

# THE THIRD WAR

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS ON THE OCCASION OF THE THIRD ANNUAL COMMUNITY VIGIL FOR PEACE

MARCH 18, 2006

Tonight we gather on the third anniversary of our nation's commencement of hostilities upon the nation of Iraq. We welcome members of the larger community to this hour when, together, we will once again pray for peace.

For many of us, this is the third time we have done so in as many years. Tomorrow, what has been a three-year battle rolls into a fourth year. So tonight, we gather to pray for peace.

Our own number of military dead is now approaching that of civilians who lost their lives in the 9/11 attacks on our nation. That is not to mention the thousands of others who have suffered grief and injury as a result of those barbarous acts, as well as the ensuing acts of human violence by all sides.

Some would say two wars began that day. One was a war of retaliation and pre-emption against certain identifiable enemies, either real and suspected, with names like Osama and Saddam.

The other was, and remains, a global war that has no definable end in sight; against an elusive enemy that has the capacity to spawn an endless stream of fresh recruits. Despite the guise of religious extremism, one could say it is a third-world war against those of inordinate privilege and power in the first world. You might call it World War III.

But another, third war that began that day – and continues to this -- is a war on peace; that is, the very notion of a true reconciliatory relationship between nations and peoples. At the risk of stating the obvious, the first casualty of war is always peace.

---

***But another, third war that began that day – and continues to this -- is a war on peace; that is, the very notion of a true reconciliatory relationship between nations and peoples. At the risk of stating the obvious, the first casualty of war is always peace.***

Yet it is a peace that is truly possible only when we find peace in our own lives, as well. As spiritual writer, Henri Nouwen once said, "Peace in the world cannot be made without peace in the heart." So tonight, we gather to pray for peace. Peace in our world. And, peace in our lives.

Tonight we also gather as people of goodwill, with respect for each other and our differences of opinion, understanding and experience. This hour together is not a protest rally against any one or any thing, as much as it is a vigil to pray for peace.

---

***This hour together is not a protest rally against any one or any thing, as much as it is a vigil to pray for peace.***

Amongst us tonight, there are those of us who once believed – and some still sincerely believe -- our nations' actions in Iraq have been necessary and prudent; that our intentions to promote democracy and freedom are honorable goals that are still possible to achieve; that our own costly sacrifices -- which pale in comparison to the numbers of others who have borne by far the larger portion as a result of our endeavor -- have nonetheless been worth the price we have collectively paid; and still hold out hope for some semblance of success and stability in a tumultuous part of our small and inter-connected world.

Others of us sincerely believe our nation's actions for the last three years have been more than ill-conceived, with flawed intelligence and shifting rationale propelling a downward spiral of death, destruction, chaos and sectarian strife which gets as close as one might conceive to any reasonable definition of outright civil war. Some of us believe our choice to wage war on Iraq has been an act of misguided futility, incompetence and arrogance, at best; that it has enflamed passions, hardened hearts, and sown the seeds for a harvest of retaliatory violence yet to come. Some of us believe our worst fears and dire predictions have indeed come to pass, in a real live drama that is nothing short of utter, tragic folly.

Yet, we are all people of goodwill, with something more than simply respect, tolerance and forbearance for one another, and our differing views. Whether conceived in religious terms or strictly pragmatic realities, the fact is, we are inextricably bound to one another as members of the same human family; struggling sorrowfully now with the question of how we shall either best try to live with each other, or continue to try to eradicate each other.

So tonight, given these hard choices, we gather for an hour to pray for peace.

*Out there*, opinion polls have shifted dramatically in recent months, with increasing priority given to finding any viable exit strategy; leaving Iraqis to fight amongst themselves if they so choose.

Meanwhile, *out there*, political debate & spin continue; while international diplomacy, tinged with bellicose rhetoric on different sides, intensifies over the potential future-threat of Iraq's nuclear neighbor, Iran.

*Out there*, it all sounds hauntingly familiar. But tonight, we gather to pray for peace.

Two weeks ago on his trip to India, President Bush stopped by the memorial in New Delhi that commemorates the life of Mohandas K. Ghandi, the great advocate, prophet and martyr of non-violent resistance. In a customary, traditional gesture, the President and First Lady first removed their shoes before they paid their brief respects to the one who once said he believed it was, "Non-violence that was the law of the human race, being infinitely greater than, and superior to, brute force."

After the President put on his shoes again and left, it was reported Hindu priests washed down the sacred site with

holy water from the Ganges river, because they believed the place had been defiled; defiled not by our war-time president, but by the bomb-sniffing dogs that had first secured the perimeter, as a precautionary measure to guard against a possible act of violence by still others.

The dilemma one might ask is, how does the commander-in-chief of the most powerful conventional army the world has ever seen wear anything but combat boots ever again? And all the while, with all our amassed firepower, why is it we find ourselves increasingly unable to defeat those we secretly fear we'll never truly vanquish; or ever achieve any truly decisive victory?

More so, the deeper questions with which all people of goodwill are confronted is how do we respond to those who commit evil acts of violence, without ourselves becoming the evil we deplore? How does one still believe peace is possible? And, even if one does in fact come to the point of doubting it is possible, how does one still continue to believe in peace nonetheless?

Personally, I'm what you might call a *pessimist for peace*, choosing to stake my bets on the possible futility of peace as preferable to the utter futility of a cycle of violence that all but pre-empts the possibility of anything else.

---

***Personally, I'm what you might call a "pessimist for peace," choosing to stake my bets on the possible futility of peace as being preferable to the utter futility of a cycle of violence that all but pre-empts the possibility of anything else.***

*Out there*, religious fanaticism and sectarian extremism abounds. Yet every faith tradition has at its most authentic roots the respect for every other human being, and the twin virtues of justice and peace.

So it is that the unwelcome reality is we are at war with ourselves, as much as we are at war with our objectified and often demonized enemies *out there*. In the end, the fundamental question of this war that we have still chosen to wage tomorrow is not really a political issue, or one of diplomacy, or use of military force. It is ultimately a spiritual question for every living soul.

So it is that we gather for an hour in a house of prayer tonight, to pray for peace. *jb+*