

Sermon: How To Pray About Iraq
Amos 9: 5-7; Acts 10: 34-43
Rev. Dean Snyder
June 6, 2004

Since the war began in Iraq, there have been 935 US coalition soldier deaths, another 4,882 wounded (as of June 4, 2004).

CNN has a website [<http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2003/iraq/forces/casualties/index.html>] where you can see a photo and learn the names of the names of each soldier who has died in the war in Iraq. Here are just a few:



Pfc. Wilfred D. Bellard, 20, from Lake Charles, Louisiana, Killed when his vehicle fell into a ravine in Iraq on April 4, 2003



Spc. Robert T. Benson, 20, from Spokane, Washington, Died from a non-hostile gunshot wound. (He looks so like one of the youth in my last church, I panicked when I saw his photo.)



Gunnery Sgt. Jeffrey E. Bohr Jr., 39, from Ossian, Iowa, Killed in northern Baghdad while engaging Iraqi forces



Pfc. Rachel K. Bosveld, 19, from Waupun, Wisconsin, Killed during a mortar attack on the Abu Ghraib Police Station in Baghdad, Iraq



 Sgt. Dimiter Dimitrov, 25, from Polski Trambesh, Bulgaria, Killed in an ambush of a convoy in Karbala, Iraq,

You can look at their photos on the CNN Website. So many of them look so young, 18, 19, 20, 21. So many are smiling broadly for the camera, proud and happy. There were 935 as of Friday. A few more this weekend. A few more every day, it seems.

There is another Website – www.iraqbodycount.net. I've had several conversations with the folk who run this site over the past year when I have wanted to quote their reports in articles I've written and I've wanted to make sure their work was reputable. It is. Iraqbodycount.net reports civilian death in the Iraq war based on deaths reported by at least two dependable newsgathering services. They report between 9,000 and 11,000 known civilian deaths.

You can go their Iraqbodycount.net's data base and read about each incident:

15 Apr 2004	5:00 AM	Baquba	house hit, woman and teenage sons killed	rockets	deaths: 3
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16 Apr 2004	-	Kufa	civilians caught in crossfire	gunfire	deaths: 5
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23 Mar 2004 - 24 Mar 2004	-	Fallujah area	members of Iraqi Facilities Protection Service, child killed	gunfire	deaths: 1
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20 Apr 2004	-	Baghdad	Abu Ghraib prison, Baghdad (Baghdad Correction Facility)	mortars	deaths: 22
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The list goes on and on and on.

I guess as far as wars go, the Iraq war is, so far, a small war. 400,000 American soldiers died in World War II. 10,000 Allied soldiers died on D-Day alone, 60 years ago today. 58,000 American soldiers died in Viet

Nam.

The Encyclopedia *Britannica* estimates that 13 million civilians died in World War I

World War II deaths are estimated at 50 million, with the largest loss of life in the former USSR where 20 million people died. Think of the accumulated pain! In comparison Iraq is a small war.

And Iraq is not the only active war happening in our world today. I am, as Jane says, for obvious reasons, a fan of Books for Dummies and Idiot's Guides. The Idiot's Guide people have put out a book about war. *The Complete Idiot's Guide to World Conflicts* includes more than 50 active wars in the world as of 2002. We live in violent times.

Yet, Iraq weighs heavy upon our hearts because it is uniquely our war. And it is not a small war to the families of the young people on the CNN Website who died there. Or to the 138,000 US soldiers in Iraq and their families. Or to the loved ones of 11,000 civilians who have died in Iraq, or to the loved ones of the thousands who died at the hands of Saddam Hussein's police before 2003.

I am also concerned because, it seems, that as the months go by, I read the newspaper every morning with less and less sensitivity to the human pain of war. "Five casualties this morning," I find myself saying to myself, "About par, I guess." War has the capacity to be spiritually numbing. We stop feeling. Human pain becomes merely the strategy of war. Death becomes a sign of the victory.

I am old enough so that I grew up in a time where you could walk through major cities and not see people living on the street. I am amazed at how insensitive my soul has become when I walk home from this church to Capitol Hill in the late evenings and pass 20 or 30 people living on the streets of Washington, DC and I've come to consider that somewhat normal. I am concerned that my heart has become callused enough that I can read about death in the morning newspaper and say to myself, "That's about average."

So I want to suggest this morning – Peace with Justice Sunday – that it is important to our own spiritual health that we make it a spiritual discipline to pray about Iraq in such a way that we do not diminish in our own souls the pain of this war.

It is important to pray about Iraq because prayer makes a difference in the world. Prayer, I believe, enhances the realm of shalom, the kingdom of God, the eschatological peaceable kingdom that is seeking to draw us and our world toward itself. The God of peace, justice, inclusion and affirmation is ahead of us seeking to draw us as a magnet draws metal filings toward itself. And I believe that when we take time to open our hearts and our minds and our spirit to this force of God's shalom it helps us move toward where God would have us to go and toward what God would have us become a peaceable, beloved community, a global

community. Pausing in our busy days -- stopping to think and feel and to share and receive, to talk and listen – to connect with the divine presence opens a door for the Spirit of God into our lives and our world. I can't explain it, but I am confident prayer makes a difference in human relationships.

But it is also important to pray about Iraq because it helps keep our hearts from becoming callused and hardened by the violence of war. Violence should never become commonplace and ordinary.

Our staff spent some time Friday with our District Superintendent David Argo. David was head of our conference's delegation to General Conference. David told us that General Conference has accepted the former EUB Church's Articles of Religion as part of the authoritative theological documents of our church, and he told us that the EUB articles include the statement that "war is incompatible with Christian teaching." Finally, something in our *Book of Discipline* that really may be incompatible with Christian teaching.

It is a great danger is that our souls will become used to war and violence as ordinary.

I want to suggest that we make it a daily practice to pause to pray about Iraq, individually or as households or as co-workers or as church groups or at happy hour at JRs. As a pastor I have resolved that every time I am called on to pray anywhere I am going to pray for an end to violence death in Iraq and to pray for peace.

And here is what I would suggest, when we pray, that we include in our prayers:

1. Praise for God, who can beat swords into plough shears, and who works in all situations to bring healing out of disease, harmony out of violence and life out of death. I believe in encouraging God, cheering God on. God does great things. God is worthy to be praised. God makes a way out of no way. God is always on the side of peace and justice and inclusion and equality and healing and beauty. So our prayers about Iraq ought to recognize that God can do something positive out of this thing that feels so negative to us, and we ought to cheer God on and encourage God.
2. Confession. All war is the consequence of the sin and failure of God's people. The war with Iraq began a long time ago when the Christian Church, for the most part, turned its back on our Moslem brothers and sisters. The war with Iraq began when United Methodists began giving less and less to global mission and spending more and more on ourselves at the local church level. It began when we cutback on building schools and clinics and hospitals around the world and sending out Americans to be teachers and nurses and doctors there.

3. Let me tell you again the story of Nelson Mandela. When black Africans took over the government of South Africa, a lot of people expected there to be a bloodbath in response to the years of harsh oppression. A reporter asked Nelson Mandella why there was no violent retaliation. His answer was: “That’s just not the way I was raised.” Nelson Mandela was raised in a Methodist mission school, built by Methodist apportionments and second mile mission offerings, and taught by teachers whose salaries were paid by Methodist apportionments and mission giving. When I started as a minister in the United Methodist church about seven cents out of every dollar we put in the offering plate went to support global mission. Now it is down to about three cents. One of our members who is now in Nicaragua, applied to be a United Methodist mission worker there, but because United Methodists have cut back on our support of global mission. Our prayers need to include confession.

4. Intercession. Visit the CNN site where you can see the names and faces of the young soldiers who have died in Iraq. Visit iraqbodycount.net and see the circumstances of the Iraq people who have died. Grieve with these families. Pray for them. Pray for those still in harms way. Let no one ever become a statistic in our hearts, or a strategy in the game of war, or a victory. Pray for our president and his cabinet. Pray for the leaders of Iraq. Pray for the United Nations.

5. Petition. We need to pray for ourselves, that we as citizens of a democratic government and taxpayers may do what is right and moral and good and pleasing in the sight of the God of Shalom.

Last weekend was annual conference, the last annual conference that Bishop Edwin Felton May would preside at. It was also, of course, Memorial Day weekend and the dedication of the World War II Memorial on the Mall. Bishop May preached his last sermon to annual conference as our bishop. It was a long sermon. When he stepped away from the pulpit and I thought he had finished, he started up again. He preached about war.

World War I, he said, was supposed to be the war to end all war. Then he said we fought World War II. And World War II was even more deadly than the War that they told us would end all war. And he went on to talk about the Korean War and Viet Nam and the Persian Gulf.

A pastor friend pulled me aside while the bishop was going on about fighting World War II when World War I was supposed to be the war to end all war. My friend, obviously agitated, asked me, “Is he saying we shouldn’t have fought World War II, because if he is he is going to make a lot of people in my church awfully mad.”

I thought for a few seconds, and said to my friend: “I think what I hear the bishop saying is that war doesn’t end war.”

War doesn't end war. Global understanding ends war. Justice and equality ends war. Foreign service ends war. Working to end world hunger ends war. The peace corps ends war. United Methodist mission ends war. Volunteers in Mission end war. United Methodist Women mission school ends war. Africa University ends war. Prayer ends war. God ends war.

Every day let us pray for peace in Iraq.