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Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
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Trinity Sunday
Memorial Day Weekend

Memorial Day Weekend Sermon
A Conversation with a Marine Corps Veteran

Cornel:

Ian Vellenga, you have been a seminary intern here for the past year. You will graduate from San Francisco Theological Seminary next year with a Masters in Divinity and you will most likely go on to serve a church somewhere in the United States.

You recently completed your four year term in the U. S. Marine Corps as a tank crewman. Two of those years were spent in active duty in Iraq. There's a lot of admiration for young men serving their country in this manner. You were willing to sacrifice four years of your life for your country. I commend you for this.

Tell us what the phrase "marine corps veteran" means to you and something of your story in the military.

Ian:

There are less than 2.5 million active duty and reserve military personnel serving now in the United States. That's less than one percent of the population. Of that 2.5 million, only 13 %, or about 235,000, are Marines serving active duty or reserves. Being a Marine Corps veteran gives me a sense of accomplishment, because so few people have ever done so. I have done what about one tenth of one percent of the people in this country has not, and that, in one sense, makes me proud.

As mentioned before, I enlisted on February 14, 2005 and was honorably discharged on February 13, 2009. I was stationed in the United States in Twenty-nine Palms, CA, and was sent over to Iraq for two tours during my four years in the Marines.

Cornel:

You told me that Psalm 137:1-6 was very meaningful for you when you were in Iraq. Please read the passage for us:

Ian:

"By the rivers of Babylon— there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, 'Sing

us one of the songs of Zion!’ How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.”

Cornel:

How was this passage meaningful for you when you were in Iraq?

Ian:

I tended to take this passage quite literally. I was stationed throughout the Al Anbar province in Iraq, and I spent a lot of time in a place called Haditha, which is a hydro-electric dam that the Marines took over and made a base of operations. It is situated on the Euphrates River, one of the “rivers of Babylon.” This Psalm is something that I would often turn to in my free time, because I saw myself in it. There I was, by the “rivers of Babylon,” feeling homesick and longing to get back home. It was, in a way, tormenting to hear news from home, like friends getting married, alumni reunions, birthday parties, and so on, and still keep my head and my wits into what my job entailed while I was in Iraq. I read this Psalm over and over, more than any other passage, because just like the Israelites who were sent to Babylon and eventually returned to their native land, I too would be heading home soon.

Cornel:

The ending of this Psalm is one of the most difficult to understand. It reads in verses 7 through 9: “Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem’s fall, how they said, and “Tear it down! Tear it down! Down to its foundations!” O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!”

This is very powerful and painful language. What does it bring up for you?

Ian:

Obviously there is a lot of anger in this passage. And like the psalmist, I too experienced a lot of anger while in Iraq. I was angry at the war to begin with. I was angry at the circumstances that got us into war. I was angry at the presidential administration for sending us there. I was angry at the terrorists. But what these passages show is that there is a venting of anger, and putting it into words. That is something that we never did as Marines while in Iraq. We were never allowed to express our anger in words, never give our opinion about the war, and never give a critique about whatever mission we may have been currently on. We had to remain silent. What the last verses of the psalm did for me was to identify what made me angry, rather than keep it bottled up inside. It helped me realize that anger was ok, and it allowed me to put into words all of the frustrations I was going through, and by doing so, I had the ability to work through that anger and eventually overcome it.

Cornel:

Let's turn more specifically to "war and peace" in the Bible. It seems to me that God in the earlier stages of Hebrew history was a tribal God who supported tribal wars like the so-called conquest of Palestinian lands. Israelites called upon God for victory in battle and victory was often seen as something given by God.

Later we have the prophetic tradition that calls Israel to beat their swords into plowshares. The prophets also proclaimed justice for the poor, oppressed and disadvantaged like the widow and elderly.

Jesus continues the theology of the prophets and explicitly blesses peacemakers and states that those who live by the sword will die by the sword. As I see it, the New Testament has a bias towards peace. We must do everything in our power to proclaim and affirm peace and especially peace with justice.

Things get complicated: Until we can guarantee a world where one country will not attack another country we need a strong enough military to protect and defend ourselves. Our biblical mandate for peace challenges the way we think about our military and military engagements.

This is a complicated subject and the church has a checkered history when it comes to the issues of war and peace. What are your thoughts about war and peace in the Bible and history and how we meet the challenges of our day?

Ian:

In the Old Testament, there is a lot of justification for conquest and war based on religious ideals. And even throughout history, the common phrase during war is "God is on our side." But we rarely, if ever, ask if we are on God's side. We accept a paradox in today's world: to have peace, you must prepare for war. But how often do we really give peace a chance? All too often, the military is used too quickly as a way to achieve diplomacy, because we tire easily of actually discussing and resolving our disagreements with other countries. It is easier to go to war to achieve our diplomatic ends, than actually coming to an agreement with other countries at the diplomacy table. If I had my way, the military should be used sparingly, because the military's sole purpose is to fight wars. We are not diplomats. We are not negotiators. We are not nation builders. We are warriors that are meant to fight. But many, particularly in our government, would have us take on all of those roles. And when that happens, nothing good comes of it. I think the challenge is to realize when, if at all, we should go to war. Quite frankly, we should pursue peace and seek peaceful ends a lot more than we have in recent decades. There may be times for war, but that should always be a last resort. We need to focus more on peaceful solutions and diplomacy, rather than sending troops to force a solution.

Cornel:

Thank you and God bless you in your ministry. Your experience as a Marine Corp veteran and your perspectives shared here will serve you well. We need a few good men and women in the ministry!

Amen.