

We will serve the LORD!
Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25

When Religion and Politics Collide

Today, we commemorate and pay our respects to all veterans and active-duty military personnel who have selflessly served and continue to serve our nation. We extend our profound appreciation to these individuals who have fearlessly answered the call, in times of necessity. Their dedication has secured the freedoms and peace that so many of us cherish today. Thank you all who serve the nation.

At the same time, we need to remember that we, Christians, are called to be peace-makers, not peace-keepers. Peace-keeping is difficult but peace-making is much more difficult than peace-keeping. We are called to be peace-makers working for reconciliation with justice.

Recently, we have witnessed many wars and armed conflicts in the world. Ukraine and Russia, Israel and Palestine. Wars can be the worst human-made evil. All wars are brutal and disturbing. As a pastor, what has often disturbed and even disgusted me, has been the role of religions in wars. When Hamas attacked and kidnapped civilians, 19-year-old Naama Levy was also captured. Video footage showed that she was bruised and cut, and her shirt was stained with blood. As she was pushed into the vehicle, bystanders chanted "God is Great!" in Arabic. How could people shout "God is Great" while a defenseless woman was dragged and shivering in fear?

Another disturbing moment of the Russia - Ukraine War was that "Patriarch Kirill, head of the Russian Orthodox Church, told his followers that "sacrifice in the course of carrying out your military duty washes away all sins."¹ In other words, Kirill says that dying in war is like martyrdom. Religious leaders often justify unjust wars in the name of God.

I don't know if you remember or not, but two weeks ago, I talked about refugees across religions taking shelter under the roof of St. Porphyrius Greek Orthodox Church in Gaza. However, Israel Defense Forces struck that church, killing 18 people and injured many as well as displacing around 400 civilians sheltering in the church. According to an article, the current Israel government is the most theocratic in the country's history.² This means that the government of Israel attempts to rule the nation in the name of God. How could political leaders who claim to rule the country in the name of God condone destruction of a place of worship where hundreds of people took shelter?

We all know that Christianity is no better than other religions in this matter. The Crusades, religious wars in the middle ages, and the entanglement of Christianity with western imperialism and colonialism are all examples. Is religion a cause of violence and war? Not really.

Many people misconstrue that religion has led to many wars and conflicts like religious wars of the sixteenth century. However, William T. Cavanaugh, a theologian argues that that is a myth. He points out that these wars are in fact the birth pangs of the modern states.³ So called religious wars happened when politics and religion collided. Whenever wars and armed conflicts happen, political leaders seek to justify them. In many cases, they turn to religious authorities to support the moral legitimacy in their actions. Think of it, if the highest authority, God, endorses their action, who would refuse to support the war? Unfortunately, when wars are waged in the name of God, they tend to be more brutal and ruthless than other wars because it becomes a Holy War for God and the enemy represents evil standing against God. We, Christians, must be careful, not to fuse our loyalty to God with our pledge to nation or political party. We must serve only God in sincerity and in faithfulness.

Revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness

In today's scripture, Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem and urged them to fear the Lord and to serve God in sincerity and in faithfulness. If they were not willing to serve the Lord, Joshua told the Israelites to choose whom they would serve. What Joshua did in this ceremony of renewing covenant between God and Israel was to call for absolute faithfulness to God, loving only God "with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might." (Deut. 6:5) Thus, serving the Lord means not serving other gods.

Serving God in faithfulness begins with putting away others god. Joshua said to the Israelites, "put away the foreign gods that are among you." Joshua's words are closely connected to historical memory of the place, Schechem. Schechem as the place where their ancestor Jacob buried the foreign gods in his household under an oak

¹ <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-patriarch-kirill-dying-ukraine-sins/32052380.html>

² <https://ffrf.org/news/news-releases/item/42071-israel-s-theocratic-government-imperils-all-things-secular>

³ Theopolitical Imagination by William T. Cavanaugh, 2002, 22.

tree before he returned to Bethel. Thus, the foreign gods in the text implicitly refers to idols that can be buried under an oak tree.

Edward Farley says, “Idols are something finite, like a rock, a statue or money, but people give them some divine status in an attempt to escape from their inescapable finitude, anxieties, and fears by discovering an ultimate security in some finite good made absolute.” In this sense, anything can be turned to idolatry such as one’s self, nation, race, money, relationship, political belief, religious belief and even religion itself if we attempt to make them absolute. Hence, the foreign gods are among us. The foreign gods are still among us, not outside of us, but inside of us, although we do not often recognize them. How often do we worship other gods in the name of serving the Lord our God? Killing other human beings in the name of God is idolatry. Blowing up a place of worship for the sake of security in the name of God is idolatry. Giving your ultimate loyalty to other than God, that’s idolatry. We should put away other gods and serve God in faithfulness.

Ironically, serving God in faithfulness is possible only by recognizing our inability to understand and serve God in sincerity. In today’s text, Joshua urged the Israelites to choose whom they would serve and the people answered, “we will serve the Lord, for he is our God.”(v. 18) The answer from the people sounds like exactly what Joshua wanted to hear from them, but Joshua’s response to the people sounds really strange. Joshua said, “You cannot serve the Lord.” Well, Joshua seemed to have some memory problem and forgotten what he said, calling people to serve God. Of course, that is not the case as we all know. Joshua went on to explain the impossibility of serving the Lord by saying that “he is a holy God.”(v.19) “He is a holy God.” The Hebrew word for “holy” comes from the root word “Kadash”. This root word means “to be set apart.” Holy is a word that sets God apart from the rest of finite created beings. God is utterly different from creation. The fullness of God is always beyond our intellectual capacity.

God’s holiness and the impossibility of knowing the eternal God fully, prevents human beings from giving finite things absolute status in order to consolidate their sense of security and identity in the name of God. In this way, we can avoid the pitfall of religious extremism entangled with political extremism. When we accept that we cannot completely know Holy God, we can raise a question “Is this really what God wants?” Is killing unarmed civilians what God really wants? The UN calls Gaza a children’s grave as the death toll tops ten thousand. Is blowing up a city packed with children what God wills? When we wake up from the illusion that we know God and God’s will 100%, we can see God in other people’s face, their suffering and tears.

After the destruction of St. Porphyrius Greek Orthodox Church, in his sermon, Rev. Dr. Munther Isaac, Palestinian Christian, the pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem, cried out, “What is happening in Gaza is not a war or a conflict, but an annihilation — continuous genocide and ethnic cleansing through death and forced displacement. World political powers are sacrificing the people of Palestine in order to secure their interests in the Middle East; they say our annihilation is needed to keep the people of Israel safe. They offer us as sacrifices on the altar of atonement, as we pay the price for their sins with our lives. Where is the justice?... Where is God when we suffer?... God is under the rubble in Gaza. He is with the frightened and the refugees. He is in the operating room. This is our consolation. He walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death.”⁴ God is under the rubble in Gaza. It is the most powerful counterclaim against those who kill people in the name of God.

My friends, we are called to serve God. Serving God in faithfulness begins with putting away other gods and searching for God’s whisper in the voice of the voiceless. “God is under the rubble in Gaza.” If you are a veteran, you are privileged. You are privileged because you have proudly served this nation and kept peace and freedom for others. Also, you are privileged because you have seen the horrors of war and the true value of people. A Korean war veteran said, “if you had the privilege of being scared to death in a war..., you have a privilege and maybe the duty to oppose war during your life-time because you’ve seen it.” There is no glory in war and veterans know the true value of peace in their hearts. As peacekeepers, you worked hard to keep peace and freedom. But, now, God calls you to be peacemakers who dream of a world in which no nation lifts up arms against another, nor do they study war any longer. All of us are called to serve God and God calls us to be peace-makers. My Asbury family, serve God in faithfulness and let us continue to sing the song of peace. Amen.

⁴ <https://sojo.net/articles/god-under-rubble-gaza> I strongly encourage you to read his entire sermon.