made. And violence has no value.

What is valuable? You. Me. Each Other. All these other lives for whom Jesus also died and rose. My son. My daughter. And my enemy's son and daughter too. To know that - in the fiber of my being - and then do them harm, is to deny Christ outright; to wish them harm is to deny Christ in my own heart. And to send our children to do it for us is surely the greatest, greatest sin of all. Take this, for you to hold in your hand: Jesus died and rose so that human beings need never go to war.

Another life which God has deemed worthy is not ours to take. And the taking of it will ruin us -- as Mariah's friend will tell you.

Would you pray with me?