

Life, Death and ?

Pentecost 25C—November 6, 2016

[This transcript was meant for a spoken performance. It is not optimized for a reading experience.]

[Play video [“You Want It Darker”](#) by Leonard Cohen]

*If you are the dealer, I'm out of the game
If you are the healer, it means I'm broken and lame
If thine is the glory then mine must be the shame
You want it darker
We kill the flame
Magnified, sanctified, be thy holy name
Vilified, crucified, in the human frame
A million candles burning for the help that never came
You want it darker
Hineni, hineni
I'm ready, my lord
There's a lover in the story
But the story's still the same
There's a lullaby for suffering
And a paradox to blame
But it's written in the scriptures
And it's not some idle claim
You want it darker
We kill the flame*

—Leonard Cohen

You want it darker?

It was November 1, 1918, and the fighting was as fierce as ever, with Allied troops pushing the retreating German forces out of France and back towards their own border.

As the Infantry moved in to mop up resistance in a village, snipers began to pick them off, starting with the captain. Then a shell burst on the hard cobbles and soldiers were hit by debris and shrapnel.

Many could scarcely believe they were wounded. The soldiers had been dodging bullets for four years. Many began to think that they were immune. Many of those men had been with

the battalion from the beginning of the war and had the misfortune to be injured in its very last action.

—Quotes from THE DAILY MAIL¹

Word and rumours were being murmured: “the Germans were seeking peace”. Soldiers must have been thinking that someone had started a sick joke about surrender.

The German armies fought a tenacious battle. No soldier thought the war was even near being over.

The sudden rumours of an armistice made everyone nervous.

I want you to think about those soldiers fighting in World War I. You have seen many black and white pictures of the Great War.

I have sat with many soldiers from many wars. I remember one particular man who was old and approaching his death. On his wall, in the nursing home, was a photo. It was a photo taken during World War I. It was a picture of a donkey.

I asked the gentleman, “tell me about this picture”. The man began to cry. Looking up at me he said, “I am sorry for crying, I am just a silly old bugger. It was such a long time ago. When I think about that donkey, I remember it all.”

You want it darker?

The man went on to explain that the donkey had just come over a bridge. I didn’t see any bridge.

He continued. The cart was filled with munitions.

You want it darker?

I didn’t see any cart. Just a donkey and some debris behind the donkey.

“We were crossing the bridge when it happened. The bridge was blown. Everything was gone but that donkey and me. I made it—my buddies didn’t.” In tears of remembering, he said he could remember it as if it was yesterday. “I remember the mud, and the blood.”

So I want you to think about those soldiers in World War I or whichever war you choose. Think of a soldier, being a soldier. Think of the mud and blood that you have experienced.

When the murmuring of Amnesty grew louder, soldiers who had been battling in fierce fighting, boots on the ground fighting—those soldiers took little notice of the shelling that happened all around them.

You want it darker?

Brave soldiers became terrified as the talk of peace became louder. If you were a soldier back then, what might make you suddenly terrified? What would make you so scared that you and your company scurried for shelter as soon as you heard that familiar sound of battle?

¹ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1084616/A-bitter-victory-Returning-WWI-soldiers-hatred-leaders-sent-die.html#ixzz4OsVRwq9q>

As a soldier, you had witnessed so much death. You experienced as the elder described the mud and blood of war. If the end of war was near, you were taking no chances.

Rumours became a reality. The morning of November 11 was extremely cold in France. White frost covered the front. The head of the platoon of soldiers called his men together. He looked at his watch and said:

"It is 10 AM. Men, I am pleased to tell you that in one hour, the Armistice comes into force and you will all be able to return to your homes."

Think again about those soldiers; place yourself then and there. You have just heard that, in one hour, Germany will surrender. How would you respond?

One of the soldiers who was actually there said the announcement was greeted with silence. *"We did not cheer, but just stood, stunned and bewildered."*

Remember: when the men enlisted, they were assured that they would be home for Christmas. That was 1914. Three Christmases had passed and they saw no sign of going home before the next.

That same soldier remembers *"that on the stroke of 11 am, [November 11, 1918] the lieutenant raised his hand and said, 'the war was over.'"* That time, they cheered.

"The war was over, which is the great thing and a joy," a lieutenant noted. But the concept of peace was baffling after so many years of bloody conflict.

A soldier reminisced, *"To think that I shall not have to toddle among machine guns again and never hear another shell burst. It is simply unimaginable."*

Another soldier admitted that he, too, was apprehensive. *"What's to become of us?" he asked. 'We have lived this life for so long. Now we shall have to start all over again.'"*

[Play section of "[Seemed the better way](#)" by Leonard Cohen]

*Seemed the better way
When first I heard him speak
Now it's much too late
To turn the other cheek
Sounded like the truth
Seemed the better way
Sounded like the truth
But it's not the truth today
I wonder what it was
I wonder what it meant
First he touched on love
Then he touched on death
Sounded like the truth*

*Seemed the better way
Sounded like the truth
But it's not the truth today.*

As the elder veteran said, when you have lived, witnessed and experienced the mud and blood of war, the memory seems like yesterday.

Men and women went into battle. So many died. So many were mutilated. And so many asked what would become of them.

War marks the soul of everyone who is involved. It doesn't matter which side. It doesn't matter which war I am referring to. The victor and the vanquished are marked.

Mud and blood makes one rethink and reevaluate.

Soldiers joined the fight for God, King and Country.

I personally think that it was the mud and blood of war that began the reshaping of church and faith in North America and Europe.

Twenty-one years after the ending of the First World War, another great war began. You want it darker?

Five years at the end of the Second World War, another war began. You want it darker?

Three years after the Korean conflict ended, another war began. The Vietnam war started.

What had Sounded like the truth

But it's not the truth today.

When you have been marked by war, when you have been stuck in the mud and blood of war, how you talk,

what you think about Life,

what you think about death,

and what you think about God changes.

When the men and women came back from war, what had "sounded like the truth is not the truth today".

Today's gospel is a story set following the impact of war. The gospel of Luke is written in the late first century and is not from Jerusalem or even Israel. By the time this gospel is written, Jerusalem had been destroyed in war about 20 years earlier. The temple was gone. With the temple gone, the high priests had either been slaughtered or disappeared.

This is not a historical document that we are reading today. The Sadducees were the high priests. They were the power of the temple. When this story is written, the high priests do not exist. What had sounded like the truth is not the truth today.

Sit with the gospel and notice the characters: the Sadducee and Jesus. An important note is that Sadducees are not resurrectionists. The high priests of the temple did not hold that belief about life after death and, more specifically, resurrection of the body.

This is a post-war story. The high priest asks Jesus, *"Now, at the resurrection, to which of them will she be wife since she had been married to all seven?"*

This is a story of a setup. This is a story of entrapment. This is a story of aggression. The questioner had no real interest in an answer. The power wanted the threat destroyed.

This is a teaching story and maybe gives us a tiny reflection of the Lucan community from which this gospel emerges. By all accounts, they heard and many personally experienced the mud and blood of war—or at least the threat of war. Roman domination brought war up close and personal.

Jesus does not answer the question but the author does have him reply. The community of listeners had to hear and allow for an impact of the words.

Then and there, the community had to question, explore, question some more to what Jesus said by what they heard.

Here and now you and I have to question, explore, question some more what we have heard.

God is not God of the dead, but of the living to whom all are in fact alive

God is not God of the dead, but of the living.

God is not God of the dead, but of the living... But of the living to whom all are in fact alive.

The community then and there, the community here and now is called to life.

You may not realize how war has impacted your life.

Many of you know your own experience of mud and blood. You do not need to be asked, “Do you want it darker?” You know dark. You might even be able to close your eyes and whatever has marked you seems like yesterday.

You know about life. You know about death. Do you want to know about resurrection? Engage in the sacred teachings and practice of following the one called Messiah. This sacred path is about life; it is all about life in the very moment.

The warriors who survived returned home to wherever home had been. They were not the same men. They were not the same women. They had faced death. When they returned, they began again. They began a new life, a different life.

This journey—their journey, your journey and my journey—is not just about life, it is about living. To be living means that you are engaged fully in the life you are living.

Jesus did not get trapped, bogged down or stuck. To the high priest, to the past, Jesus spoke about living.

This week, take some time to pause and remember the warriors, the soldiers and our veterans. They fought for many reasons. They fought for freedom.

Out of the mud and blood of battle, life arose ... that is resurrection. When we have gone through the mud and blood, we rise up again. Remember, honour and rise up because this is good news indeed.