

The War is Over

**A Sermon for Memorial Day Preached by
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... [A]ll Judah stood before the LORD, with their little ones, their wives, and their children. Then the spirit of the LORD came upon Jahaziel son of Zechariah, son of Benaiah, son of Jeiel, son of Mattaniah, a Levite of the sons of Asaph, in the middle of the assembly. He said, "Listen, all Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, and King Jehoshaphat: Thus says the LORD to you: 'Do not fear or be dismayed at this great multitude; for the battle is not yours but God's. Tomorrow go down against them; they will come up by the ascent of Ziz; you will find them at the end of the valley, before the wilderness of Jeruel. This battle is not for you to fight; take your position, stand still, and see the victory of the LORD on your behalf, O Judah and Jerusalem.' Do not fear or be dismayed; tomorrow go out against them, and the LORD will be with you." Then Jehoshaphat bowed down with his face to the ground, and all Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem fell down before the LORD, worshiping the LORD.

2 Chronicles 20:13-18 NRSV

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence

and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

Philippians 4:4-8 NRSV

Today's Memorial Day message is about finding peace, peace that passes all understanding, peace with ourselves, peace with each other, and peace with God. I'd like to begin in an improbable way, with a war story.

On December 17, 1944, the Imperial Japanese army sent a twenty-three year old soldier named Hiroo Onoda to the Philippines. He was stationed on the small island of Lubang, seventy-five miles southwest of Manila.

He was ordered to do all that he could to hamper enemy attacks on the island, including destroying the Lubang airstrip and the pier at the harbor. As Onoda was departing to begin his mission, his division commander told him pointedly that under no circumstances was he to surrender or take his own life. He was to fight to the last man.

In February of 1945, just a couple months after Onoda arrived, Allied forces attacked the island, and quickly overtook its defenses. As the Allies moved inland, Onoda and three other Japanese soldiers retreated into the jungle. Cut off from support, they survived by rationing their rice supply, eating coconuts and green bananas from the jungle, and occasionally killing one of the village cows for meat.

It was upon killing one of these cows some months later that one of Onoda's men found a note. It apparently had been left behind by a local resident, and said, "The war ended on August 15. Come down from the mountains!" The Japanese soldiers scrutinized the note, and decided that it was a piece of Allied propaganda, a trick to coax them out of hiding. They ignored it. This note was not the only message they encountered; over the next several years, fliers were dropped from planes, newspapers with banner headlines announcing the allied victory were left, and letters from the soldiers' relatives

arrived. Each attempt to convince them that the war was over was viewed by Onoda and his soldiers as a not so clever hoax. Onoda and his men lived in the jungle for years, occasionally engaging in skirmishes and carrying out acts of sabotage as part of their guerrilla activities. Any villagers they sighted were seen as spies and attacked by the four men.

In September of 1949, over four years after the war was officially over, one of Onoda's soldiers quietly snuck away from his friends. Sometime in 1950 the three remaining soldiers found a note from the one who had left. It informed the others that he had been greeted by friendly troops when he left the jungle. To Onoda and the remaining men, it was clear that this man had been coerced into working for the enemy. They continued their guerrilla attacks, but more cautiously.

Three years later, in 1953, one of Onoda's remaining two men was shot in the leg during a skirmish with some fishermen. Onoda helped him back into the jungle and nursed him back to health over several months in the most miserable conditions. The following year, the men encountered a search party on a beach, and that same soldier was fatally wounded as Onoda and the others fought off the men who were sent to rescue them.

For nineteen years, Onoda and his sole remaining comrade continued their guerrilla activities. They lived in the dense jungle in make-shift shelters. Every now and then they would kill another cow for meat, which alarmed the villagers and prompted the Filipino army to embark on yet another unsuccessful search for the men.

In October of 1972, the two remaining men snuck out of the jungle to burn a large cache of Filipino rice, in an attempt to sabotage the "enemy's" food supply. A police patrol spotted the men and fired on them. Onoda escaped back into the jungle alone; his jungle companion of 27 years had been killed.

News of that soldier's death traveled quickly to Japan. It was concluded that since he had survived all those years, then it was possible that Lt. Onoda was still alive. He had been

declared legally dead about thirteen years earlier. More search parties were sent in to find him, but he successfully evaded them for another year and a half.

A Japanese college student on a mission finally managed to track Onoda down and earn his trust. This student tried to convince him that the war had ended long ago, but Onoda explained that he would not surrender unless his commander ordered him to do so.

In February of 1974, the student returned to the island with Onoda's one-time superior officer, a Major Taniguchi. When Onoda emerged from the jungle to meet with the student and his old commander, he arrived in what was left of his dress uniform, wearing his sword and carrying his still-working Arisaka rifle, 500 rounds of ammunition, and several hand grenades.

The commander, who had long since retired from the military and become a bookseller, read aloud the orders: Japan had lost the war. All combat activity was to cease immediately. After a moment of quiet anger, Onoda pulled back the bolt on his rifle and unloaded the bullets. He took off his pack and laid the rifle across it. When the reality finally sunk in, he wept openly.

Onoda had spent twenty nine of his fifty two years hiding the jungle, fighting a war that had long been over for the rest of the world. He and his guerrilla soldiers had killed some thirty people, and wounded about a hundred others. They had done so under the mistaken belief that they were still at war, almost three decades after peace had been made.

*Adapted and quoted from articles on
Wikipedia.com and DamnInteresting.com*

It's a fascinating and sad story, isn't it? Even though Onoda was once our enemy, we can admire his intentions and stand in awe of his endurance. At the same time we have to feel badly that he ended up devoting the better part of his life fighting a war that was already over. In the process he killed and wounded many innocent people and was indirectly responsible for the

deaths of two of his soldiers. All because he refused to believe that the war was over.

As strange and as foreign as he tale may sound, I think many of us could star in the movie version of Onoda's tragic story. We, too, live as if every day is a battle, an epic struggle of wills, a "law of the jungle" competition in which only the strong survive. Mostly, we fight faceless enemies as we clamor for security and "the good life." Or seek power and influence. Or desperately search for affirmation and acceptance. We're embarrassed to admit it, even to ourselves, that we live this way, but many of us do. Most of us conceal it pretty well, but when we're really honest with ourselves and God we have to admit it: We have spent much of our lives like Lt. Onoda -- living in distrust, living in hiding, living in anger and fear. Why is that?

Why do we measure our lives by how big our homes are or the kind of clothes we wear or car we drive? Why do we feel better about ourselves when our bank account is full and feel like failures when it is empty? Didn't Jesus show us how true success is measured? Didn't he show us that in the end all of our stuff is just, "stuff"? If we're struggling to keep up with the Jones', that battle isn't worth fighting, because it's not worth winning. It's like trading your birthright for a bowl of stew. [Remember the story of Esau and Jacob from the Bible?]

And why are we obsessed with power and control? One of my current laments is how often I feel out of control of my life. It's true that Andrew's two hospitalizations within a month and the arrival of two foster kids in between would shake up anyone's life. But why, even in good times, do we feel that it's important for us to be able to control every last detail of our lives. Some of us would rather die --literally--than give up control. One of the biggest fears I hear from people as they age or become ill is the fear of loss of control: of their mind, their finances, their driving, and their own body. Jesus told us that true power is obtained when we surrender control to God. When we put our lives -- including the smallest details -- in his hands then we are more powerful than all the generals of all the armies in the world. The more we try to hold onto control, the less control we have over our lives. That's a battle we can't win—but we keep fighting it, don't we?

And isn't it kind of silly how no matter our age -- from Kindergartners to Octogenarians -- we still crave "at a boys" and "at a girls" from the

people around us – many of them people we hardly know or barely like? Where did we get the idea that we must prove ourselves to be loveable and capable? This thought keeps us anxious as we continually monitor all our relationships and look to others to tell us what we're worth? If we're going to do that, why not simply accept that our worth comes from our status as God's chosen sons and daughters, heirs of the covenant, children for whom Christ died? If anyone's going to tell you who you are, let it be God. He fought the battle for you and me already. He gave his life for you and me already. He has claimed victory over Satan and the powers of sin and death already. We don't have to fight anymore. God is on our side. The war is over.

The war is over. Four simple words. Very hard to believe. For soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen. For me. For you. For everyone. I'm not saying that life isn't hard; it can be terribly hard; some of us know that all too well. And I'm not saying that there are not battles to be fought – for justice, for honor, for freedom. Some things are even worth giving our lives for. I *am* saying that we must choose our battles very carefully or we risk wasting our lives in dogfights that we have no business being in or fighting battles that have already been won.

Let's review. God is going to provide for us. God is in control. God loves us. Even death, the final enemy, has been beaten. So why are we still fighting?

Pastor Max Lucado once told a congregation about a fly that he saw flying while on a plane flight. What struck him was how futile the fly's efforts were. I'm sure the fly thought he was making progress, but no matter how hard the fly tried to fly, the plane was infinitely more powerful. The fly couldn't out fly the plane. The fly couldn't stop his forward momentum even if he turned around and flew backward. The fly would have been better off buckling in and enjoying the ride.

We'd be better off, too, if we could listen to all the people God has sent – from the patriarchs to Jesus to Saint Paul – who've told us that we don't have to fight anymore. Recall the Advent words that God spoke to Isaiah the prophet,

"Speak kindly to Jerusalem; And call out to her, that her warfare has ended, that her iniquity has been removed, That she has received of the LORD'S hand double for all her sins."

Isaiah 40:2, NASB

God is speaking these words to us today. God's peace doesn't have to be won. It's a gift that, with God's help, we can believe and receive. Amen.

Note: For more of Hiroo Onoda's story read his own account: "No Surrender: My Thirty-Year War,"

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