

At War With the World
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This sermon was born in a moment of frustration. A few weeks ago, the Pentagon quietly announced that a small number of U.S. soldiers were going to be deployed in Iraq, for purposes of “training and advising” Iraqi soldiers fighting to retake areas now controlled by the terrorist group known in the U.S. as ISIS and in the Arab world as Daesh. I came of age at the end of the Vietnam era; I am skeptical of the language of advisors and training. It seems obvious to me, and even more so after the announcement last week that another “small number” of troops are being sent to assist with operations in Syria, that in spite of all assurances to the contrary we are beginning to re-escalate our war in the Middle East. The truth is we have never really stopped being at war so far in the 21st century, but it seems very possible to me that we are on our way into another period of more active, larger-scale warfare. I hope I’m wrong; I pray I’m wrong. But I don’t think I am.

That’s when I decided it’s time for a sermon asking: What is it about our nation that seems to lead us to be at war with the world?

Second thoughts hit this week. It’s December; there are only four Sundays, and one of them’s *after* Christmas. It’s a time for celebrations. Tonight’s the first night of Hanukkah; Jewish families will light menorahs and the first latkes will be fried up. Today is the second Sunday of Advent, when Christians anticipate the birth of Jesus, known in this season as the Prince of Peace. This is the season of “peace on earth; goodwill toward men.” Shouldn’t I be talking about *that*?

But really, how can we separate the two? It *is* the season for celebrating peace—and we *are* preparing ourselves to be at war again. For all we will say and sing about peace in the next three weeks, for all that America professes ourselves to prefer peace to war—after Beirut, after Paris, after San Bernardino, after Chad yesterday, the urge to do battle against the people we see as evil is rising among us again. Symbolically, this season makes it especially poignant that we’re talking about war—and yet here we are. And so it seems like I have to say something unless I am in denial. Why does America fall into war so often?

According to one narrative, our nation was born in war, and warfare has marked most of the important turning points of our history. We fought a war for independence from the British Empire; we fought a war to end slavery; we claimed Texas and California in warfare with Mexico; we established ourselves as a global power in World War I and took our place as a dominant world superpower in World War II. The Cold War with the Soviet Union and China defined the second half of the 20th century; what we choose to call the “war on terror” has so far defined the 21st.

There are other narratives of American history, but the one using wars as landmarks is deeply embedded in our national psyche. As a nation, we believe that fighting has settled our conflicts and resolved our disputes. This is part of our personal folklore, not just our national mythology. Have you ever heard people advise parents to let two squabbling children just fight it out, because they're sure to be friends afterward? (This is probably more common with boys than girls, but if you've ever heard of Rhonda Rousey, you know that gender equality in the fight-it-out department may not be too far off.) When I was growing up, the advice most often given to a child trying to cope with a playground or neighborhood bully was to punch them out. In my family, there's a legend that when my older brother came home crying because a big kid around the corner took his bag of Halloween candy, my mother locked him out of the house and told him to go get it back. He did, but I can tell you pretty confidently that he and Butch Sverchek did not become friends.

Teachers, developmental psychologists, and a lot of parents are now realizing that this strategy doesn't actually end bullying, but that doesn't mean that it isn't still the reflexive advice we give. At a deep, mythic level, Americans believe that we can solve a difficult problem by beating up the person who's to blame—or defeating them in a war, or just killing them. We're not unique in this, of course. It's a globally common worldview.

Another American quality that often leads our nation into war is a failure to appreciate that other nations in the world—especially less industrially-developed, non-white majority nations—are fully real, not just with sunsets too, and clover, as our meditation hymn says, but with aspirations, economic and political interests, values, conflicts, and histories of their own. In the Middle East, this kind of blindness has led us again and again to give military support to people we didn't really understand, who later on turned out not to be especially concerned about our national interests. We learned this ahistorical, dehumanized way of seeing other countries from our own colonizing European ancestors, of course, but it was sharpened in the Cold War, when much of our foreign policy was explicitly built around the idea that the less-developed countries of the world were “dominos,” game pieces whose own interests were side issues to the main event of our struggle against global communism.

In recent years especially, we have also been led into violent conflicts by an absolute certainty that America is always right. We can be prone to believing that we are always righteous, always morally pure. Again, I don't think we're unique in this, but it is woven intricately through American history. The people responsible for our wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were very open and probably sincere in their belief that American-style secular democracy is the best model of government for every nation in the world. It's an easy step from that belief to becoming convinced that spreading that gift, by force if necessary, is our mission for the betterment of humankind. Once we've made that leap, any resistance to the effort strikes us as an attack on “our way of life,” and we react ferociously.

After fifteen years in which we have utterly destroyed the physical infrastructure of two nations and only partially restored them, in which we have engaged in military campaigns that killed tens of thousands of people, in which we have sided with one or another ethnic or religious group against the others who share those countries, in which we have impersonally dealt death from the skies with substantially less than pinpoint accuracy—after fifteen years of that, when a group that is truly evil arises out of the chaos and finds followers, it is a mark of our belief in our own innocence that we continue to ask: Why do they hate us?

And when something happens that truly hurts us and makes us feel threatened, the only solution that feels sufficiently satisfying is a violent counter-attack. I have heard this from people who have opposed our involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq since the first Gulf war in the 1990s: After Paris or San Bernardino, suddenly they believe the solution to the problem of ISIS is to create a great, World-War-II style coalition of powerful countries and neighbors of Syria, and go in force to smash the terrorists.

For those of us who do not see war as the solution to the present situation, confronting the host of factors that lead our nation again and again toward violent conflict is a daunting task. Where do we even begin?

I think challenging the war narrative is first. War *does not* resolve conflicts; war does not solve problems. It wasn't the Revolutionary War that created the United States, it was generations of hard, intentional, peaceful work afterward. If war solved problems, Black people in this country would not still be living with the legacy of 250 years of slavery and 150 years of legalized terror and inequality. If war resolved conflicts, Israelis and Palestinians would long since have found peace. I believe war may be necessary in order to neutralize an immediate, deadly threat. Yet even if it is necessary, war does absolutely nothing to change the social, economic, political, or cultural circumstances that gave rise to the threat in the first place—and it usually causes new threats to arise. It's worth pointing out in this connection that the explicit strategy of ISIS is to draw the non-Muslim powers of the world into war, to lead us to hate and mistreat Muslims and deny refuge to people fleeing their violent misrule, not because they believe they will win, but because they know it will create more hatred of the West.

As religious people, we are called to resist the dehumanization that war depends on. Both in our own minds and in our public conversations, we must reject the trap of identifying whole populations as “enemies.” Above all, our faith urges us to resist the temptation to see the lives of our adversaries in a conflict as somehow mattering less than our lives, their children less precious than our children.

Is it possible to turn the nation aside from war? It might be, but it doesn't really matter, in terms of deciding whether to try. As I heard the Quaker Parker Palmer say once, we're not called to be effective; we're called to be faithful. And the way of warfare offers no hope for humankind's future.

Unitarian Universalism is not a pacifist tradition; we have been of many minds about war over the centuries. And yet, the tradition our spiritual ancestors have passed along to us is truly audacious. Just think of some of our legacies: To believe that good will inevitably overcome evil—not by conquest, but by healing the wounds of the spirit that cause evil to arise. To believe humankind is capable of growing toward an ultimate vision of perfection, expressing a Divine nature which is part of us all. To believe that what Jesus called the Kingdom of Heaven, the Peaceable Kingdom Martin Luther King Jr. called the Beloved Community, to believe that is not some promised future realm to reach after death but something to be created here and now, in this world, in the life of human beings. How bold we have been!

This is where we come back to the Season of Peace and Goodwill, because for our spiritual ancestors, those beliefs were the true meaning of Christianity. They were the message of Jesus, heralded by angelic voices singing in the stories of his birth. The inevitable triumph of Good; the Divine in human nature; the Kingdom of Peace and Justice in our hands to create.

And so among our ancestors we count abolitionists and people who worked for compassionate care for prisoners and the mentally ill; we count leaders of the movement for women's suffrage and crusaders against poverty and for universal public education. And we count many who have argued that following the man whose birth is anticipated in this season of Advent means working through peaceful methods to make peace in the world.

One of those was the 19th-century Universalist minister Adin Ballou, who wrote the words to our opening hymn. Ballou wrote about what he called "Christian Non-Resistance" and corresponded about non-violence with Leo Tolstoy. Through Tolstoy's writing, Ballou's ideas reached Mohandas Gandhi, and they later came home to this country as Gandhi's work inspired Martin Luther King, Jr. You see? We do not know what impact our work will have, and our lifetime does not set its limits.

It was Martin Luther King who wrote: Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hatred cannot drive out hatred; only love can do that. The evil that is terrorism cannot be conquered through warfare; it can only be healed through love and justice.

In this season of lights and of beauty, this season of generosity and of love, may the promise of peace fill our hearts. May all people whose thoughts are full of rage, hatred, and bitterness find the healing that will lead them toward peace. May our nation learn to be guided by peace, and may peace be our hope and our gift to the whole family of humankind.

Another spiritual ancestor who became convinced that Christianity demanded an end to war was the Unitarian minister Edward Hamilton Sears. During the Christmas season of 1849, saddened by news of revolutions in Europe and the United States' war with Mexico, Sears wrote a poem that was later set to music and became one of the most familiar of Christmas carols. Let's raise our voices, our hearts, and our hopes as we sing "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear." It is possible to live in peace.