**11062022 – Sermon – Remembrance Sunday**

As soon as my uncle was old enough to sign up for the Canadian Air Force, he did. World War II was raging and he wanted to do his duty. My Dad was still too young – *almost* 17 – but he wanted to follow his brother. They were very close. The way I heard the story was that my Dad doctored his birth certificate and headed to the Recruitment Office of the RCAF. I guess his “doctoring” looked a bit suspicious and the recruitment officer called home to check it out. My grandfather answered the phone. “No, he’s not yet 18; send him home.” So, Dad headed …to the Army – and the story repeated. He was determined though, so next he went to the Navy. This time, my grandfather decided that, if he was so passionate about this, he’d help him go. So, at 16 years of age, my father went to war.

It wasn’t a unique story at that time, I think. I’m sure there were other young men who did the same; you may even have some similar stories in your own family. And even the ones who *were* of age were still very young. We just saw so many of those fresh young faces in the tribute slides during the Act of Remembrance. Courageous, passionate young men who were ready to fight for justice and peace. Did they have any idea what they had signed up for? Were they prepared for what they saw and experienced?

My family was lucky. Both my dad and my uncle came home without obvious injuries. My grandfather also made it home in World War I – early because he had been gassed, which later led to cancer – but in one piece. Not all families were so lucky, I know. And not all injuries are seen by the naked eye.

World War I was supposed to be the “war to end all wars” – but here we are in the 21st century, in a world where wars are still raging. I wonder what all those young men think of us now… were their sacrifices all in vain?

What will it take to make the dream of world peace a reality?

Isaiah talks of beating swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks… but the weapons we have today are far more dangerous than swords and spears…

Paul’s letter to the Ephesians talks of ways to defend against evil forces – arming ourselves with truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, and the Word of God…

And here we are…

We want peace. I don’t think anyone could argue with that. I believe every young face we just saw on our screen would agree. In fact, I don’t think it’s a sentiment that is exclusive to Canadians and our allies. I have a feeling that those who fought then and those who are fighting now all feel the same, no matter which side they are on.

And yet, here we are…

I am proud of my grandfather, my father, and my uncles, and all those we honour on Remembrance Day. I am proud of those in my extended family who are members of the Canadian military today – not because of the glory of war but because of the passion to make the world a better place that gave them the courage to face violence and evil.

Because, most of the time, I don’t think it was such a glorious experience.

Have you ever asked someone who has been to war to tell you about it? John Ross and I were discussing this at lunch last week. It is very rare for such a request to be answered with stories of violence and gore, of the awful conditions, the disease, the horrors of things they witnessed. Instead, we hear about the camaraderie, the pride… we hear the rousing songs, sometimes comical moments or even romantic ones …

My dad and his brother were two of a family of 7 children. When they came home, of course, they all wanted to know what it was like but they rarely talked about the tough things. It was just too hard. And so, they created stories about a fictional character who seemed to show up wherever they went. Her name was Henrietta. The stories would go something like this… “There I was, sitting in a pub in London, eating me tripe and onions – and who should walk through the door?”

“Well, Chri…, Henrietta!” the other would exclaim. She showed up in the nose turret where my uncle was a bombardier. She appeared at the wireless station next to my dad’s in the communication centre on the ship. She was there in every country they visited. The two boys never ran into each other, but Henrietta was everywhere they went. They were great storytellers and comedians. They were always able to change the focus of the questions with a story that would make people laugh.

Henrietta became a family legend. We still have a family golf tournament in her honour – “The Henrietta Open”… and guess what name we’ve given the gps in our car?

These two brothers made it home safely – but it doesn’t mean the experience was all glory and adventure. Sometimes the memories are just too hard to share.

Most of the fresh-faced young men and women who went to war had no way of knowing what kind of hell they were going to face. Today, the realities of war are delivered in graphic detail, right to our living rooms, right to our phones and tablets. Would our young people be as eager to sign up?

Would those who fought in the past want them to?

In our service of Remembrance this morning, David read “In Flanders Fields” by John McCrae. It’s a traditional but haunting cry to us from those who have gone before. “Take up our quarrel with the foe,” they cry, “To you, from failing hands we throw the torch, be yours to hold it high. If ye break faith with us who die, we shall not sleep though poppies grow in Flanders fields.”

What are they asking? Are they encouraging us to fight? Are they saying that fighting is the way to peace, so keep it up? Are they saying that the horrors of war will always be with us, that there is no hope? Were the prophets wrong? Was Jesus just an idealist with his head in the clouds?

I don’t think so. Our veterans fought for that peace we so desperately hope for… Sounds like an oxymoron, doesn’t it?

But what if we look at it this way…

The fighting was necessary to defend the rights and freedoms of others to defend the world from the greed for power – misguided power over land, over resources, over human lives. They couldn’t stand quietly on the sidelines and let brute force have its way. They faced that brute force to push it back.

“We didn’t finish the job,” those voices in the poem say, “but we are counting on you to keep going, to take it to the next step toward peace.”

They didn’t fail… They cleared some space. They planted the seeds of peace. It is up to us to make sure they grow, to push the forces of violence and injustice even further back so that those seeds can flourish…

The story that Susan read to the children this morning illustrates that message well. Just as that little boy kept nurturing that green sprout – even when the soldiers tore the garden out - he didn’t give up hope. He tried again with the next little appearance of a green shoot. He gathered more and more children – on both sides of the fence - to work on that garden until it was so strong and vibrant that the soldiers couldn’t destroy it.

We owe it to our veterans to do the same. To take those seeds of peace they planted and make them grow, make them flourish, to make them so strong that they choke out the forces of greed and power.

The message is not to train stronger soldiers and build bigger weapons to beat others into submission but to become better gardeners to nurture the seeds of peace they planted, to turn swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks.

It’s hard work, work that will take a lot of strength and perseverance. And it will take a lot of time and patience. Are you ready to sign up?

Amen.

Reflection: What place does war have in our quest for peace? What is the message of hope in what our veterans went through in the name of peace and justice? Think of those we honour today. What message do you think they want us to take from their sacrifices?