

“One True Sentence”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Micah 5:2-5a; 6:6-8
November 11, 2018
Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost

The eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month — one hundred years ago today an armistice ended fighting on the Western Front, bringing to a close hostilities between the Allied and Central Powers in the First World War. That armistice would be extended thrice until the Treaty of Versailles was signed the following summer and the Great War came to an end.

Shortly after the start of the War in 1914, H.G. Wells wrote a series of articles in British newspapers that eventually were compiled into a book called *The War That Will End War*. It was “the war to end war” or “the war to end all wars” — initially a hopeful, idealistic sentiment. Now we call it that with a sad chuckle.

You might remember from your history textbooks that instead of ending killing, the First World War gave a master class in innovations that led to death and destruction. There was trench warfare — living men digging holes in which to die or, at best, to live a wet, smelly, terrifying existence across No Man’s Land from the enemy’s wet, smelly trench. Submarines and tanks and airplanes and chemical warfare made the images of war so different from the grand and noble adventure people had known before. Advancements in machine gun technology made killing the enemy much more efficient. A German *Musketier* later remembered, of a day in which more than 60,000 British troops were killed, “When we started firing, we just had to reload and reload... We didn’t have to aim, we just fired into them.”

All told, somewhere between fifteen and nineteen million people — military and civilian — are counted among the dead from the First World War — including about six million who died from war-related famine and illness. Over twenty million military personnel were wounded. Of course, those numbers would be dwarfed in less than three decades by World War II.

Between the wars, the world did what it does when faced with calamity — it tries to make sense and find meaning in what has happened through artists-who-are-sometimes-called-prophets. What had happened was horrible and pointless and filled with despair, and so we got what came to be known as the Lost Generation and its writers— disillusioned and having lost faith in institutions and ideals, having watched all that fall apart in a war of attrition that wreaked of mustard gas. They were Gertrude Stein and T.S. Eliot and F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ezra Pound and Ernest Hemingway and many more.

Once the U.S. became involved in the War, Hemingway responded to a Red Cross recruitment effort and became an ambulance driver in Italy. From his very first day, he saw the horrors from the fighting. In the summer of 1918, while bringing cigarettes and chocolate to the soldiers, he was wounded by Austrian mortar fire. Though injured, Hemingway managed to carry a wounded Italian soldier to safety, and was then injured again by machine gun fire.

Hemingway and the other Lost Generation writers told stories of characters who come to lose faith in modern society, having their hopes and dreams run headlong into an overwhelming sense of futility and corruption. For Hemingway, the wounds of the war are often not mentioned, but they loom just beneath the surface. Stories made apparent their meaning through dialogue and action and silence, not through flowery, elaborate language. Excessive prose was a place for illusions and dreams that died in No Man's Land.

After the reigns of David and Solomon, infighting split the Israelites into two kingdoms: Israel in the North and Judah in the South. Divided, they struggle to stand. With threats in every direction — war and the threat of more war around every corner — the prophet Micah addresses the Southern kingdom. His message from God, as we have heard it this morning, is a promise of a new ruler and of a new relationship.

There was no shortage of religious people in Judah. (A shortage of religiosity is rarely ever the problem.) But the religion being practiced was what religion too often is — a twisted interpretation of what God actually wants.

This was not a new problem. And it's not a problem confined to history. But Micah is here to remind the people that God seeks a new, different relationship. God has been seeking this since the beginning, of course, but every generation needs to hear it. How do we please God, and make this war-torn world better? Is it through lots of extra sacrifices and offerings? What can I give to please this God?

In his memoir, *A Moveable Feast*, in the chapter titled "Miss Stein Instructs," Ernest Hemingway wrote: "All you have to do is write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence that you know."

Hemingway was talking about reminding himself how to write when he felt stuck. I imagine God, time and time again rejected by God's people, having that reminder on the holy writing desk. And so we are gifted perfect snippets of wisdom like this:

God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

The liturgy and rituals are only as good as the path of life onto which they place the children of God. A thousand rams, sure, but a thousand acts of kindness and a thousand moves toward justice and a thousand steps with our Creator taken in the knowledge that we need guidance — that is what will please God. There's no fancy Hebrew in this verse. Simple verbs: do, love, walk. Deep, but approachable concepts: kindness, justice, humility.

This is the new relationship God requires of Israel. And it's not new at all. It's the same sentence, rephrased, that God has been saying since the beginning.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

We'll read those words from the Gospel of John in forty-three days and a few hours, in the dark, as our Christmas Eve service nears its conclusion. The first part of our Micah reading is usually read during Advent, as we hear about a new kind of king. But while it might be too early for "Santa Baby" on the radio, it's never too early for this message. For war-torn Judah living in a time of darkness, the news is that the current state of failed leadership is not the end to the story. One will come from Bethlehem — the house of David, yes, but also outside the center of power, and from one of the "little clans." God will work from the margins, as usual, from the least expected.

This one "shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace."

One hundred years and a few hours after the armistice and nationalism has popped its grotesque head up from the grave in Europe and here at home. The sense that the only thing that can transcend political borders is war is making a comeback. If we are to make meaning of this current age, let it be with words of peace and kindness and justice and humility. Let's not cast about for rams to sacrifice, but for stories of a world being made great to all of its ends.

As we remember the fallen and honor those who have demonstrated courage beyond comprehension, may we also remember the truth that God does not have a rooting interest in our wars, beyond peace. The lines we draw and the walls we build and the trenches we dig are pleasing only to the forces that would keep us in the eternal night.

May peace break out in abundance. May we be bearers of its light, doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with our God. *For you, O Lord, our souls in stillness wait; truly our hope is in you.*
Amen.