

Sermon: Remind, Recall, and Remember

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles PC, on Remembrance Sunday, November 7, 2021)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

It was the year 1650. Oliver Cromwell had taken hold of levers of power in the English parliament. His army had fought successfully in a civil war against King Charles I, whereby the king was summarily executed. Cromwell had also subdued Ireland in a separate campaign. Now his attention had turned northward, towards Scotland.

The Scots may not have seen eye-to-eye with the late king, but he had Scottish blood after all. What Cromwell and the English parliament did was indeed inexcusable, and deserving a strong response. The Scots then crowned Charles II as king, and mustered a good size army under the commandship of David Leslie. A decisive battle at Dunbar was to determine the fate of both nations for decades, for centuries to come.

What was interesting about this battle, at least worthy for us to remember on a Remembrance Sunday is how the rank of the Scottish side was thinned out. You see, a coalition of Presbyterian ministers, called the Covenanters, bankrolled the entire war effort (I guess ministers back then were paid much better as compared to now). So these ministers had a lot of say in the makeup of the army. A ‘Committee for Purging the Army’ was formed three months before the actual battle (talk about Presbyterians being fond of committees). Anyone whose loyalty was in doubt were purged, along with those considered to be undesirable or sinful.

Picture this: Presbyterian ministers, going through the rank and file, examining thoughts and conducts of each soldiers, and deciding if individuals were indeed worthy to fight the upcoming battle. Sounds ludicrous to us now, but it was actually quite sensible to the Scots back then. They were not just fight a territorial war, or a war of succession, they were fighting a religious war—the Scottish presbyterians against the English puritans. They were fighting not only how people were to be subject to their king, they were fighting for how people were to be subject to their God. A cause eminently worthy to die for, a religious war, a holy war.

Thinning out the ranks is a time-honoured tradition in the Scripture. The most well-known was Gideon in the time of Judges, who under God's specific instruction, vastly dwindled his army from 32,000 down to 300. The dramatic victory that Gideon achieved subsequently proves the point that when it comes to a holy war, it is the Lord God of Host who goes out with you, who goes before you, who fights on your behalf.

The passage of Deuteronomy 20:1-9, contains instructions that Moses supposedly gave to the Israelites when they entered into Canaan, the Promised Land, on how all warfares were supposedly to be conducted by the people of God. Whenever the people of God were assembled to do battle, the priests were supposed to declare, in verse 3-4

“Hear, O Israel! Today you are drawing near to do battle against your enemies. Do not lose heart, or be afraid, or panic, or be in dread of them; for it is the Lord your God who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to give you victory.”

The criteria for thinning the ranks includes: those who had recently built a house but not yet dedicated; those who had planted a vineyard but not yet enjoyed; those who were engaged to a women but not yet married; and even included those who who were afraid or disheartened, whose hearts were simply not in it. These were gracious criteria, humane criteria that seek to preserve a semblance of humanity in the ugliness of war. If war really is necessary, and sometimes they are, then who and how it is to be conducted, has as much bearing as the final outcome of victory—the process is as important as the product, ends do not always justify the means.

Coming back to the Battle of Dunbar in 1650, after the Presbyterian ministers thinned out the rank, many of the battle harden veterans were weeded out (I guess battle tested soldiers and virtuous lives don't jive). David Leslie and his colonels complained that the army is really left with “nothing but useless clerks and ministers' sons, who have never seen a sword, much the less used one.”

Nevertheless, with the Church of Scotland solidly behind the war effort, and God seemingly behind them as well, Leslie took his 12 thousands men to meet the English, 16 thousand strong, just a light numerical disadvantage.

Would anyone want to guess what the outcome was? Or maybe you already know it from history. A disastrous defeat for the Scots!

I won't go into details of how that came to be, but only to note that close to 9,000 of them were captured. After dismissing those who were sick and injured, about 5,000 prisoners-of-war were forced to march 100 miles south non-stop, to Durham, in what some would eventually call it the "Death March to Durham".

Many perished during the march, due to execution, exhaustion, starvation, and illness—most likely dysentery. Only about 3,000 of them were alive upon arrival. Over the course of next few months, more died in prison and were later buried in a mass grave. Some were sent off to fight in the French army, some were sold off as indentured-servant, slaves really, to the colonies in the New World, to Barbados, Virginia and Massachusetts. Some eventually worked off the debts and settled in parts of Maine. In a sense, these prisoners-of-war were vanguards, they were the first to bring Scottish Presbyterianism to the Puritan New England. They were the forefathers of Presbyterian denominations across North America.

What could we learn from this story, from the Battle of Dunbar? Were the Presbyterian Covenanters in error? In error with their cause, their intention, their application of the Scripture? Who is to say? Certainly I don't feel qualify to render a judgement on those ministers. But I will say that no one, at least none that I am aware of, had ever gone out to wage a war declaring that the Devil is on their side. Yet, many would claim that God is.

I will also say that it is a try-and-true wisdom in Proverb 19:21, according The Living Bible version, '*Man proposes, but God disposes*'. And God sure has a funny way of making real His will, unexpectedly by us all.

Stories of war and stories of faith both serve the same function, they remind us, help us to recall, so we shall remember, lest we forget, lest we forget.

I will end my reflection today with these selected words from Peter the Apostle, in his Second Epistle,

*"Therefore I intend to keep on reminding you of these things....
so that you may be able at any time to recall these things....
by reminding you that you should remember
the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets,
and the commandment of the Lord and Savior
spoken through your apostles."* (2 Peter 1:12-15; 3:1-2)

At this time, I would also like to invite you, to declare together our

Confessional Response: Living Faith 8.5.1-3

Christ, the Prince of Peace,
calls his followers to seek peace in the world.

We know that nations have fought in self-defense
and that war, at times, may be unavoidable.
But the tragic evil that comes with war,
the slaughter of men, women, and children
must rouse us to work for peace.

We protest against the world arms race
that diminishes our ability to fight
hunger, ignorance, poverty and disease.
We affirm that God is at work
when people are ashamed of the inhumanity of war
and work for peace with justice.
We pray for peace to him who is the Prince of Peace.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.