

## **Not Fun and Games**

(sermon for December 4, 2011 – Advent Sunday 2)

By Dr. David R. Mains

**Text:** Luke 2:36-38.

**Subject:** Victories in warfare.

**Desired Response:** Recognize this reality.

**How To:** Don't quite early on in the battle.

**How Long:** Stay the course for the 40 days.

**Sermon in a Sentence:** Those experienced in warfare recognize that victories seldom come about all that easily.

Few wars end as quickly as the one the U.S. led against Iraq in 2003. It began on March 20 with the “shock and awe” campaign that blasted Baghdad and other Iraqi targets with massive and widespread bombings. Four days later, invading coalition troops were within 60 miles of Baghdad, and by mid-April they held every one of Iraq’s major cities. After only 26 days of fighting, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Department of Defense announced that all major combat operations were over.

By way of contrast, the United States started military operations in Afghanistan in 2001, and even though we have over 100,000 troops there, plus somewhere less than half that many from other countries, we still are unable to declare victory.

Twenty-six days—over ten years—that’s a big contrast!

To give perspective, World War I lasted about 4 ½ years. It was June 28, 1914 to November 11, 1918. Eight million, 300 thousand servicemen were killed. The cost of the war in round figures was about \$337 billion.

Less than 20 years later, World War II broke out on September 1, 1939, when Germany attacked Poland. Japan’s surprise attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 brought the U.S. into the conflict. Victory in Europe eventually came on May 7, 1945, and in the Far East on September 2, 1945. Over the course of those almost-exactly 6 years, some 16 million servicemen died.

That figure doesn't include civilian losses. Because of bombings of cities, massacres, starvation, epidemics, immigrations, whatever, the civilian deaths are now always huge—maybe

as many as 35-40 million during World War II. It's estimated that both Germany and Russia lost a full tenth of their respective populations. We know as a fact that over six million Jewish people were murdered in those years during the Holocaust.

Over 50 countries were involved in World War II, at a cost of \$1 trillion, 150 billion.

All this is to say that those experienced in warfare recognize that victories seldom come about all that quickly or easily.

Now, this is also true of spiritual warfare. You are aware, I presume, that our planet is the focus of a cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil ... light and darkness ... God and Satan. Please don't hear this as quaint preacher-talk. It's language used all throughout the Bible. 1st John 3:8 states clearly that the reason Jesus came to Earth was to destroy the devil's work.

Jesus talked of a sewer casting seed on the path, but then Satan coming and snatching it away so that people wouldn't believe and be saved.

When His disciples reported back regarding their first successful mission on their own, our Lord exclaimed that He saw Satan falling from heaven in a flash of lightning.

You may not believe in a person devil or matters such as spiritual warfare, but you would be hard-pressed to establish from Scripture that this wasn't where Jesus and the early church were coming from.

I fear that in this country we are not as conscious of this fight as were our brothers and sisters in previous generations, or as are contemporary Christians in ever so many other parts of the world.

Once again, those experienced in warfare (including spiritual warfare) recognize that victories seldom come about all that easily or quickly.

I have a feeling that the older women I'm going to speak about next understand this truth. Were it not for four sentences that make up a short paragraph in chapter two of Luke's Gospel, we wouldn't know anything about her. These begin, "*There was a prophetess...*" or a woman prophet.

Prophets were forth-tellers of God's Word. Sometimes they were also foretellers—speaking out about the future. I believe it's fair to say that those with prophetic gifts—whether men or women—have special insight into the mind of the Lord for the immediate and quite often for the future as well. We can assume this woman was thus gifted.

Her name was Anna. Scripture continues, "*The daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Ashur.*" We know nothing more about Phanuel. The tribe of Ashur was a part of the breakaway kingdom of Israel that formed after the death of Solomon. This Northern Kingdom was eventually conquered by the Assyrians, and the people in tribes like Ashur were either killed or deported to other countries, where they were assimilated and eventually no longer had a Jewish identity. So Ashur was one of the "ten lost tribes of Israel."

Apparently Anna's ancestors were true worshipers of Jehovah and had somehow returned to the Promised Land.

Continuing with the text: *"She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four."* An alternate reading would be that she had been a widow for 84 years. One way or the other, for that day and age, she was way up there in years.

Scripture again: *"She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them ["them" being Joseph and Mary with the baby Jesus] ... coming up to them at that very moment [I take this to be at the very moment Simeon finished with his blessing] ... she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Israel."*

How much this saintly woman understood about the true mission of Jesus, we don't know. But old Anna was aware enough to grasp that this given baby boy would grow up to be the long-awaited Jewish messiah.

All Israel was desperate for this day to come. But Anna was not content to remain passive. Instead, knowing that spiritual victories seldom come about all that easily, she had given herself almost totally to prayer and fasting. I don't know exactly what Luke meant when he wrote these words, but (quote) *"she never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying."* To me that sounds like someone totally committed to a given cause. And the text makes it clear that she now felt her involvement in an intense battle had resulted in victory. That's because she now knew that the promised "anointed one of God," which is what the word "messiah" literally means, had finally arrived on the scene.

We tend to think of the birth of our Lord as something that was totally in the hands of God. It's like He picked the date and it was going to happen on that day regardless. This paragraph about the involvement of Anna through fasting and intense prayer makes me believe that even spiritual events of magnitude such as the incarnation still require the earnest prayers of the people of God.

If it doesn't seem strange for saints down through the centuries since the First Coming of the Christ to now pray for His Second Coming, why should we assume that the prayers of God's people had nothing to do with His first advent?

But allow me to ask, do you agree with my premise that those experienced in spiritual warfare recognize that major victories seldom come about all that easily? **(PAUSE)**

And how big a victory would it be if our country were to experience another marvelous time of spiritual awakening?

Given where the spiritual climate of America is at present, would you say that such a season of national refreshing is a possibility without a major prayer involvement on the part of some older Simeons and Annas giving themselves to prayer and fasting today?

I'm talking to you men and women in the G.I. Generation. According to Tom Brokaw, your era was the greatest of the Americans. I know you are dying off, but I believe that some of you still have a major work to do.

You in the Silent Generation—close to 50 million of you were born between 1925 and 1943. After seven consecutive G.I. Generation presidents, voters skipped your age set and, starting with Bill Clinton, elected Boomer presidents. What about now making your lasting mark in the spiritual realm? Can you show us how to fast and pray for your homeland?

Boomers (1944-1962)—nobody talked that much about generations until you came along. But with 78 million of you, everyone had to sit up and take notice. You're the 800-pound gorilla that has always seen yourself as unique. Can you teach the rest of us how to call out to heaven and pray down spiritual fire? Believe me, we would all love you for that.

I appeal to the members of Generation X. You were born between 1963 and 1981, and in this land you numbered about 56 million. I assume this drop was due to legalized abortion. You're the latchkey kids who came home to television as your babysitter. So pop culture has had a major impact on your lives. I'm told you want your religion to be participative. So I have an appropriate challenge. Fast and pray—that's participative.

Millennials, born in 1982 and later, would you believe that almost all past major religious awakenings began with younger people? That's a fact. The experts all speak highly of Millennials. They tell us to expect great things from you. Lead us in a time of spiritual renewal and we will all be eternally grateful.

I don't know about you, but I'm getting desperate for another great day of the Lord. Anna-like, I'm not content to remain passive and just wait around to see what's going to happen. I'm for calling out to God, for praying like never before, and underlining my requests with fasting. What about you?

I believe the time in which we are living is unique. Why? Because a call has gone out to mark these last 40 days of the year 2011 by serious prayer and fasting for revival in America. And yes, the people involved are praying as well for Egypt and Libya and Israel and the whole of the Middle East, and for many other countries, and about various personal situations, but the main concern being targeted is the spiritual condition of the United States.

It takes a great effort to rally people for a cause like this. And when little seems to be happening, participants tend to discontinue their involvement. They say, "Preach on something else. We've heard about this topic for long enough."

They're a little like certain American citizens at the start of the Civil War who took their picnic baskets and tablecloths to the site of some of the early conflicts like Bull Run. But when the bullets started flying and troops began to fall and blood flowed freely, these spectators ran in horror from the carnage they witnessed. They didn't realize that war is hell, and clear victories don't usually come about all that easily.

I hope people in today's American church aren't naïve like this—assuming that spiritual warfare is different, and truly gentlemanly, and more fun-and-games than it is slogging it out day after day, week after week, month after month, and year after year, until finally a major victory can truthfully be claimed.

Fellow participants ... I know that fasting is not as enjoyable as dinner at Red Lobster or Olive Garden or Applebee's or even McDonald's. That's just reality. But stay the course. Remain true to what the Holy Spirit has asked you to do.

And you who have yet to join in on what is taking place ... please don't wait any longer to participate. Help us win a great victory in a strategic battle against the enemy right here on our home turf.