

Anzac Day 2021
Micah 4:1-4; Mark 13:3-8
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
Greg Bensted

Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

It's ANZAC Day today and I want to explore the theme of war through the lens of the prophet Micah and show how God works to calm our fears and give us hope.

Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. Let's pray:

At 8.00 p.m. on Sunday, October 30, 1938, Orson Welles caused a nationwide panic with his radio dramatization, *War of the Worlds*. Alarming, around one million listeners believed that a real Martian invasion was underway. Panic broke out across America. In New Jersey, terrified people jammed highways attempting to flee aliens. People begged police for gas masks and asked power companies to turn off the electricity so the Martians wouldn't see their lights. One woman ran into an Indianapolis church and yelled, "New York has been destroyed! It's the end of the world! Go home and prepare to die!"

It was 1938 and tensions were rising in Europe with the rise of Hitler. 1939 – 1945, marked six of the worst years in human history. It's in the context of looming war that the American radio listeners were affected. Fear and anxiety dominated their sensibilities.

In our OT lesson today, we meet the prophet, Micah, who'd experienced the movements of the Assyrian army under King Sennacherib against both Israel and Judah. Sennacherib annexed Jerusalem from Egyptian assistance, agricultural produce, and man power, before moving against the city itself. Micah references social abuse, desperation to survive, the terror of being under siege, the exile of the people, and the destruction of Jerusalem.

Micah experienced first-hand the terrors of war and the brutality of life under siege. To the Israelites, the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and exile from the Promised Land was tantamount to being cut-off from God, his promises and blessings. No greater horror could be imagined.

We're no different. We too are people of the covenant. We are God's children according to his new covenant in Jesus Christ. And there're times when we become cut-off from him. Wars rage, both in the world and our hearts.

On a wall at the United Nations headquarters in New York, these words are inscribed:

They shall beat their swords into plowshares.

And their spears into pruning hooks;

Nation shall not lift up sword against nation.

Neither shall they learn war any more (Isaiah 2:4; Micah 4:3).

This is an honourable goal, but if the UN takes this creed seriously, why is peace so elusive?

When threatened by war or rumours of war, people become frightened and anxious about what the future holds. They build walls and bear arms. Think of the Berlin Wall dividing East from West, Hadrian's Wall dividing Scotland from England, the Great Wall of China dividing China from Mongolia, or the West Bank barrier separating East Jerusalem from Abu Dis. To live by the sword means to put up your defences and attack anyone who threatens you. Suspicion, defensiveness, fear, and insecurity, turn to war in which hundreds of millions have already been lost in gruesome bloodshed. And for what? Does anyone really know why or how a war starts, or what is being fought for? Do we really want to live by the sword, defending our insecurities by fighting and killing others?

What about our internal struggles? Don't we build walls around ourselves to shut out others and hide our flaws? What drives parents and doctors to abort unborn children? Why do men abuse women, driving children onto our streets? How can people feel lonely in a city full of people? And who can truly fathom the violence of the Cross? Where may hope be found?

People, while there is sin in the world, there will be war, both external and internal. That's the nature of sin. It cuts us off from our Creator. It cuts us off from his blessings, his protection, and his divine love. Sin keeps us in the dark: fearful, suspicious, afraid of the unknown, ready to lash out. Sin restrains us from what is most certain in Jesus Christ. But will we live and die by the sword of our sin, or, will we beat our swords into ploughshares of peace and walk in God's ways?

Micah's wisdom is instructive. You see, Micah saw the Assyrian army as an instrument of God's judgement against the wicked kings of his day. The kings were corrupt, perverting justice for their own gains, enslaving their own people, behaving more like Pharaoh. But Micah's faith in God told him that this exile would only be temporary, and that God would once again redeem his people and bring them back under the protection of his covenant of peace.

Micah's vision springs from the yearnings of nations left broken and shattered by the stress of disastrous wars. Nations will turn to God the judge, who establishes peace solely by his justice. He will lead the world to a peaceful resolution where there will no longer be a need for swords and spears; they will be reshaped into instruments of peace, prosperity, blessing, and sharing. Guided by God's word, nations will renounce war and seek peace. In the absence of war, people will trust in a future where they'll live peacefully in their own land and will be afraid no more. Such was Micah's faith and hope.

We too share this faith and hope and we have living examples in our own day:

In the 1980s, East Germans began to hold protests against the DDR regime. People were fed up with insecurity, suspicion, fear, and distrust. The military would swoop and crush all opposition. In the yard of Luther's house in Wittenberg, there was a rally where speakers called for freedom and peace. A powerful prophetic action was staged by the Wittenberg city congregation (the same congregation where Luther preached centuries before): a blacksmith came and set up his equipment and literally beat swords into ploughshares on an anvil. Right before their eyes, weapons of bloodshed were transformed into an implement that could till the soil.

The Berlin Wall no longer exists. It was knocked down in 1989, reuniting East and West Germans after 28 years of separation. Hadrian's Wall is just a crumbling epithet of a sad history and the Great Wall of China is now a major tourist attraction.

Most importantly, through Christ and his gift of the church, we too can learn to walk in God's way. When we learn to live as though our lives are eternal, we understand more deeply God's call to be in unity with Christ. We learn to serve each other as long-lost brothers and sisters with grace and humility. Rather than noticing differences, we look for similarities. We're all someone's neighbour to love and be loved. And when we invest in pleases, thank-yous, and smiles, we reap an abundance of peace and goodwill.

But God digs even deeper into our lives. Long before we can think of God and love him, he has already thought of us. Even though our sin has fractured the paradise of creation and made it a theatre of war, the same hands that were at work in the first hour of the world, are still at work blessing and guiding us with wise and loving counsel. Our lives are moulded by the same hands that beckoned the stars and the flowers at the world's dawning and made the day and the night. And whether you're a child, of great age, or anywhere in between, God considers the small steps of your daily journey to be greater than the light years that measure the far reaches of the universe.

And whenever I think of the Anzacs, I'm reminded of the depth of God's love for us and the sacrifice that he made to draw us near. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."* Anzacs, Diggers, and our current serving men and women, must be commended for their bravery and take pride in their calling, as contemporary examples of what Christ had the courage to do for us all. Only Christ can take up those lives again and Jesus will certainly take us up on the Last Day as sure as the setting of the sun.

Beloved, Christians can be confident and look forward to eternal peace. Don't let anyone ever take away from you the belief that God has prepared for and brought to you in Christ, the Promised Land, in which justice and peace and love rule, because Christ rules for eternity. Why should we be afraid? God wants to bless us and will never leave us alone. God's promise is his love and mercy, as we see them in Christ on the cross and in his resurrection. In the Christian church-community, you will find God, your brother and sister, your home, and the Promised Land. Here, each is a little Christ for the other. The church is our peace-filled heaven on earth where we meet Christ face-to-face in Word and Sacrament. Christ is our Lord, the church-community is our home, and peace is our creed.

You are blessed if you trust that God's eternal peace awaits you. You are blessed if you believe that God dwells among you and you are his people. You are blessed if you have faith that he will wipe away every tear, and death will be no more. Mourning, crying, and pain will cease and God will make all things new. For now, let us wait with Micah in hope. Lest we forget. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

*John 15:13.