

“Regarding the Possible Invasion of Iraq”

A sermon given at the First Parish in Wayland, Massachusetts
by Ken Sawyer and Erin Splaine
on March 2, 2003

There is a lot on all of our minds these days, including the possibility of impending military action against Iraq. At services here we have tried to offer comfort, support, and encouragement to everyone's conscience and courage, whatever anyone's stand on the matter may be. We will go on doing so.

We will also, beginning tomorrow, have this meetinghouse open every weekday from nine in the morning until 6:30 in the evening so that people can come sit in this room. If war should begin, the two overhead lights in the front of the room will be turned on and will remain on around the clock, with flowers on the table in front of the pulpit, until peace is restored in Iraq, as a symbol of our concern for those who serve in our armed forces and for the Iraqi people.

In this time before that war, when there is still any chance that war can be averted, we know feelings are high, mixed feelings, feelings of anxiety, patriotic pride, fear, confidence, anger, hopelessness, impatience, hope, and despair. All of those feelings are present in this congregation, even in some individuals.

We have heard people here say that the president is proceeding in a firm, controlled manner toward a wise and desirable invasion. And we have heard people here say that the president's apparent commitment to such an invasion is foolhardy in the extreme and frighteningly damaging to our national and personal interests.

We want to be sure that everyone understands that mixed feelings and divergent views are what we should expect and welcome in a healthy religious community like our own. What would be unhealthy is if some of us were made to feel less religious or less valued by the First Parish community because of our viewpoint — whatever it might be. What would be ideal is if any one of us could say over coffee or tea when we gather after the service, I strongly support – or I deplore – the president's stand on a war with Iraq, and feel not just tolerated but appreciated for contributing to the honest sharing of our deepest convictions.

If it's of help in that process, we will offer our own view, which as it happens we mostly agree on. In fact, as it happens, it is the viewpoint shared by the leaders of almost every religious movement in our country. This rare near-unanimity is especially ironic in that it opposes the position of the most publicly pious president ever, who has presented his own position in the religious language of good and evil.

: Those who resist the rush to war do not just include those of us on the religious spectrum one would expect. The list is long and diverse and includes conservatives and liberals, Christians, Muslims, Jews and those of us who fall somewhere in-between.

In a letter dated August 30, 2002, Jim Winkler, General Secretary of the United Methodist Church -- their highest ranking spiritual leader -- wrote the

following: "I ask United Methodists to oppose this reckless measure and urge the President to immediately pursue other means to resolve the threat posed by Iraq.... United Methodists have a particular duty to speak out against an unprovoked attack. President Bush and Vice-President Cheney are members of our denomination. Our silence now could be interpreted as tacit approval of war. Christ came to break old cycles of revenge and violence.... I beseech the President and Vice-President to provide leadership into a new era of Christian discipleship...."

"If we, as United Methodists, are to take seriously the words of Jesus to become peacemakers and seek justice and peace with one another (Matthew 5:1-12), we must speak out now -- to the president, members of congress, and our local media -- that the path upon which the President seeks to embark is counter to the teachings of Jesus, inconsistent with the position of the United Methodist Church, and is one that threatens the rule of law as a fundamental principle of democracy." He concludes, "That the ends justify the means is the weakest of all possible arguments. Our nation deserves better, and [so does] the world."

: It is a view still espoused by religious leaders from the Pope on down to us. That Saddam Hussein is a tyrant who has done very evil things, no one disputes. The international community itself is united in its resolve to force his compliance with UN resolutions to disarm, and if necessity to take unified action should he ultimately insist upon remaining a threat. But many thoughtful people, religious or not, including ourselves, cannot imagine why war, the most dreadful expedient, the greatest human failure, is justifiable at this time, especially one initiated by a rather small group of states.

Will meeting force with force solve or create more problems in our present and in our future? What of the cost to our lives, to the lives of the men and women who serve our country and to the lives of the people of Iraq? What of the cost to our pocket books, and our moral voice in the world? It's hard to know what the actual monetary cost of the war will be; our government has been uncomfortably silent on the matter.

According to a CNN report I saw last night, in current 2003 dollars, excluding the cost of reconstruction, the cost of the 1991 Gulf War was \$82.5 billion. Yet, of that we only paid 20%; the remaining 80% was financed by our multi-lateral allies. This time around, excluding nominal financial help from Great Britain, we are footing the bill alone. Without allies we fight alone, we pay alone and we bear the consequences alone.

Even in these tenuous economy it is not the financial cost that concerns us the most — rather it is the cost to our moral voice on the world's stage and our responsibility to each other.

At the end of fighting of the Korean War, President Eisenhower, a man who understood both politics and war, said this about the cost of war: "Every gun that is made, every warship that is launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold

and are not clothed. The world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children.... This is not a way of life at all, in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from an iron cross.”

It seems to us that the President’s eagerness to invade Iraq, even with few allies and considerable international opposition, is a mistake, and one that will bring lead to terrible consequences, in terms of lives lost, money spent, and our increased vulnerability to terrorism.

It will change how the world sees us, and how we understand ourselves. Historically, we have rarely thought of ourselves as aggressors. Are we to accept now the notion that we are entitled to do anything we want, just because we can? And why should the moderates in the Arab world, upon whom we are critically dependent if we hope to disable the terrorist threat of radical Islam, league with us if we act like the crusaders we are accused of being?

: A war at this time and for the barest of reasons that our government has provided is more than an opportunity for unprecedented destruction and degradation of human life — it is an opportunity missed and a moment of grace left behind.

Just two weeks ago in an unprecedented moment of global togetherness, millions upon millions of people — old and young rich and poor, working class and upper class, old hands in the movement for peace and first time protesters -- took to the street of the world to voice their opposition to the war. In London and Paris, New York and Madrid, on almost every continent and in the most unlikely of places, millions raised their collective voices and as if in one language said, “No — not in my name.”

But the decision-makers were not listening and they are not listening still. In fact, they are dismissive of those who harbor even the slightest doubt about the war. We have the world’s attention and after September 11th the world’s sympathy and yet we seemingly fail to recognize an unprecedented opportunity to create a partnership with the world community for the betterment of us all.

With leadership and courage, these voices of protest could become a true world-wide coalition in the highest sense of the word. We have an opportunity to re-imagine the worldwide protest against our government and the war into a worldwide moral chorus for change in Iraq and for the dignity and hope for the Iraqi people. We have an unprecedented opportunity to lead the way for what is holy and just among all nations and we are squandering that opportunity with a blind and deaf march to war.

: But we could be wrong. It may be that military action against Iraq will result in a quick victory with little loss of life and modest American expenditure and damage to Iraq; the replacement of the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein with responsible leaders, democratically elected; and greater stability and peace in the Middle East, a safe Israel and a Palestinian state.

Ironically, once war begins, if it does, those are the outcomes we'll be hoping for as much as anyone else. They just don't seem as likely as outcomes far less pleasant, indeed quite dire, quite personally threatening in terms of terrorism's increased appeal to some who would take the actions of our nation against Iraq as a call to arms.

Sen. John McCain, who knows all too well from his own experience, said, "War is awful. Nothing, not the valor with which it is fought, nor the nobility of the cause it serves, can glorify war. War is wretched beyond description. And only a fool or a fraud could sentimentalize its cruel reality. Whatever is won in war, it is the loss the veteran remembers,"

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said once "the ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending evil, it multiplies it. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

It is for these reasons and so many more that we pray for peace.

: We all live in the in-between time — suspended as it were somewhere between hope and inevitability — in an anxious liminal place. We carve out our daily lives not knowing what the future will bring. We all hope for the same things — freedom, peace, democracy, safety, for ourselves and the people of Iraq and everyone — though we have widely differing ideas among us as how that will most likely come to be.

In a time of such unknowing, of such peril, of so many potentially excellent or awful, awful outcomes, we do know this: that even in the worst of circumstances, as well as in the best, the values we believe in will still be true -- goodness, justice, love, peace — as we can treasure them in our communities, our congregation, our families, and in our own hearts.

In a time of such unknowing may we always be grateful for this community where we can bring our hopes and fears — our doubts and our certainties — our similarities and our differences and be heard and comforted and sustained as we figure it all out together. May we all keep on talking and keep on listening.