

CHILDREN OF THE ATOMIC BOMB

A sermon preached by
The Rev. Clarke K. Oler
All Saints Church
Pasadena, California

August 6th, 1995

The Feast of the Transfiguration

and

The 50th Anniversary of the Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki

I.

On August 6th, 1945, as a 19-year-old veteran of the war in Burma, I was driving a US Army truck full of radio gear over the famed Burma road into Western China. Like my two brothers who were in the Philippines, I was on my way to join the vast build-up for the invasion of the Japanese homeland which we all knew was coming

One of my older brothers was a Marine and the other was a paratroop doctor. I thought they would probably be among the first to land on the beaches of Japan. I, with my radio, would not be far behind. Suffice it to say, the three Oler sons, an entire generation of Olers, was poised for what everyone knew would be the most costly operation in terms of American lives ever to be mounted. The Americans had already sustained staggering losses in the Pacific war. But the greatest battle of all lay ahead of us

The news of the atom bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and then the news of the Japanese surrender, came through to me on the Burma Road. I can remember as though it were yesterday the overwhelming feeling of relief, of deliverance.

My parents kept a neat file of all my letters. The other day, curious as to what I wrote on that occasion, I reread those letters. They were bursting with thanksgiving that there would be no invasion, that the terrible war was finally over. "O, my God," I wrote to my parents, "we will be together again; we will be coming home."

When General MacArthur was signing the surrender documents on the deck of the battleship Missouri, the voice of a crewman who had forgotten to switch off his microphone was heard over the sound system; "Brother, I hope those are my discharge papers!" That was all any of us thought about. It never occurred to me to ask if the bombings were a good thing.

As time passed, and I became aware of the magnitude of the devastation wrought by the bombs, I felt a dreadful ambivalence: those bombs which I believed saved my life, and my brother's lives, turned out to be the most terrible device ever unleashed upon mankind. Today is the 50th anniversary of that bombing. Some of us who were actually engaged in the bitter battle against the Japanese forces remember the exultation we felt when the victory came. Today we are called by God to remember the price of that victory, and the kind of weapons and tactics that both we and our enemies resorted to in that war.

II.

It is always the Christian community's duty *to remember*. It is central to our worship, and essential to our hope. When he established the eucharist, Christ said, "Do this is remembrance of me."¹ "Do not forget my humiliation and suffering on the cross; do not forget the lies, the betrayal, the cruelty, the full range of human sins that caused my crucifixion. Do not forget the power of God that raised me from the dead and gave me the victory over the cross." That victory

¹ Luke 22:19; I Corinthians 11:24-25

was not one of human powerfulness, but of God's commitment to life, of God's refusal to turn the world over to the forces of evil. On the mount of the Transfiguration, God's voice thundered out of heaven to the three vacillating, bewildered disciples, "This is my beloved Son, listen to him!"² By remembering, we listen.

God is in the remembering. In a few days we will remember and celebrate the end of the war. I hope we will celebrate that right gloriously. It was the end of an incredibly painful and costly conflict. But I hope we will be thoughtful in our celebration. The Japanese people are now our friends. They were taught by fanatical leaders who led them through horrible military adventures. That is the remembering that the Japanese must do. They need to remember the rape of Nanking, Pearl Harbor, the Bataan death march, and the infamous prisoner of war camps if their suffering is to give way to hope. Yesterday, at the peace observance in Hiroshima, the Mayor of that city said to the world, "We want to apologize for the unbearable suffering that Japanese colonial domination and war inflicted on so many."

We need to remember, not only the terrible effects of the atomic bombs, but the fire bombing which largely destroyed almost all of Japan's sixty-six biggest cities. General Thomas Power, the commander of the U.S. bomber forces, estimated that the firebombing of Japan's cities resulted in half a million civilian deaths. Forty percent of all urban housing in the entire nation was destroyed and 20 million people were left homeless. He described the firebombing of Tokyo in March 1945 as "the greatest single disaster incurred by any enemy in military history. It was greater than the combined damage of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. There were more casualties than any other military action in the history of the world." We need to remember, not to stir up our guilt, but so that we will not minimize, we will not be tempted to glamorize what we as a nation believed it was necessary to do to fight and win that war. Without remembering there cannot be any hope.

III.

Today commemorates the dawn of the nuclear age. Those were the only two atomic weapons ever exploded against an enemy, so they present us with the only specific record of what an atomic attack is like. Yet most of us do not remember: we were not there, or, like me, if we were around at the time, we didn't pay attention; or we have numbed our consciousness because the suffering of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is too hard to look at. We have to remember what most Americans have never really known! That is the important task of today if we are to let the agony of those cities lead us to hope and a renewed commitment to life.

In 1962 Robert Jay Lifton, a research psychiatrist at Yale, went to Hiroshima to study the psychological effects upon the survivors.³ He found them, in spite of their stoicism and enormous spirit of recovery, still traumatized seventeen years later. The best way to describe his findings is to see the Hiroshima experience as taking place in four stages.

² Matthew 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35

³ Robert Jay Lifton, MD, *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima* (University of North Carolina Press, reprint edition 1991) paperback 594 pages

The first stage was the initial immersion of the people in the sea of dead and dying after the bomb fell. He called it, “the permanent encounter with death.” Survivors recalled not only feeling that they themselves would soon die, but that the whole world was dying. Mutilation and destruction was everywhere. They believed the world was ending. One man said, “The feeling I had was that everyone was dead. The whole city was destroyed. I thought all my family must be dead. It doesn’t matter if I die....This was the end of Hiroshima, of Japan, of humankind.” They referred to themselves as walking ghosts, or as one man said, “I was not really alive.”

The second stage was what Litton called “invisible contamination.” Within hours or days or weeks after the bomb fell, people began to experience grotesque symptoms: severe diarrhea and weakness, ulceration of the mouth and gums with bleeding, bleeding from all the body openings, high fever, very low white cell count, usually following a downward course until death. Most people didn’t know what it was; they spoke of a mysterious “poison.” It evoked a wide-spread terror that soon everyone in Hiroshima would be dead. None would escape the poison. Even the unborn babies were affected, many being born with misshapen heads and severe mental retardation. Then the rumor began to circulate that trees, grass and flowers would never again grow in Hiroshima. From then on Hiroshima would not be able to sustain any kind of life. It was total death.

The third stage occurred years after the bomb fell with the emergence of various forms of leukemia, the fatal malignancy which became known as the “A-bomb disease.” Over decades there was an increase in various forms of cancer – thyroid cancer, breast cancer, stomach cancer, bone-marrow cancer, lung cancer. And there was a pervasive anxiety. One doctor said – this was 17 years later! – “The fear never completely goes away. Take my own case. If I am shaving in the morning and I should happen to cut myself very slightly, I dab the blood with a piece of paper – then when I notice that it has stopped flowing, I think to myself, ‘I guess I am still alright.’” The people retained the profound fear that at any moment the A-bomb disease might break out in them; and, worse than that, they might transmit this deadly taint to future generations. To this day, nobody knows for certain the extent of the permanent genetic damage. As one woman said who was pregnant at the time and who survived the blast, “When will the silent bomb within us explode?”

The fourth stage was the persistent identification with the dead, as though the dead were the legitimate ones, and those who survived had somehow borrowed a life they did not deserve. In many cases it caused the survivors to feel they were living “as if dead.” They became in their own eyes a death-tainted group, as though they were in some vague way carriers of a fearsome destiny. Many of them carried the keloids on their faces and bodies, the thick scars of the burning, visible reminders, they thought, of their collective shame. They did not speak of their experience because they were often discriminated against; they were poor bets for employment because they might develop the disease, and their children would have difficulty finding marriage partners. At a deep level many retained a sense of guilt that they remained alive while others died, and for not having been able to do more to save others. What could they do about the keloids on their souls?

This was the experience of two small Japanese cities. You and I hear it now as if for the first time, and we say, “We did not mean it to be that way. We just wanted to kill the soldiers and stop the war. We didn’t know.”

Now we know! And, strange to say, their story is their gift to us. The memory of their suffering is their gift, not to stir up our guilt but to remind us of the terrible cost of war and the threat nuclear weapons pose to the survival of the human race. But their gift to us is greater than that: they have given us their recovery, their courage, their incredible good will instead of hatred, their commitment to peace instead of revenge. On this day of all days, they do not point the finger at us, but they reach out to us to join them in their determination to rid the world of atomic weapons and to forge an alliance with us because, like them, we know the dreadful truth.

IV.

I have said that God is in the remembering. That is not the whole truth. Yes, the remembering is essential to hope. But remembering by itself can make us cynics. Seeing again the savagery of the past can destroy our trust in human beings, including our trust in ourselves. We need to see through the human tragedy and beyond it to the vision of life on this planet as God envisioned it when he created it. The people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki have embodied that vision. That is their greatest gift of all. God is in their healing, and in their ability to rise above national and religious differences to reach out in the name of peace. I must add that I believe God was also in the just and compassionate American occupation after the war.

The Japanese Nobel Prize-winning author, Kenzaburo Oe,⁴ writing recently in *The New York Times*,⁵ reminded us that among those who died in Nagasaki were more than 8,000 Christians. The rebuilding of their city and of their lives has been an interreligious and international effort. He wrote, “With the rebuilding the surviving atomic victims are trying to move their recovery into something larger so that they may pass their faith on to those who are to come in the next century.”

Today we face not only the threat of a war between nuclear powers but a nuclear accident, or a terrorist attack. America must take the lead in renouncing atomic weapons and weapons testing. That is not a simple thing to accomplish. We cannot dis-invent the bomb. But the enormous creativity and intense effort that went into the making of the bomb we must now turn to the un-making of the nuclear threat. We are presently engaged with Russia in the reduction of our nuclear arsenals. We must do everything in our power to maintain and enlarge that effort through treaties and increasingly effective verification. We must continually inform our leaders of our absolute commitment to that goal.

Einstein said, “We are like infants playing with dynamite ...and thus we drift towards unparalleled catastrophe.” The use, or the threat of use, or even the mere possession of nuclear

⁴ A biography of Kenzaburo Oe, winner of the 1994 Nobel Prize for Literature, is available at the Nobel Prize Website, <http://nobelprize.org/literature/laureates/1994/oe-bio.html>.

⁵ Kenzaburo Oe, “Denying History,” in *The New York Times Magazine*, July 2, 1995, pp. 28-29.

weapons presupposes leaders of superhuman wisdom and self-control. Democracy accepts that our leaders are fallible human beings who all too often, like the people who elect them, “know not what they do.” But they can be held to account, they can have second thoughts, and they can put mistakes to right. No one can put to right mass death and the contamination of the earth.

If God is in the remembering, God is even more importantly in the making of the peace. That was the meaning of Jesus’ life, the Prince of Peace; of his death and resurrection; of God’s command at the Transfiguration: “This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to Him.” “Listen to Him! You have my precious world in your hands.”

The Japanese people once lost their way in war. We must not lose our way in peace. In our national proclivity for optimism and happy endings, we do not like to look into the heart of darkness, but on this day we must and we do. We do not dare to succumb to collective denial. We must re-awaken to the dreadful power of annihilation that we possess in our nuclear weapons. There are some clouds that do not have a silver lining.

Today we let the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the dead and the living, be our teachers, so their suffering will not have been in vain. With the help of Almighty God, the author of all hope, we let them lead us now. For we, too, are children of the atomic bomb.