



## PEACE, PEACE, WHEN THERE IS NO PEACE

*Sarah Hinlicky Wilson*

I've been noticing lately how all around us in the mainline churches military imagery is being carefully and quietly plucked out of our worship language. Partly it is (cowardly) discomfort with the violence and apocalypticism of the Scriptures. Partly it is (sensible) worry that the imagery will be co-opted to support a vicious political ideology.

Curious as to its treatment in the ELCA, I took a look at the new and much-disputed *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. I had three hymns in mind as test cases for the imagery of war.

"The Battle Hymn of the Republic" remains in its unaltered entirety in ELW but is now found under the classification of "National Songs"—in the LBW it was labeled "Christian Hope." A sensible transposition, given that Julia Ward Howe wrote the song in response to the striking sight of Union soldiers on review in 1861, but also a move guaranteed to make Lutheran pastors think twice before selecting it for worship, given our instinctive distrust of civil religion.

However, "Lift High the Cross," that smash-hit of 1980s hymnody (following its appearance in the LBW and LW, the first American Lutheran hymnals to include it despite its early twentieth-century origins), has undergone major surgery. Where once we sang of "all newborn soldiers of the Crucified," we now identify these same newborns as "servants."

More critically, an entire verse has dropped out: "Led on their way by this triumphant sign / The hosts of God in conqu'ring ranks combine." Although this reference to the hosts conquering and thus triumphing is deleted, the hymn still somehow manages to conclude, "So shall our song of triumph ever be / Praise to the Crucified for victory!" (In all fairness, surgery is a familiar fate for this hymn. It started

off with eleven stanzas in addition to the refrain, so the LBW had already whittled it down to five in 1978.)

The operation on "Lift High the Cross" naturally made me wonder how the infamous "Onward, Christian Soldiers" possibly could be edited into redemption. It couldn't. This hymn has been neither relocated nor edited: it is simply omitted from the new hymnal altogether.

Now I am all for excising civil religion, keeping the two kingdoms distinct, and deflating the American ego balloon about our noblesse oblige on the world stage. But it is precisely in service of those goals (and a few others) that I would argue *against* the removal of all military imagery from our collective Christian speech. Abandon the language and we abandon the very weapons we need to fight the militaristic impulse itself. For the church is the one place where these powerful images, and the dangerous energy that accompanies them, are transformed.

The three aforementioned hymns of battle are good examples of this point. "The Battle Hymn," for instance, assumes that it is Christ, not simply the army of the North, that is marching on with his banner of truth. *His* is the

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terrible swift sword of judgment; *he* is the one to sift out hearts; and he will do so because of the maltreatment of the slaves. Julia Ward Howe testifies in her words that Christ is present and involved in human affairs; a wake-up call

to all those who cheerfully assert Christ's presence without considering the implications. (How often we bleat the question, "What is God doing in this place?" without considering that the answer might be: loosing the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword.) The consequent call to action in the last verse of the hymn is carefully worded: "As he died to make men holy, let us live to make men free." The call

is not to slaughter, dominate, or institute Reconstruction, but to *live*, as holy people obliged to procure freedom for those who have wrongfully been denied it. This is hardly a hymn that glories in bloodshed and battle. In fact, even the choice of tune constitutes a transformation of misguided loyalties: earlier in the Civil War the opening line of a popular song to this tune was, “We will hang Jeff Davis on a sour apple tree.” Howe’s conviction that the war had to be fought was accompanied by the conviction that the reason for doing so had to be pure.<sup>1</sup>

“Lift High the Cross,” for its part, plays off Constantine’s vision of the cross alongside the words *in hoc signo vinces*. But the hymn’s invitation is not to fight against the rebels and rivals with the emperor but to be drawn toward the cross on which Christ was lifted up (John 12:32), in order to go forth and baptize all nations. The hymn was written in 1887 for a festival service of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, not for wartime at all.

And “Onward, Christian Soldiers,” perhaps the most popularly despised hymn among the pacifistically inclined, was originally written for children! Sabine Baring-Gould intended it as a “Hymn for Procession with Cross and Banners” on Whit Monday (the day after Pentecost). Note the critical simile of the first line: “Onward, Christian soldiers, marching *as* to war.” We are not *actually* marching to war. Our army is the church, which is united in “hope, doctrine, and charity”—charity, not total destruction. In the third verse (in the LBW—like the previous two hymns, our version is chopped down from its original length), all the nations of the world are put in their cosmically relative context: “Crowns and thrones may perish, Kingdoms rise and wane / But the Church of Jesus constant will remain”—and again, not by military strategy but by Christ’s own promise, which “cannot fail.” In the end Christ is the king, whom the whole army of God confesses, and he clearly does not

triumph through trenches and bombs but through the cross.

It is precisely this relativizing of the military language that makes hymns like these so effective and indeed so necessary. It is very much the same reason why we must continue to call Christ the king (to say nothing of the fact that the Messiah must be king to qualify as Messiah at all): because his kingship dethrones all the other would-be kings of this world. Promoting a democratic Christ, a solely meek and lowly servant Christ, amounts to

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crowning the powers and principalities in his place.

However, far be it from me to impose musical artifacts of Christian piety on anybody. The church will continue to march in the light of God whether or not it sings “Onward, Christian Soldiers.” And often enough such songs, however theologically precise, accrue a cultural significance that obscures their original intentions. As I recall from my college days in the South, “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” is not exactly a popular favorite there.

What cannot be discarded, however, is the witness of Scripture, and the fact remains that a universal rejection of military imagery amounts to a universal rejection of the Old Testament. To deplore every kind of battle is to be a Marcionite, equating the Lord of Hosts with a gnostic god of darkness.

Consider the canonical book of Joshua. Its best-known story is the fall of the walls of Jericho because of the application of the herem, devotion to destruction. Joshua and his invaders succeed insofar as they wipe out the Canaanites at God’s command, thereby eliminating the temptations to idolatry as well as fulfilling God’s long-standing promise to Abraham. Invasion and conquest are part and

parcel of the election of Israel. War and bloodshed are necessary to the promise. Talk about the scandal of particularity!

At the same time, throughout Joshua and other scriptural tales of war, behind and within what is legitimately labeled (and criticized) as Israel’s ideology of military expansion, there is a challenge to and transformation of the warrior ideals at work. Israel is not encouraged to cultivate a vast standing army—there will be no policy of deterrence for them. David gets in big trouble for taking a census, the chief reason for which is his faith in numbers instead of in God (II Samuel 24, I Chronicles 21). When the Israelites fight, they have to do it God’s way. God selects not hulking heavyweights swinging swords but underage shepherds swinging slingshots. God selects not trained and wary assassins but quirky goofballs who lap water up like dogs instead of cupping it in their hands like normal people do (Judges 7). It is the steadfastness of the prophet and the helpers holding up his hands that determines the victory, not the courage of the fighters (Exodus 17). From Samuel to the Psalms to Isaiah and the rest of the prophets, there is no confessing Yahweh without confessing that He is the Lord of Hosts.

Nothing in these reports of Israelite military victory can possibly commend the war policy of the nations today. Israel just barely had the faith necessary to trust the Lord God Sabaoth; the powers that be in our era certainly will not manage even that much. Any word invoking God’s support for military endeavors today is blatant idolatry—the one thing God dislikes even more than violence.

Jesus continues the challenge to and transformation of military imagery. In his own person a great battle will be fought, and the result will not be instantaneous peace for all: he has not come to bring peace, but a sword (Matthew 10) and division (Luke 12). For the gospel is not actually good news to everyone. To some it’s a catastrophe that prompts a violent response.

Jesus permits the idolatry, ignorance, malice, and violence of the world to be visited upon his body. But he is not passive and does not cease to fight. Rather, the lion of Judah turns on the true enemy, the devil, and routs hell.

The apostolic ministry will follow in this same pattern. According to Luke, during the final conversation with his disciples after the passover meal, Jesus said to them:

“When I sent you out with no moneybag or knapsack or sandals, did you lack anything?” They said, “Nothing.” He said to them, “But now let the one who has a moneybag take it, and likewise a knapsack. And let the one who has no sword sell his cloak and buy one. For I tell you that this Scripture must be fulfilled in me: ‘And he was numbered with the transgressors.’ For what is written about me has its fulfillment.” And they said, “Look, Lord, here are two swords.” And he said to them, “Enough of that!” —Luke 22:35–38

As usual, the disciples miss the point, assuming that the sword they will need is a literal rather than metaphorical one—a misunderstanding demonstrated all too vividly when Peter slices off Malchus’s ear. But Jesus does prepare them for the battle ahead, for the same kind of rejection that he himself is about to undergo on the cross. In the apostolic ministry of the twelve and their own followers, there will be battle every bit as much as there was for Joshua and the twelve tribes of Israel. It is a crucial difference that this battle no longer will require God’s army to bear arms. But there certainly still will be bloodshed and death—for the martyrs—because there certainly still will be enemies: the devil, the emperor, furious unbelievers, false teachers. Battle will be spiritual for the Christians, though still physical for their persecutors.

The theme of battle surfaces again and again in the rest of the New Testament. There is the extended metaphor

of the whole armor of God in Ephesians 6—the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of the readiness given by the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit—the point of which is that we are indeed engaged in a battle, not against flesh and blood but rather “against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” Likewise in II Corinthians 10, Paul writes: “For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds.” Timothy is commended to “fight the good fight of faith.” And where spiritual battle is concerned, even Paul and James can agree. Romans 7, that wellspring of Lutheran piety, outlines the internal battle fought by the baptized against their own flesh and inclinations; James writes: “What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?” (4:1).

Faith means war—not against the frail bodies of our brothers and sisters made in the image of God but against the sin within and the powers without. The promise of the Revelation given to John is that all kinds of war will finally cease, not on this earth or in this time but at the end, when the Lamb of God himself will come as the warrior of righteousness and seal the serpent in the abyss forever.

What emerges from the Scriptures, then, is that fighting is not the problem. War and struggle are not the problem. The problem is in identifying the true enemy and attacking that enemy only as God prescribes. But that language of warfare itself is not thereby eliminated. It remains essential. Salvation is certainly *for* something (as we are fond of saying nowadays) but it is still also *from* something—we are saved from an enemy that would destroy us.

We human beings are warriors. We fight; we love it. War infects and

inflates us. It creates loyalties and loves without rival. Whether we were created this way or evolved this way, whether we divert the channels of our aggression into sports or the stock market or politics, we thrive on battle. Given what we are, it is no surprise we are called to do battle with weapons of the Spirit. And given what we are, it is positively dangerous to relinquish our claim as the church on the imagery of war. It will not go away simply because we declare it too dirty to sully our hands with. Its powers and passions will simply fall into other hands. It will not be challenged and transformed, then, but manipulated and misdirected. If we are to end war, we must claim war, and we must proclaim *our* war as the *true* war, the war of greatest drama and highest stakes, because we do not fight against flesh and blood (anybody with a fist can do that) but against the cosmic powers over this present darkness. As long as there are enemies of truth and joy, we must fight back.

Why is this so hard to accept anymore? I have already suggested it has something to do with discomfort at the Scriptures’ violence and apocalypticism, and something to do with fear at the imagery’s misuse.

It is also a theological problem: an inability to reconcile power and good-

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ness. Because of the this-worldly abuse of power and an obsession with theodicy as the lynchpin of all theological systems, the tendency is to discard omnipotence as a necessary attribute of God. It seems wiser to emphasize God’s goodness—for who would or could forsake that aspect of God?—but leave His almightiness off to one side.

Augustine dealt with this tendency: it is the Manichean error par excellence. A God simultaneously all-good

and all-powerful is inconceivable, so the Manichees divorced the attributes and proposed two gods, one of evil and darkness, the other of goodness and light. But as is so often the case, divorce didn't solve the problem. Manichean cosmology imagined the kingdom of darkness, restless and active, launching an attack on the kingdom of light, which was perfectly good, perfectly passive, and perfectly incapable of repelling the attack. The result was a whole universe infected with unassailable evil. It turns out that powerless good is not recognizable as good at all. For good to be good it must also be stronger than evil, and fight it, and defeat it, once and for all.

But I suspect more than anything, even more than the theological problem, the elimination of the language of battle is actually a manifestation of a battle that we Americans like to pretend is not happening in our country—the class struggle. Suppression of war imagery comes from the upper and upper-middle classes, which (conveniently enough) are also the classes furthest removed from the experience of struggle in daily life. Suppression of war imagery comes from people who do not need to fight; who are secure, comfortable, and well-fed; who have the luxury of thinking about war abstractly and recoiling from it. Wealthy Americans can afford to subcontract their struggles out and make them *other*. This is most evidently the case in our own military, which is largely populated by people from lower socioeconomic brackets. But it is a pious lie to suppose that we are not as guilty of war crimes as

the army itself as long as we continue to pay our taxes, drive on the roads, and exercise our free speech. Disdain for the military and imagery deriving

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from it is class snobbery—and willful ignorance to boot.

The practical and pastoral implications of this are clear. If all forms of war, including the very existence of armed forces, are inherently evil, such that even the words alluding to them are to be eliminated from the church, then it is impossible for us to minister to members of the armed forces. We will have to answer a resounding “no!” to the rhetorical title of Luther’s treatise *Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved*. I cannot imagine that anyone in the ELCA would actually defend this point, but the deletion of the language suggests it. By contrast, the maintenance of this imagery and simultaneous transformation of it proves that soldiers are not beneath our collective Christian contempt but that they can exercise their vocations in a holy manner and engage in spiritual battle against the many temptations to wrongdoing in their particular walk of life.

The pastoral implications of war imagery go beyond ministry to military personnel. Think of young women in our culture, across all class strata. They are besieged by a host of

lies to forsake their intelligence, wits, and humor to become nothing more than bodies available to the highest bidder. They are virtual prisoners of war. Such assaults cannot be resisted with bland charges not to give in to peer pressure. Our young women are inadvertant soldiers, and they must be equipped to fight back.

Further examples abound. Children have to learn from a very young age how to fend off not only playground bullies but cruel adults as well. Workers have to resist the abuses of management. Minorities have to assert themselves in a culture that has no idea how racist it is. The only people who don't have to fight are the ones who are sitting comfortably on the backs of everyone else—though they will learn to fight fast enough when their position is threatened.

In the end, the erasure of all war imagery within the church suggests peace when there is no peace, a lie denounced by the prophets (Jeremiah 6:14 and 8:11). Jesus’ peace cannot be taken from us, it is true, but until the kingdom comes our lot is tribulation. The ministry of the gospel is a battle within a world whose peace is only strategic withdrawal from open armed conflict; whose peace may be every bit as deadly to souls as its wars. Against *this* peace we must take up the sword of the Spirit and fight as if our lives depended on it. LF

*Note*

1. The historical details on this and the other hymns have been drawn from *An Annotated Anthology of Hymns*, ed. J. R. Watson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

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