

Sermon Archive 210

Sunday 29 July, 2018

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: 2 Samuel 11: 1-15

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Funny little expression, isn't it, at the start of the story of David, Bathsheba and Uriah? "It was in the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle . . ."

That there's a time of year when kings go to war. Summertime, Springtime, Christmas time, the time for going to war. As if war is a regular, reliable season. Like war is as to be expected as day and night. Plain old, everyday, ordinary war. Get up in the morning, have breakfast, go to war, come home from war (maybe), have dinner and go to bed. Write a letter, go to war. Bake a cake and go to war. Sing a hymn and go to war. Watch the news and go to war. It was in the spring of the year, the time when kings go to war.

Does Aotearoa New Zealand need four large Boeing P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol planes, with the capacity to detect and destroy submarines? Well, not today we don't, but we might tomorrow, if it's time for war. When nurses, teachers and police officers are crying poor, do we want to spend 2.3 billion dollars on military hardware? No, not really, but we're going to, because you have to be ready. If war never happened, then we could make a grant to the New Zealand Ballet; we could put a nurse in every school; we could plant a whole lot of trees or research a cure for kauri die-back. We could spend our public money so differently, so much more creatively . . . But you've got to be ready for the time when kings go out to war.

Of course while we're waiting for the time of war, we can put our armed forces to worthwhile use. They can support a shaken city after an earthquake. They can dive for helicopters at the bottom of a beautiful lake. They can rescue people from the rooves of their houses following the rain and the flood. And they can go to distant places like Iraq, Afghanistan, East Timor, the Solomons, Sudan to keep the fragile peace each place has found. There are many good things you can do with

roughly 11,440 militarily trained personnel - filling in time constructively while we await the time of war.

Some people, of course, tend not to wait quietly and patiently for the time of war. There was the case of Mohammed Emwazi, educated at St Mary Magdalene Church of England primary school and the University of Westminster. Radicalised in his early twenties, he travelled circuitously to Syria, where nick-named "Jihadi John", he participated in the beheading of five western journalists. War did not come and get this young man. He raced out to find it. There were religious and political statements to be made; there was involvement to seek. After wreaking significant harm and damage to others, he was eventually killed by a United States drone - in what a US official described as a "flawless and clean hit". The then US President, one Barack Obama, announced that Emwazi had been "taken out". It was the time that kings go out to war - and driven by politics people **do** go out.

Other people are not so driven by politics. Some go out for the money. There's money to be made in times of war. Once upon a time described as "mercenaries", these days they describe themselves as "private military and security companies". In the 1990s, the four big companies were Executive Outcomes (with people in mainly in Angola and Sierra Leone); Sandline International (with people in Papua New Guinea and Sierra Leone); Gurkha Security Guards Ltd (with people in Sierra Leone); and Dyncorp International (with people in Bosnia, Somalia, Angola, Haiti, Colombia, Kosovo, Kuwait, and Afghanistan). Dyncorp describes itself thus: "Started as an aviation company, the company also provides flight operations support, training and mentoring, international development, intelligence training and support, contingency operations, security, and operations and maintenance of land vehicles". Because I do not have access to the dark web, I can't tell you how much it costs these days to hire a private army, but I can tell you that Dyncorp declares an annual income of three billion dollars. It would seem that business is brisk. It is the time when kings (and business people, and political interest groups) go out to war. No need to wait at home and put up with peace. You can go out anywhere really, and at any time, to war.

Uriah the Hittite went out to war. Not a mercenary, not a political agitator, he was a regular soldier - and it was the time of year when regular soldiers go out to war. Not remarkable then, quite to be expected, regular as the springtime, Uriah went out to war. Soft-fleshed,

vulnerable to the sword, properly trained, theoretically supported by the competence of the chain of command, Uriah went out to war. Unfortunately, all theory aside, Uriah was **not** supported by the chain of command. His king stayed back in Jerusalem, falling in lust with the now unaccompanied Bathsheba - Uriah's wife. In the time of war, the time of war becomes an opportunity for more than business. It becomes an opportunity for a corrupt leader to do whatever he wants in the absence of the soldier. We're not told what Bathsheba thought or felt. That seems irrelevant. The king wants her. The king gets her. The soldier is caught up in the time of war. Regular as springtime, unsurprising as day or night, the time of war allows the powerful person to abuse the powerless. It allows the one with much to steal from the one with little. These are familiar things within the times of going to war. War sometimes does not bring the best out of us. And indeed you could describe the dynamics of war as the act of taking what does not belong to us. I take that land. I take that freedom. I take that life.

In the time of war, the regular old cycles of life continue. In the time of war, actions continue to have predictable consequences. In the time of war children are conceived and message is sent "Your majesty, my husband's commander in chief, I'm pregnant".

Regular as the springtime, no more surprising than the daily arrival of the morning, the commander in chief uses his power to hush things up, to pin the pregnancy on someone else. Uriah is given leave from the fighting, and encouragement to come home and have sex with his wife. The stroke of a pen, the nonchalant granting of an executive order, and Uriah is invited to provide an alibi for the king.

Sometimes, however, the time of war does give people opportunity to show character. It does bring out the good in us. Uriah, out of respect for his fellow soldiers still out there in the field, who do not share his mysterious good fortune of being granted time with their wives, decides that this is not the time for the pleasure of intercourse. He forgoes the opportunity of sleeping with his wife. The hippies might say "make love, not war", but Uriah says "no". In the time of war, people make odd sacrifices. The rationing of food, the shortage of stockings, the measuring of hope, the letting go of security. It is the time when kings and business people go out to war - and Uriah is

making his point. We are in this together. I will not take advantage.

Well, back to the king - the powerful one. This point of principle, this noble gesture by the soldier is a pain in the . . . neck. When war brings out the best in us, it can be a political inconvenience to the corrupt. So the corrupt come up with another plan. The plan is that Uriah's commanding officer, some obedient fellow (who doesn't ask questions) is ordered to take Uriah into the thickest, darkest, most frantic and dangerous part of the battle. His friends and protectors in the battle are then quietly to withdraw - leaving Uriah exposed to the danger. In the time of war, people are expendable. A flawless and clean hit. A drone to the head. The command that gave the sexual excuse, also gives the freakish accident. Loved by his country, servant to his king, here lies Uriah the Hittite. In the time of war, all manner of crime is done.

This sermon doesn't have a punchline. It doesn't, in the regular sense, have a point. It's simply an attempt to explore what happens when war becomes a way of life. When we get used to the idea that there is room for violence, room for the mercenaries and the jihadists, then we're going to have to cope with things like corruption and death and injustice. If we become nonchalant about war - O war's to be expected - then we're giving room in our shared life and planet for deeply disturbing things to happen.

Perhaps the point is that we should never fall into believing that war is natural or good. It is unnatural and bad. Whether sometimes it is necessary is another matter altogether, but certainly it is unnatural and bad.

"It was springtime, that time when kings go out to war". Really? I think that that is where we should leave this sermon. And maybe soon we will pray for peace.