

Psalm 4077 (Matt. 11.28-30)
Jeremy Rutledge, Covenant Church
May 25, 2008

When I watch the show, I almost always remember something my Hebrew professor used to say. He said, “In the lament there is life.” My professor went on to say that when we mourn, when we protest, when we lament, we are keeping alive some vital hope that things could be different.¹ “In the lament there is life,” he said, and he wasn’t talking about a twenty-five minute sitcom, but whenever I sit down to watch the show his words come to me. Because the show may be the deepest expression of sustained lament that I have ever seen on television. It ran for eleven seasons, each one of them a darkly comedic protest against the horrors of war. The show I am talking about, which many of you have already deduced from the sermon’s title is, of course, *M*A*S*H*. And just in case there is someone here who has not seen it, *M*A*S*H* tells the story of the 4077th Mobile Army Surgical Hospital operating near the front lines during the Korean War. The show first aired in 1972 and it used the Korean War as an allegory for the war in Vietnam that was raging at the time. When *M*A*S*H* began to make its way into American living rooms, then, it was broadcasting to a war conscious, and, in many ways, war weary audience. And *M*A*S*H* had a lot to say. “In the lament there is life.”

*M*A*S*H*’s particular lament was more often than not offered in the language of bitter humor. Its cast of characters ranged from the eclectic to the zany, with surgeons sipping homemade martinis in bathrobes and combat boots, corporals clinging to their teddy bears at night, and one well-known recruit from Toledo who always appeared in

¹ Samuel E. Balentine, “Enthroned on the Praises and Laments of Israel,” in *The Lord’s Prayer: Perspectives for Reclaiming Christian Prayer*, ed. Daniel L. Migliore (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 34.

drag, bucking for a psychiatric discharge. So the show sort of got its foot in the door by being funny, really funny. But mixed in with all of the absurd jokes was the occasional joke that was not funny, the awkward moment of silence, some scene of surgeons covered in blood working feverishly, or a cut to the helicopter pad where there seemed an endless stream of incoming wounded. And every once in a while an entire episode would sort of hit you like a glass of cold water, a deadpan diatribe that placed a few jokes around a great many questions. I'm thinking of a certain episode that debuted in 1975 entitled "Quo Vadis, Captain Chandler?"² The voices from that particular program have haunted me as I considered the Memorial Day holiday, when we are asked to remember those who have served and suffered in the wars, and also as I have reflected on the stories of Rabbi Jesus, where we are asked to remember some ancient wisdom and ask what it might mean.

"Quo Vadis, Captain Chandler?" begins as a great many episodes of *M*A*S*H* begin, with the arrival of wounded soldiers needing medical attention. In its first frames we see dusty buses with bright red crosses painted on the side pulling up, their doors swinging wide for doctors and nurses to climb inside and assess the damage. The most critical patients are taken directly from the buses into surgery, while one of the show's mainstay characters, Corporal O'Reilly, nicknamed "Radar," stays to collect the names and serial numbers of the remaining soldiers. Radar goes from man to man, adding the relevant information to a clipboard, until he reaches a final soldier and asks for his name. In the opening scene we don't hear the man say his name, we just see Radar's response. His eyes widen and he checks with the man again, pausing for a moment as if he's seen a

² *M*A*S*H*, "Quo Vadis, Captain Chandler?" episode 82, November 7, 1975.

ghost. In the next scene Radar finds his superiors to report that they have a problem. He tells them, “We got a guy that says he’s Jesus Christ.”

What follows is a series of gags as the characters of *M*A*S*H* each respond in their own way to the wounded captain who claims to be Jesus. The show’s main characters, surgeons “Hawkeye” Pierce and B. J. Hunnicutt, crack a few sacrilegious jokes and shake their heads at the shell-shocked captain calling himself Christ. Their nemesis, Frank Burns, impugns the character of the wounded soldier, calling him a commie who should be court-martialed for cowardice and blasphemy, as if the latter were a military offense. The commanding officer, Sherman Potter, takes a decidedly medical point of view, asking what needs to be done for the man’s physical and emotional health. And two additional characters come into play. One is a comically paranoid intelligence officer, Colonel Sam Flagg, who sees in everyone else, especially this Jesus clown, a direct threat to the United States of America. The other is a very likable Jewish psychiatrist named Sidney Freedman called in to evaluate the patient who continues to claim that he is Jesus come to the battlefields of the Korean peninsula. As the episode unfolds we see how one man, speaking the rabbi’s language of peace, reconciliation, and unconditional love, begins to put everyone else on the defensive. And the longer we watch, the more the question of who is really crazy in this show rises to the surface. The question is nowhere more pronounced than in a scene where the psychiatrist comes to sit at Jesus’ bedside to evaluate him.

In his book, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, former West Point psychologist Dave Grossman details the extraordinary toll that war takes on the psyches of those who participate in it. In Grossman’s professional

opinion, “War is an environment that will psychologically debilitate 98% of all who participate in it for any length of time. And the 2% who are not driven insane by war appear to have already been insane...before coming to the battlefield.”³ Grossman’s work describes the range of soldier’s responses to their damaged psyches, from the relatively mild symptoms of recurring nightmares and chemical addictions to the much more severe manifestations of post-traumatic stress disorder and full-fledged psychic breaks with a reality stained by the atrocities of war. This psychological scarring remains the untold cost of war and Grossman would remind us that any time we send people into massive armed conflict, we can expect them to come back, if they come back, bearing wounds that are more than skin deep. Grossman suggests that our very humanity is damaged as the bombs are dropped and the fires burn. And his good news and bad news is that he believes that “despite an unbroken tradition of violence and war, [people are] not by nature...killer[s].”⁴ It seems to me that this was one of the points that *M*A*S*H* was trying to make, which brings us back to the bedside of the captain who said he was Jesus and the psychiatrist who came to sit with him.

The scene is set in a recovery area with the Jesus character laid up in a cot. He wears nicely pressed pajamas and his head is wrapped in a clean white bandage. Dr. Freedman comes to see him, dressed in an olive drab uniform and carrying a clipboard with the captain’s real history on it. When the patient shakes his hand and says that he is Jesus Christ, Freedman responds, “Your presence here poses some interesting questions.” In the conversation that follows, the psychiatrist asks the patient how long he has know his

³ Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1996) 50.

⁴ *Ibid.*, xiv.

true identity. Up until a few days earlier, we learn, the patient was called Arnold Chandler. He was a Western farm kid who enlisted in the Army and had become a decorated bombardier. He had flown over fifty successful missions, sighting targets on the ground from the nose of a B-29. After listening to this litany of his former life, the wounded captain tells the psychiatrist that he's sorry but he's not that guy, he is Christ the Lord. The psychiatrist presses him, "But you died." "I arose," Jesus replies. "That was a long time ago. Where have you been since then?" "I live on in all men." As they continue to talk, Dr. Freedman hears this wounded man saying that he has no enemies, that he loves all people, even North Koreans, that he would never drop bombs on anyone. "My children," Jesus says, his eyes tearing up, "Why would I hurt my children?" And as the scene fades its questions hang in the air. The psychiatrist looks compassionately on the man and realizes that he cannot fight any more. He returns to the unit's commanding officer and says that the wounded captain is not really Jesus, but he is not really himself either. He is a man who got lost in the war.

Perhaps what is so striking about the episode is that it never seeks to fully resolve all of the tension it creates. The writers simply leave us with a wounded flier whose own psyche has chosen the delusion that he is Jesus Christ over the despair that he is a killer. And as the twenty-five minute television show draws toward its conclusion, a sneaking suspicion begins to grow that amid all the identity confusion, the only thing that remains rather clear is what the rabbi came to teach us. He moved in the circles of the suffering and the outcast, the wounded and the weary. He told his followers to put down their swords and love their enemies. He practiced a radical forgiveness that included every person, calling "the least of these" his brothers and sisters. And when the wounded

*M*A*S*H* character needed to make a total break with the horrors of war, he broke for the opposite of those horrors, an opposite that he understood to be the figure of Jesus. I did not come to take life but to preserve it. I did not come to harm people but to heal them. I am not a bombardier dropping fire onto human beings, I am Christ full of mercy and compassion for my children.

This morning I will not seek to resolve the tension any more than the brilliant writers of *M*A*S*H* did in 1975. I might simply suggest, as they did, that there is a marked contrast between the teachings of Jesus and the ongoing violence of a warring world. I might also suggest that *M*A*S*H* as an allegory still holds up and should probably be watched more regularly by all of us living in a nation that has, at this moment, 190,000 troops deployed in two wars being waged in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁵ And I suppose I might take one final step and just ask what kind of psychic wounds we are asking our servicepeople to bear as their tours are endlessly prolonged in wars that are now running into their sixth and seventh years respectively with no clear end in sight. This is to say nothing of the hundreds of thousands of civilians killed and the several million refugees who have been forced to flee their homes. Perhaps we should take a moment sometime this weekend and mutter the sincerest prayer of all, a prayer of deepest lament for the unspeakable human suffering of war.

At the end of the *M*A*S*H* episode, we find the wounded captain who still thinks he is Jesus climbing back into a bus similar to the one in which he arrived. Just before he does, Radar approaches him with a question. "Are you really who you say you are?" Radar asks. The wounded captain answers that he is and Radar asks a second question.

⁵ Thomas Powers, "Iraq: Will We Ever Get Out?" *The New York Review of Books*, May 29, 2008, 13.

Reaching into his backpack, from which he retrieves his teddy bear, he asks Jesus if he could bless the bear. Jesus, with a clean bandage still on his head, places his hand on the bear and says in a low, calm voice, "Bless you." Radar looks down at the bear, touched, his boyish face breaking into a smile as the wounded Jesus adds, "And bless you, Radar." Afterwards, Radar's smile fades and he looks as if he is going to cry. He looks Chandler or Jesus or whoever it is in the eyes and says, "Oh, my name is Walter." And in a sterling moment at the end of a sitcom, with one man who knows who he is talking to another who has lost who he is, the humanity of each sort of illumines the screen. And the crazy Christ the Lord says, "Bless you...Walter." Then he walks off to catch his bus, pausing to bless the people he passes, the men and women in tired green uniforms, the exhausted ones far from home slogging through another day in an endless conflict, the lament worn in their hung heads and the bags under their eyes. "Bless all of you," Jesus says to them. Then he takes his seat on the bus and is driven away.

According to our sacred stories, the rabbi said, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." And on this day, in this moment, may this be our crazy prayer for everyone suffering from the wars we've waged. Amen.