

November 10, 2019 sermon “Who is left?”

It is 100 years this week since the first Remembrance Service after the First World War ended, at 11 o’clock on the eleventh day of the eleventh month. For one hundred years since 1919, people have stood silently – at that time, or on the nearest Sunday – to remember the dead of that War that was to end all wars, of the world war that followed it, and the wars that have followed those.

Remembering those who died, those who were killed, points us beyond Remembrance Sunday as an act of national pride and reminds us that war brings human beings into terrible conflict. One of the most terrifying things about war is how it brutalizes and dehumanizes. I was stunned this summer as my family had the opportunity to visit Tyne Cot Cemetery in Ypres as well as Flanders Field, John McCrae’s memorial and the museum to dedicate the battles, as well as Menin Gate. There are 11,900 Commonwealth Servicemen buried in Tyne Cot – shocking that in only one cemetery so many bodies lie, row of upon row of crosses. And some plots are for more than one soldier. I was even shocked to learn that German soldiers didn’t earn “the right” to be buried on their own but 4-6 soldiers shared a plot, as part of their destructive role in the war. Also, the Tyne Cot memorial monument represents nearly 35,000 servicemen from the United Kingdom and New Zealand who died in the Ypres Salient after August 16th 1917 and whose

graves are not known. My children were overwhelmed at the immense space of rows upon rows of crosses. And how do you explain to an almost 5-year-old what “war” or “death” is, and what a “cemetery” is and why so many crosses, with so few names? Then the walls with soldiers’ names, wreaths laid, and museums dedicated to the hope that lest we never forget?

Are we any closer to never having war? Or is war different nowadays than back then? We fight wars on a different level today, using technology, or hiding behind peacekeeping strategies, or investing in countries that try to do their own fighting so we don’t have to. War, at its best, is a confusing topic, yet for children – or even us as adults – it can be so glorified in video games, TV shows and movies, but as you get older, it is only then that we realize the true damage it causes and hopefully by then we aren’t desensitized. But what does God have to say about this? Where is God?

Finding out where God is in all of this is very difficult. During the First World War, theologians on both sides wanted to claim that God had been on their side. But in 1916, in the midst of the First World War, the theologian P. T. Forsyth gave a series of lectures called *The Justification of God*. His work is a theodicy (the answer to the question of why God permits evil or “Where is God in all of this?”) Forsyth warned against any simple attempt at finding God in the events of

war. “An event like the war at least aids God’s purpose in this,” he writes, “that it shocks and rouses us into some due sense of what evil is, and what a Saviour’s task with it is.” In the war he suggested, “We are having a revelation of the awful and desperate nature of evil.”

Today, as we remember, and this week as we remember, I want to draw on some Canadian information. It is often overlooked about the role of women in their service to our country. Canadian women made important contributions on the home front, on the farm, in women’s organizations, in industry, and also on the battlefield. You may remember rationing foods during both the First and Second World Wars, making it hard to obtain sugar, butter, eggs, and other scarce food items that were needed to help feed the men fighting overseas. Women did their part by donating old cookware and other household items to recycling scrap metal drives and encouraged others to “Use it Up, Wear it Out, Make it Do, or Do Without.” Other women were faced with maintaining the family farm themselves, as well as raise children, while the husbands, sons, and hired labourers were off at war. Many men left their civilian jobs to fight for their country, and these jobs needed to be filled, so women stepped forward to meet the surging demand for workers in a greatly expanding Canadian wartime economy. During this time of women entering the industrial world, women were attaining higher levels of education. Elsie MacGill was the first woman to receive an electrical engineering

degree in Canada and the first female aircraft designer in the world. The 35-year-old aeronautical engineer supervised the production of Hawker Hurricane fighter planes at the Canadian Car and Foundry Company, which employed 200 women and produced more than 1,450 aircraft during the war. MacGill became a symbol of Canada's miraculous economic wartime transformation.

In the First World War, Canadian women contributed to the military first as nurses. Then in the Second World War, these nurses were the first in any Allied country to have officer status. Canadian women would also serve in other military roles during the war, and some 50,000 eventually enlisted in the air force, army, and navy.

Canadian women who chose to serve in the cause of peace and freedom during the war years had to endure and overcome the inequalities of the Canadian society of the day. There was still a strong belief that a woman's place was in the home. However, during the First and Second World Wars, many women felt they had a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to enlist and help their country in any way that was needed. Their changing roles during these turbulent years helped lead to great changes in the way society looked at women. Their service and their sacrifice during the First World War helped influence the decision to grant federal voting rights to many Canadian women in 1917. The efforts of the pioneering women

helped open the doors for the women who now serve in a broad array of roles in the Canadian Forces today.

So much has happened over the years. The Second World War took our nation to the very brink, to the edge of the precipice. People were all too conscious of what was at risk, and the extreme cost of overcoming that risk. We thank God that our civilization came out of it, but we must not forget the price. You can write those things in great big terms - politics, government, civil freedoms, and the like – but often they come home hardest in personal stories. What hits me of my years of ministry are the number of funerals I have taken of individuals who never got over the war – women who lost their fiancées and didn't ever marry, men whose experiences haunted them and were never able to fit back into so-called normal life. The number of times funerals were adorned with war medals and memorabilia as families remember with pride what their loved ones sacrificed. What have we done with what was saved at so great a price? Who is left behind?

In studying our passage from Haggai this week, I have also been flitting back and forth between news of the recent election results, local shootings, homelessness issues, local homocides, and global concerns as well. It strikes me that both the prophet Haggai and our communities here and around the world struggle with the rhetorical and leadership challenges in their work, despite the vast

differences in time, place, and culture. In each instance, our leaders rose to prominence on the back of a powerful critique of society and a rousing call to action, which made a deep emotional appeal to the core values of their societies. So basically, what Haggai told his people 2500 year ago, still bears repeating for us today. Who is left? Who is left to listen? To act? To carry the legacy? To bear the cross of faith and discipleship?

So we ask, “Who is left?” God. God is left. God who acts through human history and who is understood through human voices in community. The prophet Haggai is such a voice. Haggai looked around at the people rebuilding their own home and not doing anything about rebuilding the temple, and he called them on it! Haggai directs his words to the power brokers of the community as well as to the remnant of the people, and his first question to them is this: “Who is left among you?”

This question is not the end of our faith journey, nor should it provide the only energy in our reflection today, but the question of who remembers the glories of old, used evocatively, can be a rich start to our new beginnings. At our dinner table each night – after we say our grace together – we now have three questions for each person gathered: 1) how were you brave today?, 2) How were you kind today, 3) what did you fail at? These questions build on the intentional need, desire

and requirement to interact with the world. So, after you are brave, after you are kind, and after you fail, who is left?

God reminds us through Haggai of two realities that are poignant to hold onto today and this week. First, we are not in this alone. The promises of God are promises of abundance in the past, in the present and in the future. God is in the mess of our current reality – local and global, familial and communal – yearning to support us in our passion for peace and justice. Second, the move into the future is not just a repeat of the past and a faith echo of former glory. In God's future we are moving toward and cocreating a surge of wonder, grace, beauty, power and love. The Lord declares through Haggai that the something to come will be greater than the former. Isn't that something?

So many people have lost their lives in war, and so many people have been affected by war and we remember them today. If their death can awake in us an understanding of our need to break down barriers of hate and the call to all of humankind to discover in each other their common, God-given humanity, then we are remembering them as they should be remembered. And remembering what they gave for us. That we might build a better world. In the meantime, the prophet declares, we have the presence of God in our midst. And after all, it is the presence

that sustains us, which guides us and protects us. If we are to have a future, it will be because of the presence and “who is left”. Amen.