

Veterans Day/Armistice Day, November 11, 2018, 100th Anniversary of the end of World War I.
St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church, Freeland WA. Nigel Taber-Hamilton
Micah 6:1-4, 6-8; A poem by Lt. Wilfred Owen, Matthew 5: 1-12

Anthem for Doomed Youth
By Wilfred Owen

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
— Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.*
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,—
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

What candles may be held to speed them all?
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

*“Orisons” are prayers

It is 10:30 a.m. on Monday, November 11, 1918 – 30 minutes before the cease-fire that will end the “War to End all Wars”: At that moment – 10:30 a.m. – Private George Edwin Ellison of the 5th Royal Irish Lancers is shot while scouting near Mons, the final British soldier to be killed in action in World War I.

At 1045 a.m. - 15 minutes before the cease-fire: the final Frenchman to die – Pvt. 1st Class Augustin-Joseph Victorin Trébuchon of the French Fifth army's 415th Infantry Regiment– is the last of 91 members of his unit killed in an attack on German positions ordered that morning by General Henri Gouraud – who did so with full knowledge that the cease-fire had been signed. A message is found on Trebuchon's body saying that soup would be served in the rear at 1130 a.m. after the cease-fire takes effect. Trebuchon is the last Frenchman to die in action.

At 10:58 a.m. – two minutes before the cease-fire: Pvt. George Lawrence Price of “A” Company, 28th Battalion, (Saskatchewan) Canadian Infantry of Canadian Expeditionary Force, is on the trail of retreating German soldiers when he is struck by a bullet and killed – the last Canadian to die in action.

At 10:59 a.m. – One minute before the cease-fire: German-American Henry Nicholas John, of the 313th Infantry Regiment, nicknamed "Baltimore's Own", is killed after deciding on his own to charge a German roadblock with fixed bayonet. John is the last American to die in action.

At 11:02 a.m. - two minutes after the cease-fire: German infantry Lieutenant Andreas Tomas is killed as he approaches some American soldiers to let them know that, since the war is over, he and his men would be vacating a house and it would be available. The American high command had failed to inform all of its soldiers of the 11:00 a.m. cease-fire and so they shot him. Tomas is the last German to die in action.

All tragic that they should die that day, in that hour – the last of approximately 10 million soldiers AND 7 million civilians who died between July 28, 1914 and November 11, 1918.

This last day, however, epitomizes the Great War in one stark way: between the signing of the cease-fire at 5:00 a.m., and its taking effect at 11:00 a.m., nearly 7,000 soldiers on both sides were killed, and 26,000 wounded. There was plenty of time after the signing to stop the fighting, there being absolutely nothing to gain from continuing; and, in fact, it was known the previous day that it would soon be signed. Yet the fighting continued even after the cease-fire took effect. Even worse, these many thousands of soldiers killed and wounded on November 11 were in almost every case thrown into action by Allied generals who knew that the Armistice had already been signed. One French general ordered an attack to take a village because there was hot water there for him to take a shower. 54 of his soldiers were killed.

The French, at least, acknowledged the stupidity of continuing the killing, though in a somewhat back-handed way: they marked Augustin Trebuchon's grave, along with those of all the French soldiers killed on 11 November, with a different date: 10 November 1918. It was done, as one French officer said after the war, because the French nation was so ashamed that men should have died on the final day.

This is the epitome of the insanity of war. As Seneca the Younger – a contemporary of Jesus – said “We are mad not only individually but nationally. We check manslaughter and isolated murders, but what of war and the much vaunted crime of slaughtering whole peoples?”

The English poet lieutenant Wilfred Owen, of the Manchester Regiment – who was killed in action on November 4, 1918 - a week before the war ended – earlier wrote a preface for his book of poetry as he sat in the trenches. In it, he said that “*This book is not about heroes.....Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power, except War. Above all I am not concerned with Poetry. My subject is War, and the pity of War.*”

Owen was speaking the unspoken truth: the enemy wasn't the Germans, or the Austrians, or the Turks – or, from the other side, the French, the British, the Americans. The enemy was and is – or should be, always – war itself.

The “Great War” gave us grenades, machine guns, tanks, poison gas, terror bombing, submarines, total war, refugees. And it gave us members of the military who for the first time suffered from PTSD (they called it “shell shock”) and who therefore fall into the category of victims sucked into that war's deadly maw – and every one since.

“Peace” came with the Treaty of Versailles, signed in January 1920. It was a vindictive peace – no peace at all, really, except the absence of open conflict. That “peace” gave us Nazism, including Krystalnacht – the night of broken glass – which happened 80 years ago yesterday; it brought us World War II; gas chambers; the holocaust; and the list goes on. That “Peace” brought us Middle Eastern dysfunction and wars; terrorism; IED's, suicide vests; 9/11.....

There are a few (very few) positives: the Great War gave us today – first as “Armistice Day,” and then, after World War II in 1954, as “Veterans Day.” and it gave us the fellowship of reconciliation

How, then in light of this litany of violence and death, are we as Christians to remember this day? How should we mark the end of a war that did not end all wars; a war that cost the lives of more Europeans than any war in history. What can we take from this day?

When in 1938 – twenty years after World War I ended – Congress enacted legislation that made November 11 an official public holiday called “Armistice Day” their purpose, they said, was that it be “a day to be dedicated to the cause of world peace “ Later it became as well “a celebration to honor America's veterans for their patriotism, love of country, and willingness to serve and sacrifice for the common good.” Not, in other words, to glory in militarism and war, but to reflect on peace, service, and sacrifice for the common good.

Peace. That’s what our founder (Jesus, in case you wondered!) Talked about – and he did so frequently. We heard it today, we hear it often; we don’t always pay attention! Our journey is as peace-makers. On a day like today that’s especially true, because the journey requires remembering, and those memories are anything but peaceful. Yet we’re obliged to make that journey into memory, because it’s so central not only to our lives, but the life of all humanity. So on this day, peace. Peace, and sacrifice, and serving the common good.

The journey of remembering also requires honesty. No glossing over of the glories of war with stories of bright, shiny uniforms, or of claims that God is on our side. Rather, we must honestly acknowledge both regret and loss.

What’s particularly hard in our day, is that there are those who wish us to hate the “other.” Today it isn’t a soldier in a grey uniform, but a dark-skinned central American mother and her children fleeing murder and death – refugees of war, either literal or figurative. On this day when we talk about being willing to recognize and acknowledge and accept the humanity of the “other” in the grey uniform, who is called “enemy,” we’re also being called to recognize and accept the humanity of those who some are treating as less than human.

That’s why Armistice Day – Veteran’s Day – is so important. We not only remember the sacrifices and honor the dead, we also commit ourselves to the hard work of reconciliation, the personal work that asks us to change our perspective – even to see events from the perspective of those others, and then to accept the differences that lie between us, agreeing to walk together rather than separately. Ultimately, out of that shared journey, a new vision will emerge. If our honored dead didn’t die for this – the possibility of peace and reconciliation – then we have less

to celebrate on this day than we all might have hoped for.

I believe they did die for this – for the possibility of peace and reconciliation. And we fail to honor them if we don't pick up the mantle for which they gave the last full measure of devotion, and carry on that work that they so nobly advanced. Peace, and a blessed Veteran's Day to you all.