

Lent 2 Year C
Feb. 21, 2016
St. Thomas

Today marks a bitter anniversary
in the history of the world's misery.
WWI's longest and most brutal battle
began exactly 100 years ago today
in a small village in northern France.
To this day, the battle of Verdun
remains the lengthiest single battle in history –
303 days.
Never before or since have so many soldiers
fought over such a tiny piece of land
for so long,
and in the end, to accomplish so little.

Verdun was a battle fought for the sole purpose
of killing the enemy.
It was unlike any fought before,
as its goals were not to take ground,
not to capture property,
not to break the enemy's lines
but to create a mountain of French dead...
to cost the French so many men
that they could not continue the war.

Verdun ushered in a new kind of war.
For the first time, flame throwers were used in battle,
with the resulting ghastly injuries.
Both sides used poison gas bombs that could kill in seconds.
Rain and shells tore up the soil
into a landscape of mud littered with human remains.
A lieutenant, later killed in the battle,
wrote in his diary:
"Humanity is mad. It must be mad to do what it is doing."

By the time it ended,
a week before Christmas, 1916,
more than 260,000 soldiers had died,
and twice that many were wounded, many grievously.
More than 23 million shells were fired.
Nine villages were wiped off the map.
Huge craters and toxic munitions still scar and poison the land today,
a century later.

Of course, Verdun was just one battle
out of the human meat-grinder that was World War I.
That war left a profound wound in the psyche of humanity.
In all, the war cost some 15 million military and civilian lives.
Unless we include deaths from the Spanish flu pandemic,
which was itself a direct result of the war.
That would put estimates of the loss of life at 45 to 65 million
over five years.

Then came WWII,
which cost an estimated 71 million lives over six years.

But that, of course, is nothing compared to the Black Death,
which killed between 75 million and 200 million people,
including about half of the population of Europe
between 1346 and 1353.

You know what: I think God's got a lot to answer for!
How could a loving god permit such carnage,
permit so much misery,
so much unwarranted suffering by so many innocent?

Speaking personally, I'm mad.
I'm mad that children die.
I'm mad that people suffer for no good reason.
I'm mad that my dog has cancer!

In a world filled with atrocities,
 with disappointments,
 with broken relationships,
 with pandemics and diseases,
 with threats of terror,
 trust is difficult to extend – even to God.
 Even faithful people know bitter disappointment and crushing pain.
 Even God’s own know the feeling of abandonment.

How, then, can we or anyone
 call God “light” and “salvation,”
 as we said in our psalm this morning?
 What makes the psalmist believe that we will
 “see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living?”
 Does God really deliver people from evil
 or hide people in his shelter in the day of trouble?
 The evidence suggests otherwise.

At first, Psalm 27 is an affirmation of faith and trust in God.
 But by the time we get to Verse 7,
 the certainty of the initial verses is gone,
 and the psalmist is pleading with God.
 “Hear me ... when I cry aloud.
 “Answer me.”
 “Don’t hide your face from me!”
 “Don’t turn me away in anger.
 “Don’t cast me off.”
 “Don’t forsake me!”
 “Don’t give me up!”

There’s definite tension
 between the start of the psalm
 and the rest of the psalm.
 Real fear lives alongside honest faith.
 Serious doubt co-exists with genuine trust.
 In this psalm, as in life, both are unavoidable.
 And both are also essential.
 And so we hold fear and faith, doubt and trust together.

That's just what Abraham did
in our lesson from Genesis this morning.
Now there is a man in whom you don't expect to find much doubt.
Abraham is the epitome of the faithful person.
In story after story in Genesis,
God commands, and Abraham obeys.

But there comes a point when Abraham –
or Abram, as he's still known at this point in the story –
finally says, "Hang on here a minute, God. I've got a question."

Abraham, the great model of faithfulness,
wants to know how God is gonna fulfill all those promises.

"God," he says,
"I'm not clear on how you're gonna work all this out.
I need some more information.
Because what I'm looking for
is a son, a legitimate heir.
Is that what I'll finally get in the end,
or will I get something less than that?"

In response, God takes him outside and says
"Look up at those stars.
When you get done counting them,
then you'll know how many descendants I will give you.
I'm not going to tell you just HOW that will happen.
Maybe because I don't want you to know just yet,
or maybe because even I don't know just yet.
But trust me, it will happen."

And Abram trusted the Lord.
And the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.
Did he understand how God would fulfill the divine promise?
Did he get all the answers to his questions?
Seems unlikely.
Yet in spite of his lingering doubts and all evidence to the contrary,
Abram was willing to take the next step.

Serious faith requires some serious doubt.
 Because when we examine our doubts,
 we refine our understanding of God.
 We lose our wishful thinking about a God of fantasy,
 a God who ends all war
 and cures all diseases
 and solves all our problems.

Instead, we come to a clear-eyed wisdom about the God who is.
 We get to know the God who says,
 "You know what?
 Stopping war and curing diseases and solving your problems
 isn't MY job.
 It's YOUR job.
 And you can do it. I know you can.
 Look up at those stars.
 One day, my children, you will reach them.
 And while you're doing it, just know...
 I will be right beside you. Inspiring you.
 Encouraging you.
 Comforting you when you fail, and beaming with pride when you
 succeed.

"I will always hear you.
 I will never hide my face from you.
 I will never turn away from you in anger.
 I will never cast you off.
 I will never forsake you.
 I will never give up on you.
 That's MY job, and you can trust me to do it."

And so we hold fear and faith, doubt and trust together.
 But learning to do this takes patience.
 And so I call your attention back to the last line of our psalm:
 "Wait for the Lord."

Patiently seeking, patiently searching,
 patiently developing spiritual practices
 make both doubt and faith meaningful.
 This is what we should focus on during Lent.

These give us the time and the skills we need
to navigate pain,
to learn lessons,
to gain perspective,
to look up at the stars,
and maybe then to experience the world differently.

Those with the courage to face their doubts and their faith head-on
may find that they turn a corner.
They may start seeing abundance instead of scarcity.
They may recognize grace even in the face of loss.
They don't minimize pain or injustice,
they don't gloss over poverty or wartime atrocities.
But they know the power of trust,
and they keep bringing out the best in others,
and in themselves,
even in the face of the worst the world throws at them.
Like Paul, they stand firm in the Lord.

And based on who they keep discovering God to be,
they too can proclaim the word we all need to hear:
"The Lord is my light and my salvation.
The Lord is the stronghold of my life."