

Faith and Life REFLECTIONS

September 2007

“War, Peace and Faith”

Faith and Life Reflections is a monthly resource for lay and rostered leaders on headlines, current books, movies, social and ethical issues such as those involving natural disasters, the environment, the challenges of aging and developments in the church. Comments may be returned to the writer or to the editor, Mark A. Staples (Mstaples@Ltsp.edu, director of the Faith and Life Institute at LTSP).

This article is written by Mark Staples.

Focus of our reflection

“War, Peace and Faith,” a consideration of war’s influences and impact on our lives, with a focus on this month’s PBS seven-part series called *THE WAR*, produced and directed by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick.

Introduction:

I suspect all of us have been impacted personally by war in our lives, either directly through military service or indirectly through our relationships with loved ones.

For my part, my father lied about his age (he wasn’t yet 18) to join the Army just before World War I broke out. Soon he was on his way to the European Theater and France, and fought in the Battle of the Marne. He was gassed and wounded in the battle. My father never said much about his war experience. But my mother and I treasured a letter my grandmother received from a family in France that cared for my dad for a while after his injuries. The family wrote in painstaking English to my grandmother about what a fine young man my dad was. I treasure that letter, and I think about it whenever someone is critical of France’s domestic

and foreign policy. War has its intensely personal side.

The Burns/Novick documentary series is likely to rekindle your personal thoughts and memories about war. The documentary, according to our

faculty member Professor Katie Day, traces the well-known contours of the history of U.S. involvement in World War II, from 1941-1945, from Pearl Harbor to Hiroshima, Northern Africa to Berlin. The series weaves these events into a narrative supported by a vast collection of visual resources dug up from various archives. But what makes the series especially compelling is how the narrative is told through the experiences of four prototypical American towns – Luverne, MN; Waterbury, CT; Mobile, AL, and Sacramento, CA, according to Day,

who reviewed the series in a write up for WETA, the Washington, DC PBS member station and presenting station for the series.

Veterans of both the war front and home front give voice to the silenced struggles of their generation. They speak eloquently at times, and haltingly



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at other times, about the human dimensions of that war. Behind the headlines and newsreels, the patriotic symbolism and triumphalist rhetoric, was human experience marked by fear, confusion, moral conflict, and death. This is not to say that courage, clarity, faith, and even joy were absent during the war, but the series does chip away at the cultural prison created by rosy stereotypes of “the good war” and “the greatest generation.” The war in its fighting seldom seemed good, and those in this generation who sacrificed so much did not always feel great, Day notes.

Historically, the Lutheran Church, and many other denominations, have held to a “just war” theology in struggling to justify conflict under certain painful circumstances.

While the climate and terrain of war today may be different, and the cultures and stakes differ too, many of the larger questions of meaning remain the same, and our faith traditions give us language to frame the issues. None of these questions is easy to deal with.

Points for Discussion:

1. What personal stories do you have in connection with wars, past and present? Do you find it difficult to talk about them?
2. Is peace always possible? What would it take?
3. What does the universality of God’s love mean to you?
4. How do we understand our loyalty both to God and to nation?
5. Are followers of God called to kill for a national cause?
6. How can we recognize sin within ourselves and our government as well as in an enemy?
7. What is the relevance of forgiveness in the context of war?

Other References:

- Read *Beyond “the Good War”* by Professor Katie Day, who is the Charles A. Schieren Professor of Church and Society at The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia. Katie is a sociologist and Presbyterian minister. (*Used by permission, WETA, Washington, DC*)
- The seven part series *THE WAR* will begin on many PBS member stations starting September 23, 2007.
- Check out pbs.org/thewar. You can access veterans’ stories as well as contributing your own, thanks to a collaboration between *THE WAR* and the Veterans History Project.
- Read *War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning*, by Chris Hedges. Public Affairs, 2002, \$23. Hedges has worked in several theaters as a war correspondent, including with The New York Times.

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