

## **“The Great Stillness”**

*A sermon preached on Isaiah 2:1-4 by Emily Hull McGee on November 11, 2018  
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

### I.

On the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month exactly 100 years ago this very moment, a great stillness fell upon the world. In the air, atop the sea, and upon all the fronts — African, Eastern, and Western — hostilities among nations ceased. Quiet spread across Europe. The Great War, once hoped to be ‘the war to end all wars,’ had ended.

The Armistice though, as you scholars of history know, had been signed some hours earlier in a railroad car tucked away into the forest an hour or so from Paris, but its architects declared 11:00am to be the hour that fighting was to stop. Long anticipated by Allied and German forces alike, the end came as aching relief to troops battered in their 52nd month of the war that was to have ended in a handful. The war’s casualties stretched around the world: nine million soldiers, seven million civilians, and countless millions more who would die in the influenza outbreak soon thereafter, when infectious disease ravaged where war had already terrorized. Officially the war wouldn’t end until the Treaty of Versailles months later. But when the imminent promise to end such a grim and gruesome outcome of such a long and horrific war, surely those most directly mired in the conflict would celebrate its impending conclusion, right? As word spread around the world and on all the fronts about the 5:45am signing of the Armistice Treaty, surely those final five hours and fifteen minutes until the treaty took effect would

see fighting slow to a crawl, right? Surely if peace was imminent and within reach, people would start laying down their weapons, right?<sup>1</sup>

Historians tell us that there were 10,944 casualties of those five hours and fifteen minutes. Such a frenzy was motivated by the desire for revenge, those teaching the enemy a lesson, those using up whatever ammunition they had left. “I fired 164 rounds at the enemy before he quit this morning,” Captain and commander of an artillery battery Harry S. Truman said. “I’m for peace, but the gang should be given a bayonet peace and made to pay for what they’ve done to France.”<sup>2</sup> His guns joined thousands of others flaring until exactly 11:00.

When the firing did actually stop, the reaction was mixed. Some stories tell of enemies’ sudden embrace, sharing together in wine and mutuality. One British corporal said, “the Germans came from their trenches, bowed to us, and went away. That was it. There was nothing with which we could celebrate, except cookies.” But for most, an uneasy, unfamiliar sense would soon grow in the silence. Colonel Thomas Gowenlock, an intelligence officer with the US 1st Division, reflected later on that night in his memoir of the war, saying: “Many soldiers believed the Armistice only a temporary measure and that the war would go on. As night came, the quietness, unearthly in its penetration began to eat into their souls. The men sat around log fires, the

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<sup>1</sup> With gratitude for Wikipedia for brief and clear details about Armistice Day: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armistice\\_of\\_11\\_November\\_1918#CITEREFLeonhard2014](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armistice_of_11_November_1918#CITEREFLeonhard2014)

<sup>2</sup> These stories of the war’s final hours and this quote from Harry S. Truman recounted by Kevin Baker in his remarkable essay, “The Ghosts of Versailles,” *Harper’s Magazine*, November 2018: <https://harpers.org/archive/2018/11/the-ghosts-of-versailles/>

first they had ever had at the front. They talked in low tones. They were nervous. *Their minds were numbed by the shock of peace.*"<sup>3</sup>

## II.

For years, November 11 was known as Armistice Day, a day that Woodrow Wilson declared "will be filled with solemn pride in the heroism of those who died in the country's service and with gratitude for the victory, both because of the thing from which it has freed us and because of the opportunity it has given America to show her sympathy with peace and justice in the councils of the nations."<sup>4</sup> But we know that 'the war to end all wars' did not. A Second World War would be fought as seeds from the First sprouted in all their ugly, nationalistic furor. Localized conflicts notably in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and now Afghanistan have drawn our country again and again into states of war. Where once it marked the hope of peace and the celebration of 'Armistice' (literally translated from the Latin as 'arms standing still'), now we rightfully recognize the active service of our country's women and men who have done so on behalf of the many.<sup>5</sup>

Some of us know the trauma of violence that war inflicts, both to the one wielding the sword and the one receiving it. Many of us have never had to know that particular trauma and don't presume to fully grasp its horror. But all of us have experienced in some form many of the elements that make up such a tragedy: broken relationships, prejudice that leads to hatred,

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Quote from Woodrow Wilson in 1919, on the one year anniversary of the Armistice Treaty, proclaiming November 11 as Armistice Day: <https://www.loc.gov/item/today-in-history/november-11/>

<sup>5</sup> Translation help from the crew at SALT in their post, "A Brief Theology of Veterans Day": <http://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/a-brief-theology-of-veterans-day>

aggressive loneliness, separation, disconnection, fear. Our weapons of war may have changed since Isaiah's days, for where there once were swords and spears, today we wield guns and bombs, drones and missiles, terror and torture. We spread viruses that affect our bodies and our banks, poison on our airwaves and in our Twitter feed.

With our weapons of words, we defend ourselves from attacks on our opinions, our status, our way of life, our values, our voting record, our bank accounts, our calendars. With our weapons of retribution, we delight in the downfall of those we oppose, finding revenge all the sweeter when our success comes at our enemy's failure. With our weapons of indifference, we embolden those who exploit and deny, those who prop up the greatest at the expense of the least. With our weapons of emotional armor, we mask our true selves from one another, terrified that someone else might see right through to our raging fear, our deep doubt, our gnawing sadness. In this day and age, it seems no arms of ours stand still, no weapons of ours are laid down, no peace that could potentially pierce even the darkest of nights can be found. For our minds, our hearts, and our spirits are numbed by the shock of all the war that rages in and around us.

### III.

These words that Judy read for us earlier are among the most recognizable throughout the Book of Isaiah, for they speak to a promise of peace that holds captive our collective imagination. Isaiah, of course, was a prophet in his day, one called by God to speak words of truth and justice to his time and place. The Syro-Ephraimite War raged around Isaiah, when within the massive Assyrian Empire, the northern kingdom of Israel

attempted to force the southern kingdom of Judah into a coalition to break away from the Empire. Judah's King Ahaz refused, they were invaded, and many lost their lives.<sup>6</sup>

Isaiah knew of the wickedness of the Lord's people, people he says in chapter one were a "sinful nation... laden with iniquity, offspring who do evil, children who deal corruptly."<sup>7</sup> So what must the people of Judah do to make it right? "Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow," Isaiah said.<sup>8</sup> And here is where the prophet casts forth a hopeful imagination for how that will come to be, how the people of Judah move from those waging war to those waging peace.

Isaiah saw such a vision, the text tells us, the word he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem where promises abound. "In the days to come," Isaiah says, the mountain of the Lord's house will be highest, raised above all the rest. "The holiest ground becomes highest ground," and all nations will stream to it.<sup>9</sup> A new community filled with all the diversity this world has to offer will emerge. Together from across the nations, all the people will hunger to learn the ways of God, they'll thirst for God's direction. What a vision of God's future that emerges in the days to come!

Isaiah continues: For God will judge between the nations, arbitrating and listening and adjudicating and making things right between them. In the days to come, Isaiah promises, there will be disarmament. Because when all

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<sup>6</sup> Bruce C. Birch, "Isaiah 2:1-5," *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 1*, p3.

<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 1:4

<sup>8</sup> Isaiah 1:16-17

<sup>9</sup> Great quote from Paul Simpson Duke, "Isaiah 2:1-5," *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 1*, p3.

nations live within God's judgment and justice, weapons become irrelevant. For "they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore." Instruments used to kill and maim will become instruments used to feed and plant. That which once ended life will become that which sustains life; that which once severed communities will become that which builds communities. Where once we learned the ways of war, we soon will learn the ways of God. Where once there was a great enmity among nations, soon there will be a great stillness where arms are laid down, out of which will arise a great movement towards God's dream for this world.<sup>10</sup>

#### IV.

Perhaps it's due to the inescapable cynicism all around us, but this vision, this future where within God's work of love in this world weapons of war become tools of peace just feels near impossible, doesn't it? It's hard to even imagine that such a day might come – between nations, between parties, between people, and within ourselves. We know far too well the times that treaties failed, fighting persisted, the numbness of peace wore off, and violence resumed. We learn war in all its forms every day, passing it down to our children and our children's children. Even with such a promise set before us as people of faith, each day we act like those last Armistice Day soldiers, wounds open and throbbing such that we wield our last bits of ammunition on one another until the last possible moment.

And yet...

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<sup>10</sup> These dichotomies helpfully described by Paul Simpson Duke, as cited above, p5.

And yet, this promise of God isn't merely a pipe dream or an illusion. It isn't something we remember once a year and return wistfully to our lives soon thereafter. "*In the days to come, it will be!*," says Isaiah, on behalf of the Lord. "[Therefore] come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!"

Sisters and brothers, on this day where we remember the historic moment that such terrible arms were laid down, the day a great stillness settled in, might we arrange **our** lives in such a way that we reach for the stillness not the sword? Might we pry our fingers from our weapons such that we plunge them into the soil of life? Might we resist the urge to numb ourselves to the noise of napalm and be awakened by God's call to peace? Might we lay down our arms, link arms with one another, and step with courage into God's dream set before us?

#### V.

If you were to walk into a small Jesuit chapel on the campus of St. Louis University and look up, you'd likely be surprised by what you'd find. The light fixtures, you see, are made of 20th century cannon shells. Excavated of that which ends life and filled with that which gives light, these converted cannon shells now illuminate the prayer and worship and fellowship and communion of the saints who fill its pews.<sup>11</sup>

"Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!," Isaiah proclaims. It's a beautiful, hope-filled alternative to the world in which we still find ourselves speaking in low, nervous tones around the fires in our trenches, our minds still numbed to the idea of peace.<sup>12</sup> So Lord in your mercy, may it be so!

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<sup>11</sup> Duke, p7.

<sup>12</sup> Again grateful for the haunting beauty of Kevin Baker's essay, "The Ghosts of Versailles." This closing image sparked by his.