

**Never Forget**  
Pastor Cynthia Lapp  
April 19, 2009

Psalm 69  
Judges 11

It is difficult — celebrating the resurrection last week and this week heading right back to the tomb, to be reminded of death. We don't really know if the disciples went back to the tomb days later to remind themselves that it was empty. But they must have passed by many crosses, some with bodies and some awaiting bodies, as they went about their daily life. Crucifixion was not a one-time event reserved for Jesus and two thieves. It was an ongoing way for Rome to keep its subjects in line, much as systematic rape and abuse are used to keep the women and children in line and fearful in Congo.

The stories and statistics that we heard this morning are unpleasant to put it mildly. We would certainly rather not have to think about this in church. We come to worship to be uplifted, not dragged down to the depths of what is worst in our world.

But it is not just what is in the world; it is what is in our Bibles. The terror and brutality of violence against women is part of the story that is recorded in the Bible. Granted, we don't read those parts often. But that the stories of violence are incorporated into our faith story is a sign that war, violence, anger and greed are part of what it means to be human. And it is a sign that as a faith tradition we have understood that God is with us even in brutality and sexual violence.

The story of Jephthah's daughter, who is forever nameless, is not one of sexual violence, but it is the story of an act of violence that is the result of war.

Let's listen.

## Judges 11

Now Jephthah the Gileadite, the son of a prostitute, was a mighty warrior. Gilead was the father of Jephthah. Gilead's wife also bore him sons; and when his wife's sons grew up, they drove Jephthah away, saying to him, 'You shall not inherit anything in our father's house; for you are the son of another woman.' Then Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tob. Outlaws collected around Jephthah and went raiding with him.

After a time the Ammonites made war against Israel. And when the Ammonites made war against Israel, the elders of Gilead went to bring Jephthah from the land of Tob. They said to Jephthah, 'Come and be our commander, so that we may fight with the Ammonites.' But Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, 'Are you not the very ones who rejected me and drove me out of my father's house? So why do you come to me now when you are in trouble?' The elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, 'Nevertheless, we have now turned back to you, so that you may go with us and fight with the Ammonites, and become head over us, over all the inhabitants of Gilead.' Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, 'If you bring me home again to fight with the Ammonites, and the LORD gives them over to me, I will be your head.' And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, 'The LORD will be witness between us; we will surely do as you say.' So Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and commander over them; and Jephthah spoke all his words before the LORD at Mizpah.

Then the spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh. He passed on to Mizpah of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he passed on to the Ammonites. And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD, and said, 'If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammonites, shall be the LORD's, to be offered up by me as a burnt-offering.' So Jephthah crossed over to the Ammonites to fight against them; and the LORD gave them into his hand. He inflicted a massive defeat on them from Aroer to the neighbourhood of Minnith, twenty towns, and as far as Abel-keramim. So the Ammonites were subdued before the people of Israel.

Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah; and there was his daughter coming out to meet him with timbrels and with dancing. She was his only child; he had no son or daughter except her. When he saw her, he tore his clothes, and said, 'Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low; you have become the cause of great trouble to me. For I have opened my mouth to the LORD, and I cannot take back my vow.' She said to him, 'My father, if you have opened your mouth to the LORD, do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth, now that the LORD has given you vengeance against your enemies, the Ammonites.' And she said to her father, 'Let this thing be done for me: Grant me two months, so that I may go and wander on the mountains, and bewail my virginity, my companions and I.' 'Go,' he said and sent her away for two months. So she departed, she and her companions, and bewailed her virginity on the mountains. At the end of two months, she returned to her father, who did with her according to the vow he had made. She had never slept with a man. So there arose an Israelite custom that for four days every year the daughters of Israel would go out to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.

How can a father do this to his daughter? What was wrong with Jephthah that he was compelled to fulfill his vow to God? Why did he make this ridiculous

promise in the first place? God was with him, he was doing well in battle, he didn't need to pledge to make a sacrifice.

Surely Jephthah knew the custom of the victorious warrior being greeted by women with dancing and singing. He must have known he was endangering someone's life. Even so, when it was his only daughter that came running to him, why didn't he turn his head, to look at a goat or a sheep, anything else? And then when he sees her, he blames her for joyfully greeting him and bringing death upon herself!

She may have been young, but this near-woman was pretty smart to ask for a two-months reprieve so she could mourn her lost womanhood with her friends. This gives Jephthah some time to think. Didn't Jephthah know the story of Abraham and Isaac, how God provided a ram so that Abraham did not have to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Jephthah had two months for God's sake, what was he doing during that time? He should have been searching for, or at least been alert for, God's "ram." But Jephthah, uncreative, self-centered, himself emotionally wounded, thought of nothing but himself and his sacrifice to God. Why at the end of two months did his daughter have to return? Couldn't she have run away from home like he did as a young man? But she returned and he kept his vow.

We don't know what Jephthah did after that grisly deed, but it is recorded that the young woman's friends mourned and wailed for her. It became a tradition in the life of Israel to remember her for four days every year, this one who was so foolishly and needlessly sacrificed as part of the practice of war.

Would it help to look more closely at Jephthah himself? He was a wounded man. The son of a prostitute, he was raised in his father's house with the sons of his father's wife. And they never let him forget that he was a loser; his half-brothers never let him forget that he was not as good as them. They were cruel, probably beating and ridiculing him mercilessly. Since he was deprived of any inheritance, he fled the family and birthplace and became an outlaw and then a military chief.

Given his own abusive past, life as a bandit and trauma in war, is it any wonder that he was unable to think about alternatives to keeping this vow to God? Jephthah speaks of God's help, asks for God's help throughout the story, but God is silent. We don't have any sense that God would want Jephthah to keep his battlefield vow. Maybe in keeping the vow, Jephthah is making up for the lack of honor in the rest of his life.

He went on to become a judge for six years in Israel's history. When he died, Jephthah was buried in Gilead, the hated hometown from which he ran away as a young man.

It is a gruesome tale. The only redeeming value is perhaps the actions of the young girls who remember their friend every year, in fact make a tradition of remembering her. One has to wonder, over the years how many other girls they added to their roster of young virgins who died without bearing children, who have no one to remember them. Perhaps this is why it happens over four days; there are so many young girls that die violent, needless deaths and who must be remembered.

So today, in the tradition of these young women of Israel, we remember and mourn the young girls and women who experience sexual violence as part of war making in Congo. Unlike Jephthah's daughter, some of these women are mothers, but many are also young — almost women who have not yet been loved sexually.

While we remember the women and girls who are victimized, they are not the only wounded ones. Like in the biblical story, the men who commit these atrocities must be quite wounded themselves. Certainly in another situation they would be shy, gentle lovers rather than armed brutes perpetrating sexual violence that will be replicated over and over. But in time of war, in time of fighting for power and money, these young soldiers wound and kill women, all the while wounding themselves and their families. The whole society is affected.

How do we answer such devastation? The fear that the perpetrators are trying to inflict on the women in Congo reaches across continents and we feel the pain. We feel too the hopelessness and helplessness of the situation. So how do we respond?

Let's not forget the ways we are already involved with the Democratic Republic of Congo in this congregation. Some six years ago, Jean de Dieu came to the International Guest House, fleeing the war in his homeland of Congo. After some time, folks from this congregation and other friends helped him go to Eastern Mennonite University, and he graduated last year with a degree in economics. Last we heard from him, he is back in his homeland for now, looking after his sons and seeking ways to earn a living and bring peace there.

Jean de Dieu's home congregation in Goma has begun calling themselves a Mennonite Church. They are interested in learning more about peace and Anabaptism. A group is forming here to talk about what it might look like for us to relate to this congregation. What might it look like for us to reach out to Assembly Christian, to help them teach peace? Might they be able to reach out to women who carry the wounds of war? (See Kaye Brubaker to get involved with this group.)

The bulletin today lists some additional ways to respond to this particular crisis in Congo (one of which is the creation of a "city of joy," a safe place for survivors of rape and war atrocities to receive medical help, learn new skills, heal and thrive). But our response need not be limited by geography. We can respond in our own community. In a few weeks we are invited to participate in a workshop on domestic violence held at the University Christian Church (info is posted on the bulletin board). The Christian Peace Witness for Iraq calling for an end to the war in Iraq will be held April 29-30. Next week Sojourners is sponsoring the Mobilization to End Poverty (and certainly poverty and violence are intertwined).

These actions may seem small in the face of something as big as systematic rape and war. But I am reminded of the words of Kurt Vonnegot who said, "we have to live as if what we do matters." Our small act of remembering today or standing in opposition to war in front of the White House may seem inconsequential, but it does matter. We have to believe that it makes a difference. Or if we don't believe it, we have to act as if it does.

In this resurrection season, as we see spring buds all around us, we know that death lurks close by. But as followers of Jesus, with Jesus' friends, we keep looking for signs of the resurrection. And with the unnamed daughter's friends, we mourn and remember. We proclaim that violence and death do not have the last word. We stand together to never forget that love and life are stronger than death. This is our hope, this is our faith.