



THE SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

February 16, 2003

2 Kings 5:1-14

Psalm 30

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Mark 1:40-45

Newspapers, TV, and radio last night and this morning reported of anti-war rallies across the globe, from Australia to Europe, in Italy, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and Russia. The protest march held in Rome was estimated to be the largest in history, with well over a million demonstrators. One reporter in Rome commented that in Italy one can tell peoples' political persuasion by the newspapers they carry; this reporter observed that great numbers of the Italian protesters carried some of the nation's most conservative dailies. Reporting from the United States, another newsperson stated that increasing numbers of people in the United States are registering their anger at Europeans who protest impending war with Iraq. The reporter observed that European countries, unlike the United States, witnessed on their own soil in one century the greatest carnage ever known to humankind.

Nor were those in the United States who are against a war in Iraq quiet yesterday. Protests rallies were staged in major cities all across the country. The anti-war gathering in Colorado Springs yesterday was one that resulted in confrontation between those protesting war and those supporting the government's position. Tear gas grenades were launched and demonstrators were arrested. This afternoon, a block from here, on the State Capitol steps, protestors will gather to protest those who protest against war in the Middle East. And the United States has not yet declared war on Iraq, the war of conscience has already begun. Already, people are choosing up sides throughout this land and throughout the world; those who protest war and those who support a U.S. invasion of Iraq are standing toe to toe and people of good will are divided one against the other.

To the consternation of some of you, I have resisted saying anything from the pulpit about an impending war with Iraq. Others of you will doubtless harbor some resentment that I do so today. This is exactly what I have dreaded, and it is why I have remained silent. It's not that I feel the need to please everyone - I gave up on that years ago.

I remember all too well, however, the Vietnam war era; and how the United States was torn apart as those against the war and those supportive of the war took up sides against one another. Even more, I remember how faith community after faith community was rent asunder over conflicting positions on the war; I remember vividly how people stopped speaking to each other or stopped going to church or synagogue all together as a rabbi or pastor and his or her supporters took a position that was counter to the position of others in their faith communities. In seminary I researched Lutheran publications to uncover how readers responded to the Vietnam war. The letters to the editor columns were filled for years with bitter and vitriolic mail, with each side claiming itself faithful, with each side claiming the other to have fallen away from faith. The thought of all that occurring once more in this faith community or in any faith community moves me alternately to tears and to downright nausea.

As I understand the Lutheran tradition and my office, I am certainly free to present my own reasoned position on impending war against Iraq; some of you know what that position is. I am not free, however, to stand in this pulpit and tell you what *your own* position must be; I am not free to bind your conscience. I

must, however, reiterate the church's ancient, traditional teaching: *war is always, always an evil*. There are no exceptions.

However, upon this shadowed planet, where we are all in bondage to sin, our choices are frequently not between an absolute good and an absolute evil. On this side of eternity, our tragic choice is often that of needing to discern the lesser of evils and acting upon that lesser evil. There have been, arguably, times in our human history when war has been the less evil course of action. The Second World War was hideously evil, but to stand by and do nothing in the face of the evils being perpetrated by Hitler would have been more evil still. Indeed, there are those who argue that the early reluctance of the United States and Great Britain to take up arms against Hitler was itself more evil than to go to war. It is beyond doubt too that the majority of Christians in Germany who supported the authority of the state entered into an evil far greater than the evil of resisting their own government. What's more, the established Church failed utterly *when it bound people's consciences* by teaching that Christians must not under any circumstance disobey the ruling authorities.

And so on the eve of war – please God may it not come to pass – I cannot tell you what your position must be – I cannot bind your consciences. Nor may any of you bind one another's conscience. Together we must all confess that all war is evil; beyond that, it is left to each of us to act out of our own informed conscience – and *none of us is to judge the Christian sister or brother who in good faith takes a stance different than our own*.

On the eve of war – please God may it not come to pass – *there are things* I can and must say, namely: None of us comes to the altar of God as innocents. None of us comes to the altar justified by even the most well-intentioned of our positions. We come in bondage to the evils of the world from which we cannot free ourselves. We come to the altar as beggars all, with bloodstained hands with absolutely no good work of our own to offer. But here into our empty and waiting hands we receive the final act and end of all history. Though suffering and evil will have their way, though love will be betrayed, love's body broken and love's blood outpoured, suffering and evil *shall not have the last word*. God's last word is and ever shall be Christ risen from the dead.

So come to the altar and receive your crucified and risen Lord who is raising you even this day from the dead, and live in him *who is coming again* to wipe away every tear and to redeem the suffering of the whole world. And that day will come to pass when they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; when nation shall not lift up sword against nation . . . and neither shall we learn war any more.