

War, Peace, and the Hope of Baboon Grooming Habits

Ecclesiastes 3 :1-8

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

a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
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;
a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;
a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.

To everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven. This is one of those texts that everyone seems to love. If you're like me, you can't help but hear the Birds singing 'Turn, Turn, Turn when this text is read. Oh, we like this text- particularly at the start of the year. It's a text that reminds us to keep perspective on things- that life is like the weather. If you don't like what's going on to just wait a little bit- it'll change.

But I have to admit that I was kind of *not* liking this text as much this week. The sticking point for me was that last line- that last little bit about there being a time for peace and a time for war. Now, part of what I do like about the text is that it talks about life in all of it's variety- the good with the bad. There is a time to laugh and a time to cry, a time to mourn as well as a time to dance. This way of thinking of life, especially the spiritual life, makes absolute sense to me- as much as our TV commercials wish it weren't true, life really isn't just a series of never ending joy-filled moments where, if we only would purchase the right product, we would never be bored or sad and would be happy forever and ever amen. No, life is a LOT more full than that. It's full of ups and downs, and the downs aren't signs

that somehow there's something wrong with us or that God has somehow abandoned us- it's just the way life is. If we're alive we're just going to know times of grief and there will be a time to die. It's just built into the way we are.

But that last line- to everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven. A time for peace and a time for war. And I found myself wondering about this- a time for war? A time for war? Really? Does there HAVE to be a time for war? Is this really just a fact of life that we just have to accept and live with?

It's an especially important question to ask of people who try follow in the way of Jesus. He taught us if someone strikes your cheek- offer the other one as well. Our enemies? Instead of hurting them, instead of killing them- we're supposed to pray for them instead. And he didn't just talk the talk, but he walked the walk. And the very end of his life when the guards put him on that cross- he didn't resist, he didn't try to run, and according to Luke he didn't even stop doing ministry but was praying with those thieves right up to the bitter end. We follow after one who walked in the pathways of peace with his every step. And the people who try and follow after him, who try to walk this path- we have to ask does there HAVE to be a time for war?



But then, I started to think about the world a little bit, I started to think about what I read in the papers every day, and the evidence for war begins to mount up, doesn't it? I started professional ministry in September of 2001. The very first congregational letter I ever wrote I wrote on September 12th. That was not an easy letter- trying to talk to folks I didn't really know that well about the most devastating attack in our lifetime. The first time I celebrated communion was World Communion Sunday on the first Sunday of October just a weeks after that. After worship was over and we were basking in the thought of unity with

brothers and sisters all over the world, I got into my car and heard a special report on NPR that that very morning, while we were breaking Christ's body and pouring out his blood and proclaiming his love for the world, our country had invaded Iraq. And, for the rest of my nine years of my ministry we have continued to live in a state of war with no realistic end in sight.

And the hard part for me is it's not just others. Sometimes I'd like to kind of set myself apart and think that I'M not like that- that I believe in peace and if I ran the world I wouldn't be like that. But when I'm being more honest, another part of me isn't so sure. Another part of me knows the seeds of war, that these seeds lie in my heart, too.

When I was in college I joined and eventually served as president of a student group called the Student Peace and Justice Coalition. Yes, the Student Peace and Justice Coalition- I mean just give me a pair of bell bottoms and tickets to Woodstock, right? ☺ Now, Coalition was probably too strong of a word. There were three of us in the group. And peace and justice? Well, these were definitely things we BELIEVED in...but I'm not sure that we every actually did anything about it. The main thing we did, as far as I could tell, was that we helped the Austin Peace and Justice Coalition group print their newsletter on the cheap under the auspices of our student discount. But, be that as it may, I was definitely someone who wanted to believe in peace.

Well one night I was out with my friends- we were driving back from a movie, I was with my former roommate, John, and his girlfriend. It was a muggy summer night in Austin, our windows were down, the tunes were on. But then, as we rounded a curve I saw a young woman struggling with this guy. His arms were grabbing at her, she was trying to pull herself away, and over the music I could hear her kind of shouting and crying. I yelled at John to stop. And he did. And something, I don't even know what it was, something

caused me to get out of the car and say to the woman, "Do you need help?" I remember it was like I was watching myself and looking down on the whole scene. And the guy let her go, and she ran away from him and towards the brown boat of a car we were in.

Her mascara was running down her face, and she was shaking. We asked her where she wanted to go, and she gave us directions to her apartment. On the way we heard a little bit about her awful night- that the night had started out fine, that they were on a date, but then they had a fight about something, and then she wanted to leave, but her date wouldn't let her. And I think it's because we took a couple of wrong turns, but when we finally made it back to her place, he was already there. He was standing with his arms folded right in front of her door.

Now this was before cell phones- today I just would have called the police. And we probably just should have driven on, but we stopped. And I got out with her and walked her up the pathway to her door. I'll tell you, this guy looked a heck of a lot bigger standing there in the doorway than he had across the road. And when we got closer he unfolded his arms and for a moment it looked like was going to go at her, and I raised my finger and just said, "Don't." And I think I added, "Please." Well he had some words for me, but he let her in and stormed off.

Now, I'd love to tell you that I stepped in because I wanted to help her out- that I believed in peace and justice and just wanted to help out. But the truth is, from the moment that I saw him grabbing her and especially seeing him on the porch all folded up like a bear trap- I was filled with a kind of hatred for him. And there was a part of me when we were on that porch that didn't really want him to stop, and this part of me wanted to fight with him, to hurt him if I could.

In my more honest moments I know that whatever my beliefs, the seeds of war are in my heart.

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So, as I was thinking about all this, I started to realize that my initial question about war, about whether there has to be a time for war, I realized maybe this isn't the right question here. It started to seem to me the better question isn't whether there has to be a time for war- but whether peace, real peace, the peace of Christ, whether Ecclesiastes is being realistic saying there is a time for this? Yeah, I moved from wondering whether there has to be a time for war to wondering whether we're being crazy by hoping and praying for peace.

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And you know what, I'm not the only one. John Horgan is a science journalist and science teacher in Hoboken, New Jersey. For the last thirty years he's been walking the streets of New Jersey asking people two very simple questions: one, do you think that people will ever stop war once and for all; and two, if not, why? And since he's been doing this, he's seen a disturbing trend. When he started asking this question in 1981 2 out of 3 people believed that we would someday put an end to war; now, since 9/11 only about 1 in 10 think this is possible. He spoke at a church a few years back and was speaking about peace, and he asked the congregation who believed that people one day would live in peace. Only 1 hand went up- and that was in a church!

And when he follows up with these folks- asking them why. He hears the same thing time and again. The reason we'll never live in peace- it's just human nature. It's just the way we are.

And this leads me to the most interesting thing I learned all week. Last week I was all into ants- and this week, for whatever reason, I got stuck on baboons. It's like I'm in some kind of weird nature thing at the moment.

I learned about a man named Robert Sapolsky, this neurobiologist at Stanford. Half of the year Sapolsky lives in Stanford spending most of his time in a lab. But the other half of the year he lives in Africa where he studies baboons. He picked baboons because with the hunter/gatherer lifestyle, their highly aggressive and hierarchical society, and their life on the savanna- they're pretty much the closest link to what humans were probably live as we evolved out of Africa.

And the reality is absolutely brutal. Baboon society is just nasty. The males are violent, especially towards one another. They have an extremely rigid order, and anyone trying to break out of that is beaten and sometimes even killed. When tribes come into conflict over territory, they have actually been known to go to war with one another- they are some of the only animals who do that.

Well tragedy struck Sapolsky's tribe. The early 80's was a kind of boom time for Africa, and resorts were springing up all over the wildlife reserve where he was studying. One resort was built just a few miles away from his tribe. And every day, around 10 in the morning, the resort would throw out mountains of leftovers- heaping piles of chicken cordon bleu and chocolate cake. It was like a baboon bonanza. Well, the most aggressive males of his tribe started walking over every day to try and fight their way into the food pile. They often came back with these terrible scars, but also with chocolate in their fur- a pretty decent trade off. But one time they came back with something worse. Some of the meat had been infected with Tuberculosis. And TB in baboons just ravages them, and within weeks all of his most aggressive males were dead.

Well, Sapolsky was just devastated. This was his first tribe, and he had literally spent thousands of hours with them at this point- naming them, writing down their every move.

But then he noticed strange things happening to the rest of the tribe. With the alpha males gone, the females started to run the show, and the normally hyper violent baboons started to turn nice. For instance grooming is a really big deal in the baboon world- grooming is more than just picking bugs off your friend, it shows love and acceptance, too. And in the normal baboon world females always groomed males- but the males would never reciprocate. The males would just take, take, take, but never give back- you know what I'm talking about ladies? ☺ But with the big males gone- the younger, smaller males started grooming the females in a kind of baboon version of you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours. And then, stranger than this- male baboons NEVER, and I mean NEVER, groom one another. It's like human males never talking in the bathroom- as a boy know one ever tells you not to talk in the bathroom, but somehow over time you just learn this very important lesson. Women seem to go in and out chatting up a storm. But with men you can be having the best conversation in the world, but you enter the bathroom- and you enter the zone of silence. So male baboons NEVER groom one another- Sapolsky said in his entire life he'd never seen this or heard of anyone seeing this. But in this tribe, with the big dogs gone- the males were not only grooming the females, but they started grooming each other, too. He said it could not have been more shocking- he would have expected to see baboons with wings or become photosynthetic. It's on part with imagining Mike Tyson in the fifth round going over to Evander Holyfield and instead of tearing his ear off, pulling out a comb and some makeup and asking Evander if he thought he was more of a Spring or a Summer.

Now, Sapolsky just kind of thought this was an anomaly. And he absolutely expected this behavior not to last- I mean as soon as new males, males who didn't grow up in this weird baboon hippie commune started making their way into the tribe- well everything would just go back to normal. And that's what everyone else thought, too- because it's how baboons are. It's their nature- they're violent and it's just who they are.

But, and he said it is the most significant scientific moment of his life- even when new males entered the tribe, things didn't change. Not at 5 years, not at 10 years, not at 20 years- the tribe continues to do things differently even today, more than 30 years later. No when outside males come into the tribe they learn very quickly that this tribe is different- and they didn't do things like anyone else. And not only did they not disrupt the culture of this tribe, but they became a part of it. These baboons, these ferocious, violent animals, animals that up until this point we just believed were only capable of aggression- not only did they stumble their way into peace, but once they did they continued to teach it and pass it down to other generations.



With the advent of 2010 I've been hearing a lot of talk about how horrible the past decade has been, and no doubt, in a lot of ways it has been a very painful time. But there have some just incredibly beautiful moments, too. On October 2, 2006 Charles Roberts entered an Amish school in Lancaster, PA and wound up killing five children there. For someone to attack us, it's one thing- but to attack our children. Well no one would have thought less of the Amish people if they weren't there normal peaceable selves. But do you remember? Do you remember how that community even on the day of the shooting extended forgiveness to this man and his family and said, "We must not, we will not think evil of this man." And they mourned not only their own children, but they filled the

Methodist church for the shooter's funeral not to jeer, but to support the Roberts family, to support the family of this man who hurt them so very, very deeply. And they didn't act this way because they didn't care about their children- they acted this way because of Jesus, because of this man who showed us there is another way.

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Does there have to be a time for war? Is it absurd to believe there will be a time for peace? I don't know the answers to these questions- I really don't. But here's what I believe: if baboons can change, if BABOONS can change- isn't there hope for us? **Amen.**