

**THE ELEVENTH HOUR OF THE ELEVENTH DAY OF THE ELEVENTH MONTH:
A Sermon for the 100th Anniversary of Armistice Day**

The Rev. Chase Danford
Grace Church in New York
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He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." (Mark 12:41-44)

The eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month.

Four years ago, I was in London, working for a month out of the International Rescue Committee's United Kingdom office. During weekends I would become a tourist and visit the sites of the city. One day I went to the Tower of London and as I approached it, I saw that it was surrounded by a sea of red that seemed to sweep out from the tower complex into the green grass field of the old moat. The tower seemed to be bleeding, and the effect was rather striking. Thanks to modern technology, I looked up what was going on and learned that it was a public art installation serving as a war memorial. The sea of red was created by a field of poppies, ceramic poppies that would eventually number 888,246, one for each British and Colonial servicemember who died during World War One. The installation, appropriately named "Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red," was in commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the war.

4 years ago marked the beginning of World War I. Today, November 11, is Veterans Day, but it is also Armistice Day, as it was known until 1954 when it became Veterans Day in honor of all who served. If you were not aware of the World War I origins of what was once Armistice Day, you would not be alone. Today is Armistice Day and Veterans Day because on this day in 1918 at the beginning of the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, the Armistice of November 11 took effect, and the Great War was finally over. The War that was supposed to end all wars ended 100 years ago today.

I think it's fair to say that World War I, while hugely significant for the U.S. at the time, did not capture the American historical imagination in the same way as World War II, perhaps in part because far fewer Americans died: 116,000 vs 405,000. But in Europe the First World War is still remembered as a very big deal. It did, after all, take place in Europe, and in addition to 9 million combatants, 7 million civilians died. In the UK and Commonwealth countries, Armistice Day is known as Remembrance Day, and it is observed by 2 minutes of silence on every November 11. On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the armistice, we join in solidarity with the silence today.

Today, as we remember all those lost in war, particularly the First World War, we would do well to pray for the 11 service members from Grace Church who perished in World War I. They are honored on a war memorial plaque at the back of the church in the narthex, just to the north side of the main doors. I invite you to take a look on your way out after the service today. You'll see that it lists the 11 names, which we'll remember in our prayers later today, and says,

To the glory of God and in proud and grateful memory of those men of Grace Church who during the World War gave their lives in the service of their country.

That time may not dim the memory of their sacrifice this tablet is here placed by the wardens and vestrymen of Grace Church in the year 1932.

In their deaths, we can see how the devastation of war went beyond the battlefield. In addition to the 6 who died of wounds sustained in combat, two died of influenza, 1 died of a self-inflicted wound, 1 died as a prisoner of war, and 1 died in a training accident. War kills and wounds in many ways. In that way, it is like so many of what our baptismal rite refers to as the "evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God." War, hunger, poverty, political oppression, among others, are all preventable tragedies brought about by human action or lack of action.

For example, let's take a look at hunger and poverty, themes from our scripture readings today. We heard two stories of two widows today. Widows were already economically vulnerable because in a patriarchal society, they lacked a husband to provide a household income. Widows relied on their families to support them, or if their families could not, they had to rely on charity.

In 1 Kings, God tells Elijah to go visit a widow in Zarepheth during a time of famine and drought. She has just enough to make one last meal for her son and for herself before they starve. So she must have questioned Elijah's sanity, or thought he was making a horrible joke, when he said, ok, but can you first make me a little bread and then you and your son can have the rest? But then he adds, God says that the meal and oil will not run out until the rain comes. So, perhaps with hope as the only thing she has left, she decides to act out of faith, and she did not run out of food.

Our second economically vulnerable woman is presented in the Gospel of Mark. Jesus tells his disciples to take note of a poor widow who drops two small coins in the donation box. Her tiny offering was worth much more than the large sums from the wealthy, Jesus says, because "she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

We often read these two stories as tales of great faith, and they are. But good stories, most especially Bible stories, have more than one thing to say. So, it's worth remembering that Jesus points out the widow and her gift in the context of criticizing Temple-based religious practices. Only a bit more than 10 verses earlier, Jesus encounters the scribe who asks him what the most important commandment is, and when Jesus tells him to love God with everything you have, and to love your neighbor as yourself, the scribe says, you're right, and this is more important than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices. Immediately after this, Jesus taunts other scribes in the Temple about interpretations of messianic prophecy, and then just before he observes the widow, he denounces the scribes and religious authorities who strive for outward greatness rather than

inner meaning and who take advantage of others. Then following the story of the widow's offering, Jesus foretells the destruction of the temple.

In this context, the widow becomes not just a symbol of great faith and generosity. But her story also serves to critique the assumptions and practices of the day.

Jesus says, You think those pompous scribes are great? They're not. This is greatness. A woman. A widow. A poor person. All things that made her a marginal figure in her time and culture. She also becomes a symbol of the cost of a bad system. She has nothing while others have more than enough. She gave all that she had to live on to what had become a corrupt religious institution that didn't help people like her to live. In fact, in the original Greek, what is translated as "all that she had to live on" actually means "her whole life." Out of her poverty, she put in everything she had, her whole life. Out of her faith, she gave her life to a bad system. Isn't that exactly what happens when young men and women march off to war?

It is not a bad thing to be proud of them, as the wardens and vestry were of Grace Church's 11 fallen soldiers and aviators. They gave their lives in service of their country, but war, like poverty, is never a good thing. The difference between them is that war sometimes seems to be the only way to stop more violence from happening. But at the heart of both war and poverty, as well as systems of oppression like slavery and legalized inequality, lies violence. Violence can be physical, but violence can also be psychological, social, and spiritual. Violence is harm inflicted on one or many for the advantage of another individual or group. Commemorations, like good stories, can have more than one message. We remember the fallen as heroes, but we also hope that by their sacrifice, they have served the cause of peace.

In addition to Armistice Day, the past few days also marked another significant anniversary. It has been 80 years since Kristallnacht, the first major Nazi-led attacks on Jews, which took place over the night of November 9 and morning of Nov. 10, 1938. State-sanctioned Nazi persecution of Jews had previously been economic, political, and social. Now it was physical terror. Official estimates of those killed number 91, but many scholars put it much higher. In addition, 30,000 Jewish men were arrested and put in concentration camps. 267 synagogues were destroyed, and 7,000 Jewish business were destroyed across Germany, Austria, and the then-recently annexed Sudentland. When World War II ended, and the crimes of the Nazi regime and its collaborators were fully revealed, war crimes trials were held and there were promises of "Never again."

Yet in no time, one of the Allied powers, the Soviet Union under Stalin, began a campaign of political persecution against Jews, many of whom had joined the Bolshevik Revolution to free themselves of racial oppression under Tsarist rule. The latter half of the twentieth century witnessed genocide and ethnic cleansing all over the globe. And now, despite the strides made in the U.S. after WWII and the Civil Rights movement, anti-Jewish, racist, and white nationalist forces are empowered, injecting their poison into our common life. We don't need to wait for historical and sociological analyses to tell us that the normalizing of hateful rhetoric and perpetuation of racist and anti-semitic conspiracy theories at the highest levels of government in this and other countries have contributed to increased intimidation and physical violence by white nationalists.

The best way we can honor the veterans who died in World War I and every other war is by working for peace. They gave their lives for their country, in service of the ideals of this republic. Ideals like those expressed in the Declaration of Independence: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Violence and the trauma and instability it brings are antithetical to those values. As we work for reconciliation between people who stand divided and as we seek a world where truth, justice, and love are cherished, we work for a peace that honors those who died in wars that they hoped would end all wars.

At many World War I memorials and Veterans Day observances, a poem by a WWI soldier is read. The Canadian doctor and Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae. He wrote,

*In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.*

*We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie,
In Flanders fields.*

*Take up our quarrel with the foe:
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.*

When he said take up our quarrel with the foe and hold high the torch we throw, he might have meant for other to take up the armed conflict in place of the fallen, but just as with stories, poems have more than one meaning. The greatest foe of a soldier is war itself. Soldiers fight so that there won't be other wars. The torch we hold high is a light for peace.

4 years ago, I was an American tourist in London, educated in the basic facts of WWI, but largely unaware of other tremendous, devastating impact the war had on the UK, Europe, and much of the world. On my sight-seeing, I encountered a field of blood-red poppies surrounding the Tower of London, and I was provided with a bold visualization of the impact the conflict had. But this public art installation was not the only observance of the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the war. Churches were holding prayer services, culminating in a candlelit vigil at Westminster Abbey held in conjunction with the voluntary switching off of lights in homes and buildings around the UK in honor of the words of Sir Edward Grey, foreign secretary when the war began. He said: The lamps are going out all over Europe; we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime.”

Thankfully, the lamps were lit again in his lifetime, and 100 years after the end of the war, this week the Tower of London once again hosted a memorial. This time 10,000 torches filled the moat, shining the light of peace into the darkness of war and violence.

In a moment we will sing a hymn with these words:

*O day of peace that dimly shines
Through all our hopes and prayers and dreams,
Guide us to justice, truth, and love,
Delivered from our selfish schemes.*

*May the swords of hate fall from our hands,
Our hearts from envy find release,
Till by God's grace our warring world
Shall see Christ's promised reign of peace.*

Like the widow of Zarepheth, we might not have a lot to give, but when we do share our time, our talent, and our resources, we will likely find that we have a greater sense of abundance. Like the widow's mite in the Gospel of Mark, our offering for the cause of peace might not seem like such a big one. We can't all change the world single-handedly, after all. But each of us can do our part, in our lives and communities, and make a real difference to individual people. And together, we can be a force for peace.

On this Armistice Day, this Veterans Day, may we remember the fallen and all those who have suffered physical, social, and spiritual violence. May we take up their torches as we work and pray for peace.

Thy kingdom come, O Lord, thy will be done.