

**War! What is It Good For?**  
**Revelation 19:9-21**  
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**Northminster Presbyterian Church**

On a sultry May morning, Rev. John Tucker rises in the pulpit of his Presbyterian church for the sermon. He, like many of us, looks around at a world torn by conflict, but on this day...he turns to consider a war that some of the children of his own congregation have become a part of....

And he begins to preach... "be firm, be courageous, be brave;" he says to his people...and then he continues, "be faithful to your God, your country and yourselves, and you shall be invincible....You are fighting for everything that is near and dear, and sacred to you as men, as Christians and as patriots; for country, for home, for property, for the honor of mothers, daughters, wives, sisters, and loved ones."

"Your cause is the cause of God, of Christ, of humanity." He continues, "It is a conflict of truth with error—of the Bible with...infidelity—of a pure Christianity with...fanaticism—of liberty with despotism—of right with might....In such a cause victory is not with the greatest number, nor the heaviest artillery, but with the good, the pure, the true, the noble, the brave. We are proud of you, and grateful to you for the victories of the past. We look to your valor and prowess, under the blessing of God, for the triumphs of the future."

Rev. Tucker is not the first pastor to invoke the blessing of God on soldiers...he is not the first to claim that our side, as he views it, anyway, is God's side of a conflict.

But John Tucker rises to say those words at the First Presbyterian Church of Fayetteville, North Carolina in May of 1862....the cause he invokes God's blessing upon and for which he firmly claim's God's side of the argument....is the Southern Cause....slavery and state's rights...

And he wasn't alone.

One Congregationalist pastor from Massachusetts

<https://www.christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/preaching-the-holy-war/>), is reported to have preached in support of the abolitionist cause “If the crusaders, seized by a common enthusiasm, exclaimed, It is the will of God! It is the will of God!—much more may we make this our rallying cry and inscribe it on our banners.” And the abolitionist poet Julia Ward Howe went even further, making a direct link between the northern cause and the text we read today...you’ve sung it hundreds of times, I’ll bet....”Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored. He hath loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword...” It’s all right here...

Tucker and Howe and countless others of the civil war were not the last to assert not simply God’s favor, but that “our side” is actually fighting God’s battles for God...

One famous pastor of the last half-century wrote of how we are called to war to defend God-given freedoms and to fail to protect them is to fail to take the gift of them seriously. It’s a view held by many, if not most...and the fact that the late Jerry Falwell was the one to say it, doesn’t change the fact that it’s almost a universal belief in our nation.

And perhaps they are right...perhaps self-defense, or the defense of others is a possible justification for war...it’s the only justification permitted in the Just War Doctrine, a religious doctrine that is more than 1700 years old that the US formally abandoned for the first time in the invasion of Iraq in 2003...though was imperfect in its application many times before that...

As historian Karen Armstrong has noted (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/dec/29/religion.uk>), both the Bible and the Koran were written by minority peoples who often had to fight against larger forces just to survive...and though both the Bible and the Koran ultimately speak of the quest for peace, they both contain enough war language to have justified 2000 years of holy wars that continue to this day.

Today’s passage is one that is frequently cited...It is the victory of the army of heaven over the armies of the earth...in the final conflict of Jesus vs. Rome....God’s loving power vs. earthly death-dealing power...

But did you notice? There is no battle. Hear again about the defeat of the powers of earth: “And the rest were killed by the sword of the rider on the horse, the sword that came from his mouth.”

The sword that came from his mouth? Did you notice that...  
In the battle scene that is the ultimate battle...there is no battle...There is only THE WORD on a white horse with the armies of heaven on white horses behind him....and  
THE WORD... has a sword coming out of his mouth....

and that sword and only that sword...leaves earthly power as carrion for the birds...  
It's a visceral image...

But of what? What is a sword coming out of the mouth? It's right there in the text: the sword is the testimony of Jesus...

And that makes sense doesn't it? What else can defeat the lie that earthly power...money/political power/military might/global dominance will ultimately win...

The very life, witness and resurrection of Christ reveal it all to be a lie...

What ultimately defeats the powers of evil? Truth, Gospel, Grace...

And no physical war....no collection of bombs....no masterfully managed drone campaign is ever going to proclaim that.

What ultimately leads to the defeat of powers of the earth? Truth, Gospel...

Yes, John uses the imagery of war, just as he has throughout the book...but Jesus doesn't need his army....he doesn't need us to fight a violent war for his way to come about...

Only the power of the one who is Faithful and True can ultimately usurp worldly death-dealing power...and while he has a legion behind him...he does it alone...

What, then, are we to say about God and war?

Today, according to a number of sources, wars of one kind or another are being fought in over 50 countries on earth today, and an additional 20-30 nations are part of fighting those even though there is no war in their territory. Whose side is God on in these wars? Whose side is God on in the conflict

between the Palestinians and the State of Israel? Whose side is God on in the conflict between Yemen and Saudi Arabia? The ongoing conflicts between factions in Somalia, and Nigeria and Iraq?

I want to suggest that this is the wrong question.

The Cosmic Christ wins the ultimate battle with only his tongue for a sword...only his WORD for a sword... and with that, in John's vision, the WORD defeats every laser guided bomb, every nuclear weapon, every drone direct missile...every tear gas cannon, every Molotov cocktail...the Word defeats them all...

So anytime...any time...we take up arms in the name of God...we do it wrong...we put our faith in worldly warring and not in the power of the Gospel...we essentially hire as our warrior the very forces that John assures us perish when confronted with the Word....

So what does that mean?

It means that anything gained by use of earthly war can be lost by the same means...

It means that engaging in a war of self-defense may indeed be the lesser of two evils....if the only options are going to war and watching millions of innocents be killed while we stand by and do nothing...but former President and famed Sunday school teacher Jimmy Carter is right...some wars may be necessary evils...but they are always evil.....full stop.

Once we take on the divine role...deciding who lives and who dies...we disrespect the one who gave us life...and we surrender a piece of our humanity.

And when we condone others taking on that role...when we empower them and do little to hem them in...we surrender another of our callings...to seek the common welfare...the good of all.

And let us not be deceived...while there are many wars our nation is engaged in, there is only one that is being fought here at home...it's been going on for quite some time...it's a war with battles that make the news only when they are large enough...but where, daily and nightly, small skirmishes barely warrant a press notice.

It's a war that in the United States killed 109 people...per day...in 2017. It's a war that claimed 39,773 lives here that year. And that's not counting the wounded...we average just under 300 of those a day...100,000 a year... It's a war where the combatants are, more often than not, their own victims, but certainly not always.

It's a war that has resulted in perhaps the most ridiculous statistic regarding this country I've ever seen...for every 100 men, women, and children who are residents (not just citizens) of the country...the people of the United States own 120 firearms.

It's a war where battles are fought mostly in lonely bedrooms, but also in crowded movie theaters....in city streets and not that many, but too many, churches, schools, and offices.

Our war is with ourselves...and has at its center our national obsession with, our idolatry of, our allegiance to weapons of death—firearms. Ironically, the largest number of victims of this war are victims of their own violence...as suicide claims far more than 50 percent of victims of gun violence every year.

It's a war that can have no armistice, no peace, no treaties of mutual surrender so long as everyone sees themselves as the good guys...the ones on whose side God dwells. So long as everyone...even those seeking to protect others from this scourge of violence turn to the same tools of violence for defense...

Perhaps the only solution to this war...is the same way the great war of our text is resolved...by resorting to the sword from the mouth the Word...

And that sword...

is truth... that self-harm and theft and misuse by others are far greater likelihoods from firearm ownership than protection of self or family or property....

...that resorting to weapons to resolve disputes is a sign of both moral and mental weakness, not strength...

...that legal justifications from the 18th century regarding protection of property and capture of runaway slaves can't trump a Sandy Hook class's or a Mother Emmanuel's Bible study's right to live and grow, and to hold otherwise is akin to worshipping death.

That sword...is compassion...seeing the world through other's eyes and pains and struggles...and understanding our obsession with the power to take life is born of fears and distrust and ignorance that we do far too little to dispel, so eager are we to reject those who hold views different than our own.

That sword...is justice...where any system that allows one child of God to exploit or diminish...or assume autonomy over another, is part and parcel of a society that says one person has the right to decide if another person lives—so racism, sexism, and class discrimination all contribute to the powder keg that is gun violence....

....where state actors from police to the keepers of death rows must see that so long as they are so willing to take lives in the name of citizens, they cannot expect those citizens to act any differently...

Finally...that sword...is grace...where all have suffered...though certainly not equally....and all are in need of the freedom that comes not only with being freed from oppression, but freed from carrying the hurt and pain and hate and fear that are their own prisons...

Only when the Word can bring truth, compassion, justice and grace ...can there be peace.

Friends, when God goes to war...there are no bombs....there are no planes....no drones...no missiles...there is only the WORD...

May we serve the sword...not the sword of war...the sword of the Word....may our fight be to proclaim, to live, to exemplify...the good news...that there is another way...a way of truth, compassion, justice and grace...a way that our lives, our words, our commitments can proclaim...the way of the Christ.

And may there be peace. Amen.