

War is Over (If We Want It)

In December 1969, John Lennon and Yoko Ono bought billboards and full-page newspaper ads in cities around the world, declaring: ***War is Over! If you want it. Happy Christmas from John & Yoko.*** Two years later, days before Christmas 1971, John Lennon released his now famous Christmas song, *Happy Xmas (War is Over)*, beginning with the familiar line, “*So this is Christmas...*” The billboards, and then the song, were protests to U.S. involvement in the decades-long Vietnam war, suggesting that the war could be over *if* we’d just stop fighting... It’s a beautiful ideal. It’s a wonderful dream. But it makes you wonder: Is the possibility of war being over if we’d just stop fighting nothing more than a dream?

Because the heavy truth is, we live in a world that has been built on war. Behind every border is the story of a battle. From current wars around our world, to the World Wars to Cold Wars to Civil Wars to Revolutionary Wars to Hundred Years Wars, the list goes on and on. Almost to the point of accepting: *This must just be how it is.* In fact, even when you read the Bible, conflict, violence, and war appear to be at the centre of the story. It only takes four chapters until we read the story of the first brothers – Cain & Abel – where Cain murders his brother Abel out of jealousy and rage. Then just a few verses later generational violence spirals when Cain’s great-great-grandson, a guy named Lamech, kills a man in vengeance, proudly declaring, ***“If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times”*** (***Genesis 4:24***). Then by the time we get to the sixth chapter of the Bible, we read: ***Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight and was full of violence*** (***Genesis 6:11***). And ever since then the story has continued, from one tribe to the next, one empire to the next, one country to the next, conquering and creating the world we know today by war.

But perhaps, what can be even more unsettling when we read the Bible is when it seems like *God* believes it needs to be this way also. Listen to what the writer of Leviticus described as God’s instruction to Israel regarding revenge and payback (***Leviticus 24:17-20***):

Anyone who takes the life of a human being is to be put to death. Anyone who takes the life of someone's animal must make restitution—life for life. Anyone who injures their neighbour is to be injured in the same manner: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth.

That if someone hurts you, you get your due. That if someone takes life, their life must be taken. That if their tribe attacks us, we fight right back. *Eye for eye. Tooth for tooth.*

Sometimes even to the point of seeing the writers of the Bible describe God as *commanding* people to attack other nations in vengeance or retribution, or apparently as the only way to deal with “bad” or “evil” people in order to establish God’s plans and purposes for the world.

But the question today is: Is that just how things are? Or more to the point: Is that how *God* has meant for things to be? And to theme of this series: What might the cross of Jesus – as *The Wood Between the Worlds* – have to say about all this? About the dream of war being over if we really want it?

Well, as you make your way toward the cross in the story of the Bible – though, still long before Jesus arrives on the scene – it turns out John Lennon wasn’t the only dreamer. As almost three millennia before the Beatles, an “OG” dreamer by the name of Isaiah wrote a poem in the Bible with a similar dream, in **Isaiah 2:4**, where it says:

In the days to come... The Lord will mediate between nations and will settle international disputes. They will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will no longer fight against nation, nor train for war anymore.

Isaiah’s dream declared: *There will come a time when it will no longer be this way.* That disputes will actually be settled. That weapons will be turned into farming tools. That no one will train for war, because war *will be over*. And, that *God* will be the one to do this...

But that leaves the question: When?! How?! Is this only God’s plan for a distant future? Or, is there a way to live toward this dream in the here and now, *if* we really want it?

Enter Jesus of Nazareth in the first century... Listen to these words from his famous *Sermon on the Mount*, where Jesus said (**Matthew 5:38-40, 43-45**):

You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well.

You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.

Jesus says, "You've heard it said..." in the Bible. "But I tell you..." now, also in the Bible. So what's going on here? Is this the same Bible? Cause according to Leviticus, isn't it clear that the punishment must fit the crime? That 'eye for eye' is how life works – how God intended things to work? Meaning the world will inevitably continue being built on nation fighting nation until everyone gets their due? And yet Jesus says: *turn the other cheek, hand over your coat, love and pray for those that hurt you.* And that when you do you will be *children of your Father in heaven* – reflecting the very image of *the God* Jesus called Father. And living a very different way than the world had lived up to that point.

So is Jesus changing what God said? Or is Jesus changing God's mind and plan on matters of violence and vengeance?

Well, not according to Jesus, who also said (**John 5:19**):

Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.

And (**John 14:9**): ***Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father!***

Jesus says, *I can only do what God does* and so *I'm here to show you what God is actually like.* Even if the stories so far assumed God thinks like we think, that the world is built on war and that's just the way it is. But Jesus came revealing a different way, a different dream, a *turn-the-other-cheek, swords-into-plowshares, war-can-be-over-if-we-live-it* revelation of God's plans and purposes for humanity. To show us that God is, in fact, like Jesus even if humanity hadn't always known it.

Or as the writer of Hebrews says (**Hebrews 1:1-3**):

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son... the exact representation of his being.

You see, critical to the conversations and ideas of this series is recognizing that God is most exactly and perfectly revealed in Jesus, *and*, like we've said week after week, nowhere is this more clearly (and paradoxically) seen than in Jesus's sacrificial death on the cross. And so that includes, seeing and understanding what Jesus and the God he reveals has to say about violence, vengeance, and our world built on war.

So then, in addition to Jesus's teaching, what does Jesus's cross tell us about the dream of war being over in our world? Well, one of the things I think we can see most clearly through the cross is that the God revealed in Jesus – contrary to our *eye for eye* thinking – is actually a God who would rather die for his enemies than kill them. In fact, the Apostle Paul described the good news of Jesus just like that in **Romans 5:10**:

While we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to [God] through the death of his Son.

That Jesus died in order to reconcile *humanity to God* (and not the other way around), even though we had behaved like enemies toward God in so many ways. And if this is how God responds to anyone who behaves like an enemy, what we also see through Jesus's death on the cross is that he expects God's children and his followers to imitate this response – as children of the Father, following him in a *turn-the-other-cheek* way of life. In fact, Jesus called this out directly in his first followers on the night he was arrested when one of his disciples tried to defend him with violence, where Jesus said (**Matthew 26:52**):

Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword.

Not only calling his followers to a different response, but helping them see that responding in kind with violence will only ever always keep the cycle of violence in circulation. Or as Ghandi once said: *An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.*

So if this what Jesus taught – and when it comes to *The Wood Between the Worlds*, if this is what Jesus *revealed* through his enemy-loving sacrificial death on the cross – then what does all of this mean for our lives today when it comes to conflict, pay back, grudges, revenge, violence, and even war, in our world?

Well first, I want to say – since I haven't already – when it comes to the dream of war being over on a global scale if only we'd follow the way and example of Jesus, I confess that fully understanding how we could get there or what it would take for the whole world to live it together is well beyond my pay grade. But what I want us to consider today is that what we see in Jesus – and what the earliest followers of Jesus eventually became convinced of – was that the days Isaiah had dreamed of are actually possible *in Jesus* when we trust, follow, and obey his teaching and example in response to violence. That if everyone chose to stop fighting and actually “put away their swords”, indeed, war could be over. And yet, we know that war rages on all around us, perhaps most prominently these days between Russian & Ukraine and Israel & Palestine. And when I had the chance to sit across a breakfast table a couple weeks ago from our friend of Southridge, Pavlo Lozynsky, who's family continues risking their lives living and serving as pastors in Lviv, Ukraine, I can't help but empathize with the desire for their country to continue to receive military aid in order to defend themselves from unjust atrocities. And closer to home – on a dramatically less high-stakes scale – in the midst of our current *Trade Wars*, I gotta admit, my gut feels like it's only right and fair that we respond *tariff for tariff*. And yet, it all begs the question: Is this what *Jesus* wants for us? Or are we just keeping pay back and revenge in circulation?

And so, while many of these global affairs are way beyond our control and well above our pay grades, my first invitation for us is to become people who: **Pray for peace globally.** That we would become Jesus followers who regularly get on our knees and beg God to bring peace to the greatest conflicts in our world – for war to be over because we deeply want it.

Not delighting in evil or vengeance or pay back, but asking Jesus to change hearts, to inspire forgiveness, to provide for and heal the wounded. And then inviting God to convict or transform our own hearts – and anything in our lives or media consumption or voting preferences or spending – that may be consciously or unconsciously contributing to the furthering of war and violence in our world. That in the way and example of Jesus and his cross of peace we would regularly and actively pray for peace globally.

But then far more personally today – and perhaps even more applicably – in response to the God we see revealed in Jesus's sacrificial enemy-loving peace-making death on the cross, my second and most direct invitation for us is to: **Practice peace personally**. Because going all the way back to the very first conflict between the very first brothers, Cain & Abel, peacemaking and laying down our swords actually begins in our everyday relationships with our family, friends, neighbours, co-workers, classmates, teammates, and fellow church members. That if we can't – or perhaps, *don't really want* – to make peace in the conflicts closest to home, how will we ever imagine or participate living into the dream of war and conflict being over around the world? The dream that Jesus laid down his life for on the cross.

So I invite you to consider: Is there someone in your personal life that you are at odds with? Perhaps someone very close to home. An extended family member? A long-time friend, who these days feels like an enemy? A co-worker? A neighbour? Maybe a spouse, or a parent, or a child? Someone in the church? Because Jesus wants the war between you to be over. And Jesus has not only taught us, but shown us, the way through love and forgiveness and laying down our right to retaliate to make that possible. And for Jesus, being at peace with each other is of utmost priority among God's plans and dreams for the world. In fact, in the same *Sermon on the Mount*, Jesus went as far as to say (**Matthew 5:23-24**):

Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.

So as we're about to receive communion again together this morning – our weekly response throughout Lent to remember and experience the body of Christ broken for us and the blood of Christ shed for us on the cross – before we do, I want to invite you to consider a step of peacemaking you might need to take with a *brother or sister* in your life. If there's someone you're not currently at peace with – as far as it depends on you – because of Jesus's dream for our wars to be over, what step could you take right now to follow him in that dream? Even before you “come to the altar” for communion?

Is there an apology or a request for forgiveness you need to ask for or offer to someone you came with today? Is there a text you need to send to someone to say sorry or to invite for coffee to have a peacemaking conversation? Or at the very least (although still very significant) is there a prayer you need to pray right now, asking Jesus to show you the way to peace? To show you that *he* is the way to peace? To help you see and understand and trust and follow his way of laying down our lives for the sake of one another as *the way* for war to be over – and to see that that's what he so lovingly wants for us?

So, the band and our communion servers can come forward. But before I pray to conclude, I want to give us all a moment for a personal step toward peace. A quiet conversation, if that's what you need. A text of apology or forgiveness or invitation to a reconciling conversation. A prayer to grow and transform into a peacemaker with every person in your life so that together we can become people who show the world that – because of Jesus and what he's done for us on the cross – war can be over if we want it!

Band can begin to play softly...

Let's pray...