

Ending War
Co-Pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen
NPMC - July 10, 2022

Scripture: Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; Isaiah 2:1-5 (NRSV)

Hymns: VT 209 - We Dream of a Turning, VT 797 - We Are People of God's Peace

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8:

For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven:

² a time to be born and a time to die;

a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted;

³ a time to kill and a time to heal;

a time to break down and a time to build up;

⁴ a time to weep and a time to laugh;

a time to mourn and a time to dance;

⁵ a time to throw away stones and a time to gather stones together;

a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing;

⁶ a time to seek and a time to lose;

a time to keep and a time to throw away;

⁷ a time to tear and a time to sew;

a time to keep silent and a time to speak;

⁸ a time to love and a time to hate;

a time for war and a time for peace.

Isaiah 2:1-5:

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

² In days to come

the mountain of the Lord's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains

and shall be raised above the hills;

all the nations shall stream to it.

³ Many peoples shall come and say,

“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,

to the house of the God of Jacob,

that he may teach us his ways

and that we may walk in his paths.”

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction

and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

⁴ He shall judge between the nations

and shall arbitrate for many peoples;

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.

⁵ O house of Jacob,

come, let us walk

in the light of the Lord!



You might have noticed that this small quilt of a dove appeared in our sanctuary not long after the war in the Ukraine began. Bordered in yellow and blue, the colours of the Ukrainian flag, Geraldine Balzer of our congregation made it as a “Ukraine peace quilt.” This is what she shared with me about why she made it:

The invasion of Ukraine hit home for me on several levels - personal, because I had visited there; historical, because my grandparents came from there; political, because oppression always concerns me. I have three friends and colleagues who have strong ties to Ukraine and are also deeply connected to their faith traditions and we have shared stories over the years. Creating this wall hanging was an act of solidarity, a prayer for peace, and a reminder that life is political. The peace dove, an important symbol in Mennonite traditions, is also important in the Ukrainian Orthodox tradition and the hanging is a reminder that people of faith must work for peace.

Geraldine is not alone in feeling this deep connection to Ukraine. A number of us in this congregation can trace our family roots back to the Ukraine, or even have family members who fled the revolutionary war there 100 years ago. Our beloved peace and relief organization, Mennonite Central Committee, was founded there a century ago to distribute humanitarian aid to Mennonites and other people in Ukraine. As a result, this war is feeling like history repeating itself in a terrible way. As Geraldine mentions, we feel moved to act for peace, to live out our calling as a peace church. But what can we do? It seems so overwhelming.

Our passage from Ecclesiastes 3 has a kind of heartless approach to these realities of violence and war. There is “a time to kill and a time to heal,” it says.

“a time to break down and a time to build up; a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance.” And a few verses later: “a time to love and a time to hate; a time for war and a time for peace.” This is just something that happens, the passage seems to suggest. There is nothing much that we can do about it. This is the same book of the Bible, remember, that begins by declaring that “all is vanity!” It’s also where we get the well-known saying, “there is nothing new under the sun.” In other words, it’s a very cynical book, so we should not be surprised to find in it a kind of defeatist or hopeless attitude.

On one level, in the face of the horrific realities of war, it’s understandable to feel overwhelmed. What can we do when military leaders show no regard for the sacredness of human life? What can we do when even peace talks go nowhere as agreements are made and then immediately broken and dishonoured? The idyllic mountain of God that Isaiah talks about is seemingly nowhere to be found. In a recent *Canadian Mennonite*, Robert Johansen writes about these very questions in his article, “What is a Christlike response to overwhelming military might?”¹ He says that we have been taught to view these kinds of questions “primarily through the lens of military logic,” which means “we will be inclined to believe conventional wisdom that the only way to stop aggressive military power is with defensive military power.” But if we view these questions through “an Anabaptist lens of following Jesus in responding to imperial military power,” we end up with different, “more promising” possibilities to ending war and building peace, he says.

¹ Robert C. Johansen, “What Is a Christlike Response to Overwhelming Military Might?” 26, no. 12 (June 13, 2022), <https://canadianmennonite.org/stories/what-christlike-response-military-might>

Johansen, who is a retired peace studies prof, writes that following Jesus' way of loving our enemies by "at the least, not killing them," "does not mean that we simply allow violent, evil conduct to occur, or that we become a doormat for ruthless people like Putin to walk all over us. On the contrary, we should strongly resist misconduct and injustice" – just nonviolently, overcoming evil with good. He gives an example of supporting nonviolent acts of "civil resistance," as Poland did in the late 1980s, in a highly effective nonviolent campaign that "ousted a communist government and authoritarian military." We're so used to thinking that nonviolence isn't effective, but according to Johansen, recent studies have shown that "in the 20th century, civil resistance... has actually worked better than military resistance in ousting oppressive rulers." Though we don't hear much about it in the mainstream media, there have actually been many strategic, nonviolent actions taken in Ukraine in a refusal to cooperate with the invading military, including dismantling road signs, blocking roads with cement blocks or sandbags, standing in the way of tanks and military trucks, etc.² Over the long-term, these kinds of strategic peaceful actions can create real change.

Closer to home, there is of course much to be done in supporting refugees from Ukraine, several hundred of whom arrived in Saskatchewan just this week. In giving these people a safe place, a sanctuary for several years, we in Canada are doing our part to bring at least some peace to lives marked by violence and war. Along similar lines, Sasha (Alexandra) Froese of our congregation has also been volunteering her time to offer mental health and trauma recovery services to Ukrainians, both within the country and those who have fled as refugees. You might remember from the Joys &

² Daniel Hunter, "How Ukrainian Civilians are Resisting Military Force," *Yes Magazine*, March 1, 2022, accessed March 18, 2022, https://www.yesmagazine.org/democracy/2022/03/01/ukraine-civilian-resistance?fbclid=IwAR38scO6dkMphp3LDIvZ9K9P20TIUy5gs5Q9sMOZx0Gh2wbDxX_KhLKwJRY

Concerns that Sasha is originally from the Ukraine and her parents remained there to care for her grandmother. Despite the stress of that, Sasha has devoted herself to doing whatever she can to help Ukrainians, including, in her words,

1. ***“Organized a volunteer group “Common Language” that translated into Ukrainian a number of evidence-based workbooks and fact-sheets on the topics of anxiety, distress, panic, trauma, self-compassion, sleep and insomnia, grief, childhood traumatic reactions, psychological first aid, as well as support for displaced families and children. Some of the resources have been published and distributed. I am currently working on clinical editing and publishing of the rest, as well as on creating a website to provide easy access for the public and professionals.***
2. ***Created a free workbook in Ukrainian aimed at supporting adults during the time of stress and after, including addressing common reactions to traumatic events (e.g. flashbacks, nightmares, anxiety) and general coping.***
3. ***Working with the University of Waterloo Family Lab team, created an infographic on the impact or exposure to traumatic events on children and strategies for supporting them.***
4. ***Translated a factsheet on Traumatic Events and Disaster management for the Canadian Psychology Association.***

The materials in the 1,2,3,4 have been shared with professionals in Ontario, Manitoba, British Columbia, and Ukraine.

5. ***Provided training on vicarious traumatization and self-care to the Ukrainian-Canadian Congress interpreters working with people coming from Ukraine.***
6. ***Provided consultation to the Bishop Filevich school staff (Ukrainian-Canadian school in Saskatoon) regarding support for children and families.***
7. ***Completed training on Prolonged/Complicated Grief treatment with the Columbia University’s Centre for Complicated Grief to offer such training to psychologists in Ukraine.***

In terms of regular, paid work in private practice, I continue to work with some Ukrainian families.”

I for one am so inspired by Sasha’s courage and hope in taking on this important work that brings peace to so many people as they are given ways to cope with and begin to heal from the trauma of the war in the Ukraine.

Another story of peacebuilding connected to our congregation comes from Marian Driedger, who also has family roots in the Ukraine. These are her reflections on what is being done to save Ukrainian culture and artefacts from the destruction of war:

“Both our grandchildren are taking Ukrainian dancing. Twice this spring Lynn and I were able to watch them perform. I was moved to tears at times to see all these children and youth preserving a part of Ukrainian culture.

I want to tell you about a group of people from around the world, including Canada, who are peacefully trying to save Ukrainian culture and identity during the war.

The article that got my attention is called: Meet the 1,300 librarians racing to back up Ukraine’s digital archives by Pranshu Verma. Russia is bombing and destroying museums, libraries, and archives in Ukraine. There are librarians and others who are physically packing up books and other valuables and moving them to safety. But there are also 1,300 librarians, archivists, researchers, historians, teachers, and programmers who are working together to identify and archive digital content and data in Ukrainian cultural institutions. The project is called SUCHO – Saving Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Online. The volunteers work with software that converts websites into a single file that can be stored outside Ukraine. This group is backing up things like census data, books, photographs, architectural models, music, historical records, handicraft demonstrations, artwork and museum exhibitions.

It all started when two days after Russia invaded Ukraine, Anna Kijas, a music librarian at Tufts University in Massachusetts put out a call asking for volunteers to join her for a “virtual data rescue” to preserve a Ukrainian music collection which could be lost during the war. It got the attention of people around the world including Quinn Dombrowski, an academic technology specialist at Stanford University and Sebastian Majstorovic, a digital historian based in Vienna.

These two people banded together and recruited, trained, and organized these volunteers into what is now the SUCHO project. There is a master spreadsheet where volunteers detail all the Ukrainian museums, libraries, and archives that need to have their websites backed up. In some cases, where shelling is happening, volunteers specifically look for institution websites in the region that is under threat.

*To show the urgency of this work, Majstorovic tells how in March he came across the website of the Ukrainian State Archive of Karkiv. He loaded the archive's website onto the webrecording tool, and let it do its work. By early morning it had collected over 100 gigabytes of information including the region's census records, and lists of people who had been persecuted. **Within hours** of completion, the website disappeared. It was gone, but the records are now safely stored on SUCHO servers. He said "If we can save these things, we prove that Ukraine has a history."*

According to the SUCHO website they have already saved more than 50 terabytes of scanned documents, art work, and other digital materials from over 5,000 websites of Ukrainian museums, libraries, and archives.

Putin doesn't recognize that Ukraine has its own history and culture. I am so thankful for all the volunteers around the world who are working quietly and peacefully so that when the war is over, Ukraine will be able to rescue and restore some of its distinct heritage."

Here again is an example of courage and nonviolent resistance to war in the form of preserving a culture in defiance of those who would attempt to destroy and erase it.

These two examples and more convey to us that war does not, in fact, have the last word. While peaceful strategies do not offer instant solutions (peacebuilders tell us that it takes as many years to build peace as it did to cause the conflict), there are

things we can do to contribute to peace in the Ukraine and elsewhere in today's broken world. Bit by bit, peaceful actions are building momentum as each person does their small part. What's interesting about Isaiah's mountain of God in our Scripture is that while it was only a vision of future peace (not a literal event that happened), it's been inspiring people of faith in the way of God's peace for thousands of years! Let us take courage and take heart from it in our time as well. So, step by step, small action by small action, we are making our way toward the mountain where swords are beaten into plowshares, food is grown and shared instead of hostility, and war is not learned anymore. AMEN