Sunday, March 16, 2003
TOUGH TIMES FOR CHRISTIANS
Mark 8:31-38

In the past six weeks or more, a number of you have asked me personally and by email questions about the impending war with Iraq — such questions as, “What is the Christian position on our probable war with Iraq?” Others have asked, “What is your view as a Christian on such a war with Iraq?” Another question has been, “Why have you not yet preached a sermon on this important issue?”

I want to answer this last question first — why have I not yet preached a sermon on this important issue? As I’ve said to many of my friends over the past six or eight weeks, there have been many times I’ve wanted to put my foot down, but I didn’t know where to put it. I’m still not certain if I know where to put it, but I’m going to try. Today’s sermon is my attempt. But like many of you, I still have more questions than answers. At the same time, I’m comforted by the fact that raising questions, even where there are no definite answers, is an important part of the Hebrew and Christian prophetic tradition.

Times of impending war and when nations are engaged in war have always been tough times for Christians, especially when you live in a nation that is the one superpower in the world in its time. The cartoon on today’s Order of Worship illustrates this. It’s also difficult for our nation to be a superpower because we never asked for that position. So we have a paradox. Historically, we have an aversion to the idea of big government. The dissenting Protestants who founded the United States were suspicious of government. They thought people should do things for themselves through voluntary societies. Now, because we are the one superpower, we have to act like a bigger government than anyone ever imagined.

Times of impending war and when nations are engaged in war are also tough times for Christians because, in the New Testament, Jesus never spoke directly on the subject of war. When he did say such things as, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God,” you cannot be sure if he was talking mostly about those who try to bring peace between individuals, or was he talking about those who work for peace among nations? Probably both, but that’s an inference.

Jesus also knew that some form of government, which by necessity includes police officers, soldiers, and armies, is necessary for an orderly society. Police officers, soldiers, and armies can be peacemakers and sometimes find it necessary to use force in order to bring and sustain peace. St. Paul wrote that even bad government is better than no government at all. He knew that people cannot live peaceably together in anarchy because of the “unruliness” of human nature. That’s the way St. Paul put it. Think of it this way — imagine a football game in Memorial Stadium between Colorado and Nebraska with no game officials on the field. We’re all good people, so we’ll trust the players and their coaches to call their own personal fouls and other rule infractions. It would be chaos.

Times of impending war and when nations are engaged in war are tough times for Christians because there is no one universally agreed-on Christian position in relation to war, even wars that seem to be just. Historically, there have always been sincere Christians who have, as a matter of conscience, been “conscientious objectors.” They refuse to take up arms in any war. From what we know about Jesus, he was a conscientious objector. He refused to lead a revolt

and I'm sure would not have participated in one against the Roman occupiers of Israel. He didn't fight back and wouldn't allow his disciples to try to defend him when he was arrested.

In today's story read earlier from Mark's gospel, we are told that "he began to teach his disciples that he must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the religious authorities and he would be killed." Peter tried to argue with him, but Jesus wouldn't allow it. Then Jesus spoke those words that are difficult for you and me to hear and even more difficult to follow—"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?"

Historically, there have always been Christians who have supported the "just war" theory. There are some church leaders in the present time who have declared that attacking Iraq would be to enter a just war. I worry about their absolute certitude. They have no doubt that this war is moral and that God is on our side. I am not so sure. The remarkable thing about the Bible is that it tells us over and over again that God's plot is always larger than the ones we weave to reassure ourselves.

In the Old Testament story, when Sarah orders Abraham to get rid of Hagar and Ishmael so that Isaac's inheritance is assured, God visits Hagar in the desert and promises to make a great nation of Ishmael. In a New Testament story, Jesus almost gets killed in Capernaum for reminding his own people that God sometimes skips right over them to take care of people who are not a part of their faith and who they consider heathens and outside of God's love. I remember the words of Abraham Lincoln when one of his generals suggested that they pray that God would be on their side, and Lincoln replied, "No, let's pray that we are on God's side."

Jesus said that we must count the cost before taking any action, and as Christians, we need to ask, "Will the coming war cost us dearly in more ways than we can imagine?" We need to ask whether the good which may be achieved will outweigh the evil that is sure to come. I also believe it is helpful for Christians to admit, as did the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, that the choice is not always between the moral and the immoral, but many times between the immoral and the less moral. Here again, I have more questions than answers. No one truly knows what the unintended consequences will be, but we have to continue to ask those questions.

As one who is seeking to follow the way of Jesus, I have another worry about this war, and any war. One of the first casualties of any war is truth. Inevitably, each side cloaks itself in myths of righteousness. The people of Iraq must believe Saddam's propaganda, and we want to believe our leaders when they ask us to go forward to defend freedom and all that is good and just in the world.

I have another worry as a follower of Jesus. In order to fight a war, a nation must demonize its enemy. Only by demonizing your enemies can you kill them with impunity. In our time, even some Christian leaders have been demonizing the followers of Islam in total, without making any distinctions or even understanding Islam or our own religious history. I have a new book I'm reading now called Is Religion Killing Us? It is a study of violence in the Bible and the Koran.

I worry because in these times, the humanity of our enemies does not seem to register with many people, including many Christians. I heard one Christian leader say that Desert Storm was carried out with a minimum of casualties. Of course, he was referring only to United States

casualties, because in the context of war, to some people, those on the other side don't matter. Only our dead matter. According to the research I've seen, there were 35,000 or more civilians killed during Desert Storm.

I'm grateful for the many other Christian leaders — and hopefully, I am one of them — who continue to remind us that God loves all human beings and therefore has as much love for Iraqis as God does for those who live in the United States. I believe that when Iraqis or Americans die, God weeps. You have heard me say many times before in sermons and the classes I lead that I believe, as the Bible teaches, that all human beings — I emphasize "all" human beings — are created in God's image and are therefore children of God whether they know it or not.

Another casualty of impending war, and war itself, can be that we demonize even those in our own country who disagree or even seem to question the official government position. There was a story in the newspaper last week about Stephen Downs. He was arrested at a shopping mall in Albany, New York on the charge that he was being disruptive. What did he do? The arrest was prompted by a T-shirt he was wearing. What was on the T-shirt? Dirty language? Racist slogans? A single-finger salute? A naked woman holding a swastika? None of these! The T-shirt, which he had custom-made in the mall, carried only two slogans — on the back: "Give Peace A Chance." On the front: "Peace on Earth." That's it. He did not hand out any leaflets. He chanted no slogans. All he did was put on his new T-shirt and go to the food court for dinner. While there, he had only two brief conversations. One was with a teenager who admired his shirt and wanted to know where he got it. The other was with a law school student who talked with Downs about some courses the student was taking. Stephen Downs is sixty years old and is an attorney.

At this point, according to Downs, security guards approached him and gave him an ultimatum: take off the T-shirt or get out of the mall. When he refused, the guards went away, only to return with police officers. They repeated the demand, he repeated his refusal, and he was arrested for trespassing.

This is not, technically speaking, a First Amendment issue. Our right to free speech prevents the government from telling you what you can and cannot say, but as private entities, no business or shopping mall is legally required to tolerate an opinion it does not like.

Stephen Downs won't need a legal defense fund. After thinking it over, the mall has declined to press its flimsy charges. After news of Downs' experience got around, 150 people showed up at the mall wearing T-shirts like his. What a strange world we live in that a shopping mall would decide it is Stephen Downs who has said the one thing that ought not to be said: peace. Isn't it also ironic that what Mr. Downs had on the front of his shirt, Peace on Earth, is the song the angels sang at Jesus' birth?

Because I am a Christian, I still have hope. I continue to believe that our enormous power can be used for good. Also, as one seeking to follow Jesus, I can only support military action with fear and trembling. I am not arguing that all use of the military is wrong. In a world as dangerous as ours, a judicious use of military power is sometimes unavoidable. Our United Church of Christ "Statement of Faith," in one of its declarations — speaking about what God calls us to do — says, "You call us into the church to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil." Saddam Hussein is an evil, crazy dictator, as were Hitler, Stalin, and many of his successors. I did not oppose the war in the Persian Gulf; annexation by force must

be reversed. I believe as a Christian that our military action in Afghanistan was justified, and I hope and pray that our contribution to its rebuilding will match our military victory.

As a Christian, I also believe military action should be a last resort. Its consequences are too grave and its outcome too uncertain to engage in except as a last resort. I also believe that one of our greatest dangers in our present moralistic belligerent mood is taking on responsibilities we cannot and will not fulfill. Can a nation that hates taxes be generous enough to help rebuild the world? We also need to remember that even though we are the strongest military power the world has ever seen, we cannot rule the world alone.

As a Christian, I believe it is our responsibility to help build a society and a world in which it will be clear that we need one another and, as Jesus taught, we will bear one another's burdens. John Winthrop, one of our Congregational Church ancestors, said in his powerful sermon before disembarking for the new world: "We must delight in each other, make others' conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in our work as members of one body."

The United States has enormous power — maybe more power than it is good for any nation to have. Power in itself is not bad. The question is always how that power is used. The Christian tradition is rooted in the idea of careful power. Careful power is moderate and restrained, always thoughtful of consequences, always concerned that it will nurture and not destroy. God in the person of Jesus is the best example of careful power.

As the sermon title indicates, it's a tough time for Christians, but I still have hope because I believe in a loving God. I have hope because I believe over the long stretch of history, God's will will be done, if not by us, then in spite of us, and many times by people and through people we would least expect. I have hope because I believe peace on earth is possible. That's one of God's greatest promises.

I also have hope because I believe there are many things you and I, as Christians, can do so that God's will will be done. Here's my short list: we can pray for our leaders, and we also need to pray for our enemies as Jesus taught us. We can also pray daily that peace will prevail. We can treat those who disagree with us with respect and civility, instead of seeing them as unpatriotic. We can continue to ask the difficult questions. Amen.