

Peacemaking And Storytelling

The seventh book of the Bible is called “Judges.” The title refers to the succession of military leaders who arise to deliver Israel from oppression. The exploits of Samson and, to a lesser extent, Gideon have found a degree of popular awareness in Western culture, but the rest of the book is not well known.

The book of Judges addresses issues of leadership and social order within a community searching for a sense of identity. It seems odd that many of the hero stories in Judges end with a statement like “And the land was quiet for 40 years” (Judges 3:11). The book then moves directly to the next set of war stories. Why are we not told any stories that take place during these long periods of peace? The answer, of course, is that such stories do not fulfill the purpose of the book.

One important thing the Bible often reveals to us is that the patterns of literature reflect the patterns of life. Telling stories about peace requires much more imagination and effort than telling stories about war, just as living peacefully demands more imagination and courage than waging war. Fighting is always the easy way out, just as war is the easy story to tell. The inertia of human relations always carries us in the direction of violence.

Much is being said and debated about “Just War Theory” these days. One of the tenets of this idea is that war should always be a last resort. This is where Just War Theory falls apart. The easiness of going to war short-circuits its potential as a last resort.

Unfortunately, it is easy to buy into the common ideology that war is the context of the greatest acts of courage. It troubles me that I enjoy watching war movies so much. The best surprises come, however, when what looks like a war movie turns out to be something else.

I recently watched the fine movie about a Soviet submarine crew called “K-19: The Widowmaker.” In this “true” story, a Soviet nuclear missile submarine

malfunctions and threatens to explode, taking with it the American navy ship which is observing it. The Soviet captain is afraid that the explosion might instigate a catastrophic war, so he orders the crew to fix the reactor. Seven crew members eventually enter the reactor chamber to take part in the repairs. They successfully repair the reactor, but within a few weeks all seven are dead from radiation sickness. Years later the captain reveals that he requested the Soviet government to award these men with the "Hero of the State" medal. The government declined because their acts of bravery did not take place during a time of war. The captain's final evaluation is "Who needs honors from such men?"

A simplistic reading of the book of Judges would tell us that the God of Jewish and Christian tradition uses violence to solve problems.

For those of us in the Christian tradition the season of Lent reminds us that ours is a faith that was founded by an act of murder. Our collective misunderstanding of this event has instilled Christianity with a violent impulse for 2,000 years.

There are acts of great courage during times of peace and there are great stories to be told about these times, if we will summon the imagination to tell them. The Bible may not tell us enough of these stories, but it invites us into great gaps of silence that we might struggle to fill.

[Mark McEntire](#) is assistant professor of religion at Belmont University.