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Various Scriptures
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A Time to Kill and a Time to Heal

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German theologian, pastor, and self-described pacifist during World War II. Yet he went against his personal and spiritual convictions and became involved in an assassination attempt against Adolf Hitler.

Knowing what Hitler was doing to the Jewish people, Bonhoeffer came to believe that allowing Hitler to continue his reign of terror was a greater sin than stopping him, whatever the cost. Bonhoeffer was discovered, imprisoned, and executed by the Nazis just days before the war ended.

Given what we now know about the Holocaust and the murder of six million Jews, was Bonhoeffer justified? Or was he acting outside the boundaries of biblical authority?

To explore that question, I want to begin with the words of the Wisdom writer in Ecclesiastes: "There is a time to kill and a time to heal."

What does that mean? How do we live within that tension? What would Jesus say about it? And how might we apply this wisdom to the conflicts we see in our world today?

I'm going to move around the Bible this morning, so rather than trying to follow every reference, just listen. Let's plant some of these words in our hearts.

The Ten Commandments, given to Moses on Mount Sinai, say plainly, "You shall not murder."[1]

The Hebrew word translated "murder" is *ratsach*. It refers to the unlawful or malicious taking of another person's life. It is not accidental killing, self-defense, or the exercise of public justice. It is the taking of life for selfish or evil purposes.

And yet Ecclesiastes says:

"There is a time to kill and a time to heal."

The Hebrew word there is *harag*, which can mean to kill, slay, or destroy. In this context, it carries the sense of killing in a military or judicial setting.

And then there is the word *rapha*—to heal, restore, cure, or make whole again. In other words to fix everything that *harag* or war destroyed.

Already we see the tension: there is a time to kill, and there is a time to heal.

Then Jesus enters the conversation.

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[1] Exodus 20:13

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not murder.' … But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment."[2]

And Jesus goes even further: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."[3]

That is a very different way of looking at violence.

Jesus moves beneath the action and into the heart. Murder may begin with the hand, but Jesus says it begins much earlier—with anger, contempt, hatred, and a desire to destroy another person.

And yet Jesus also says something that can sound startling: "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword."[4]

Jesus is not calling his followers to violence. He is warning that the truth he brings will divide people—even families.

And then, in the Garden of Gethsemane, when one of Jesus' disciples draws a sword and strikes the high priest's servant, Jesus says: "Put your sword back in its place. For all who draw the sword will die by the sword."[5]

And finally, Paul writes to the Christians in Rome: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities…" Paul says that government has a responsibility to restrain evil and that the governing authority "does not bear the sword in vain."[6]

So, what do we do with all of this?

Let's pray.

Prayer of Illumination

This morning I want us to explore two things: a time to kill and a time to heal.

First, what do Scripture and Christian tradition say about the use of force? Then we'll look at what Christians have called Just War Theory and consider how it might help us think about modern conflicts.

And finally, we'll turn to healing—because the Bible never treats killing as the final word.

The Old Testament makes a distinction between murder and other forms of killing, including warfare, justice, and self-defense.

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[2] Matthew 5:21-24

[3] Matthew 5:38-48

[4] Matthew 10:34-35

[5] Matthew 26:50b-53

[6] Romans 13:1-5

Jesus, however, shifts our attention from simply obeying civil law to examining the condition of our hearts. The root problem is not simply what we do to one another. It is what is happening inside us. Jesus calls us to love our enemies —even those who persecute us.

Paul says much the same thing in Romans: "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse."

And: "Do not repay anyone evil for evil."

And then: "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."

I love that little phrase: "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you."[7]

Paul understands that peace does not always depend entirely on us.

So what happens when we have done everything we can to live peaceably, and peace is still not possible?

That brings us to Just War Theory.

Just War Theory is not a biblical doctrine. It is a Christian ethical framework developed over centuries, particularly through the work of Augustine in the fourth century and Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth.

It asks a simple question:

When, if ever, can war be morally justified?

There are three broad categories: justice before war, justice during war, and justice after war.

Before war, there must be a just cause—such as defending people from serious harm.

There must be legitimate authority. War cannot simply be declared by whoever has the biggest weapon.

There must be right intention. The purpose must be peace and protection, not conquest, revenge, land or resources grabbing, or total annihilation as we've heard recently.

War must be a last resort. Every reasonable peaceful alternative should be exhausted.

There must be a reasonable chance of success. We should not send people into a conflict simply to produce more death.

And finally, there must be proportionality. The good that can reasonably be achieved must outweigh the destruction the war will cause.

During war, there are also limits.

Combatants must distinguish between military targets and civilians. And the force used must be proportionate to the threat.

And then there is justice after war.

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[7] Romans 12:14-21

Peace requires more than stopping the shooting.

There must be a fair settlement. The defeated cannot simply be humiliated or destroyed as Germany was in World War I. Damaged communities will need to be rebuilt. Basic human rights must be restored.

Despite what some our leaders might think, there is no such thing as a morally clean "get in and get out" war.

World War II is often discussed as an example of a conflict that met many of the traditional criteria for a just war. At the same time, some actions by the Allies and the United States —including the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki —remain deeply contested within the framework of just-war ethics.

The 1991 Persian Gulf War is another conflict often examined through this lens. Iraq invaded Kuwait, diplomatic and economic measures failed to secure withdrawal, and a coalition intervened. Once Kuwait was liberated and Iraqi forces withdrew, the coalition stopped rather than continuing toward Baghdad.

Now some of you may know that I am a combat veteran from the first Gulf War. I have had to carry the bodies of some Iraqi soldiers who were killed during that conflict. I remember praying for over them and thinking these men were no different from me except that I was going home to my family, and they were not. That is the stark reality that every soldier faces.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine presents another contrast. Russia's invasion does not meet the traditional criteria for just war. Ukraine's defense of its territory through the principle of self-defense does.

And then we come to the conflicts of our own moment.

How do we apply these principles to the war between Israel and Hamas? Or the US and Iran? How do we distinguish between legitimate self-defense, military necessity, proportionality, and revenge?

These are not easy questions.

We Christians should be very careful about claiming that God is on our side simply because we believe our cause is right. Scripture asks us to examine not only what we are doing, but why we are doing it and how we are doing it. And we should pay more attention to the rhetoric coming from our leaders. Careless statements about "annihilating our enemy" are disproportionate and could be indicators that we are not acting justly in this conflict. We as Americans should never be ok with leaders who aim to erase any people group from the face of the earth.

But enough about a time to kill.

What about a time to heal?

The biblical idea of healing is much bigger than simply fixing a physical wound.

Rapha means to heal, restore, renew—to make whole again.

And that gives us another way to understand Ecclesiastes.

If there is a time to kill, there must also be a time to repair what killing has broken.

A time to rebuild.

A time to renew.

A time to resurrect.

The Book of Exodus calls God the one who heals.[8]

The Psalmist says God: "heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds."[9]

Isaiah and Peter connect our healing to the suffering of Christ: "By his wounds we are healed."[10]

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus heals the sick, the wounded, the outcast, and the broken. Again and again, he tells people that their faith has made them well.

And after his resurrection, Jesus entrusts that ministry of healing to his followers. To us!

James tells the elders of the church to pray over the sick and anoint them with oil.

And then, at the very end of Scripture, the Book of Revelation gives us a vision of where all of this is going.

John sees a new heaven and a new earth.

God dwells among his people.

Every tear is wiped away.

There is no more death.

No more mourning.

No more crying.

No more pain.

And then John sees the river of the water of life flowing from the throne of God, with the tree of life growing beside it.

And he says: "The leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations."[11]

The healing of the nations.

That is where Scripture ultimately takes us.

Not toward endless conflict.

Not toward revenge.

Not toward the annihilation of our enemies.

But toward healing.

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[8] Exodus 15:26

[9] Psalm 147:3

[10] Isaiah 53:5; 1 Peter 2:24

[11] Revelation 21:3b-4; 22:1-3a

And notice something important: the Bible does not simply say that God heals.

It also shows us that God uses people to heal.

God heals through doctors and nurses.

Through counselors and pastors.

Through parents and friends.

Through people who rebuild what war has destroyed.

Through people who forgive.

Through people who feed their enemies when they are hungry and give them something to drink when they are thirsty.

Through people who refuse to be overcome by evil and instead, as Paul says, overcome evil with good.

So perhaps that is where Ecclesiastes leaves us.

Yes, there may be a time to kill. But killing is never the destination. Healing is.

There may be times when force is necessary to restrain evil and protect the innocent. But even then, the Christian hope is not destruction. The Christian hope is restoration.

We are people who follow a Savior who was crucified by the violence of our world—and who responded to that violence not with revenge, but with resurrection.

And so perhaps the question for us is not simply: "Is there a time to kill?"

Ecclesiastes already answers that.

The deeper question is:

What are we doing to make room for a time to heal?

Where there is hatred, can we bring love?

Where there is division, can we bring reconciliation?

Where there is violence, can we work for peace?

Where there is brokenness, can we help rebuild?

Where there is death, can we bear witness to resurrection?

Because ultimately, the story of Scripture is not about a God who destroys. And if we are going to be God's people in this world, then perhaps our calling is to become agents of that healing wherever we can.

Christian author and activist Cori Ten Boom tells the story in her book *The Hiding Place* about encountering a Nazi soldier after World War II who served at the Ravensbruck concentration camp where she and her sister were imprisoned. He had been particularly harsh to the prisoners and her sister Betsie died there. Cori had been speaking at a church in Munich on the importance of forgiveness.

Afterward, this soldier approached Cori saying that he had become a Christian and wanted to ask for her forgiveness. He reached out his hand for hers. Every

fiber in her body resisted. So she prayed silently, “Lord Jesus, forgive me. Help me to forgive him.”

Suddenly as she mechanically thrust her hand into his, a warm sensation flowed through her body and flooded her with God’s love for him. And she said, “I forgive you, Brother, with all my heart.”

There is a time to kill. And there is a time to heal.

May God give us the wisdom to know the difference—and the courage to pursue healing whenever and wherever we can. As far as it depends on us.

Amen.