

Just one reading for you this afternoon:

“While he was still speaking, suddenly a crowd came, and the one called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him; but Jesus said to him, “Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?” When those who were around him saw what was coming, they asked, “Lord, should we strike with the sword?” Then one of them struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his right ear. But Jesus said, “No more of this!” And he touched his ear and healed him. Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple police, and the elders who had come for him, “Have you come out with swords and clubs as if I were a bandit? When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness!”” (Lk 22:47–53, NRSV)

Christ of the cross and of the empty tomb, strengthen us to bear the burdens of the day, to seek you amid the hurts and questions, and to trust you for mercy enough for this day. Amen. (From commonprayer.net)

Have any of you ever seen
One of those ancestry.com commercials?
The ones where the guy or girl is in front of
A white, digital background, sitting on a stool.
And they say something like: I joined ancestry.com
And I discovered that I was related to George Washington.
And for \$30/a month you can discover that you're related
To George Washington too.

Well, I didn't discover that I was related to George Washington,
But I was able to take advantage of an [ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com) free trial
And prove an old family legend.

You see when I was a kid, my great grandmother used to
Tell me all kinds of stories. And to be honest, it was never
100% clear if they were always true. One day, I must have been
Ten years old, she pulled out an old VHS tape, and said I want
To show you a movie about your uncle.

She popped in the tape, and on the screen, a
Black and white picture began to play.

The title of the film flashed on the screen:
Sergeant York, starring Gary Cooper.

As I discovered much later in life,
According to [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com) Sergeant Alvin C. York
Is a relative.

He's just not an uncle.

He's my fifth cousin 4x removed.

But that's close enough?

The movie chronicles the story of
Alvin C. York, a poor farmer in the mountains of tennessee.
Alvin lived with his mother and two siblings, farming his land to
provide

Food and shelter for his family. They didn't have much. Alvin had lost his
Father earlier in life.

But although Alvin was a hard worker.
He liked to have a good time and was known
For being a bit of a hell raiser around town.
In one scene Alvin's brother goes to fetch him
From a bar. And upon entering the bar he finds his brother
Inciting a fist fight with some of the other patrons.

And that was Alvin's reputation.
But one day Alvin's life as a hell raiser
Came to an abrupt stop.
Alvin York found religion.

On January 1, 1915 Alvin York walked into a revival service
And walked out a Christian.

One biographer describes York's conversion with these words:
"In just a few months Alvin was transformed from a drunkard,
brawler, and malcontent to a leader in the church, a Sunday school
teacher, a choir leader, and a respected man in the community."¹

You see Alvin York was the type of person that when
He decided he was going to do something,
He was going to do it all the way.
So When Alvin York decided to become a Christian

¹ Douglas V. Mastriano, *Alvin York: A New Biography of the Hero of the Argonne*, American Warriors (Lexington, Ky: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), 22.

On January 1, 1915 that meant that his entire life was going to change.

For York, Christianity was more than just showing up to Church on

Easter and Christmas. Being a Christian was an everyday affair.

So you may be wondering why there's a movie about Alvin York. They don't really make movies about farmers in the mountains of Tenn.

Just a couple of years after York converted to Christianity, The United States declared war on Germany, formally entering WWI. In the wake of that declaration Woodrow Wilson instituted A nationwide draft, requiring men from all of the country to enlist. Boys from Alvin's home eagerly filled in their draft registrations. But when Alvin received a letter in the mail telling him he had no choice but

To sign up for the draft, he was dismayed.

A few years earlier Alvin would have eagerly joined the other Young men from Paul Mall who penciled in their names as soon As they received their letter. Alvin even had military men in his family.

His ancestors were patriots, fighting for the Union during the Civil War, a

Very unpopular thing to do in Tennessee. But Alvin, you see, when Alvin converted to Christianity, he believed he had to accept the whole package.

And part of that package was: "Thou Shalt not kill"

To say the least, Alvin was caught between a rock and a hard place. He desired to see his country prosper. He considered himself a loyal American.

But he believed that killing was contrary to the will of God.

In Alvin's own words: "I wanted to follow both. But I couldn't. They were opposite.

And I couldn't reconcile them nohow in my soul. I wanted to do what was right. I wanted to be a good Christian and a good American too. I had always figured that the two were sort of connected. And now I was beginning to find out that they were kinder opposed to each other. If I went away to war and fought and killed, according to my reading of the Bible, I weren't a good Christian, And if I didn't go to war and do these things, according to Uncle Sam, I weren't a good American."²

On his draft card, beside the question do you claim exemption from Draft to the United States Military. Alvin York wrote, "Yes, Don't want to fight."

Of course, that response didn't mean much to Uncle Sam.

The United States military denied Alvin's request.

When he appealed, they denied him again.

And then again.

He was told by the United States government that

Christianity as they understood it has no special creed except the Bible, which its members more or less interpret for themselves, and

² Ibid., 26.

some do not dis-believe in war at least there is nothing forbidding them to participate.”³

Hoping that the war would end before he ever saw battle, Alvin packed his bags and headed off to basic training in GA.

Alvin excelled. He took orders well, did everything he was told. York, a subsistence farmer who grew and hunted everything that he and his family ate, turned out to be the best shot in his company. In what is one of the more famous scenes of the movie, York hit three bulls eyes in a row, astonishing his

Commanding officer. This resulted in a prompt recommendation that York

train the entire company in the art of shooting.

This, however, brought Alvin’s quandary to a head.

He met with the Major of his unit, also a devout Christian.

One biographer writes that the two met to talk over

Alvin’s conflicting and that the meeting looked like a scene out of Augustine’s

writings. The two went back and forth. Alvin would throw out a verse

That seemingly denounced war: But I say unto you, that ye rests not evil: but whosoever shall smit thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Matt 5:39). The major would retort: “he that hath no sword, let him sell his garment, and buy one.” (Luke 22:36). The major introduced Alvin to Augustine’s just war theory and finished his belief by quoting Ezekiel 33.⁴

³ Ibid., 27.

⁴ Ibid., 35-40.

Alvin walked away even more conflicted. He was allowed a 10 day furlough

To pray about it. To sort out his thoughts on war. The Major told him that after 10 days, if he decided that he couldn't do it, then he would see to it that Alvin would never have to fight.

Alvin spent 36 hours fasting in solitude in the mountains of his Tenn. Home, fasting and praying.

When he came down, Alvin York decided to fight. "I am going to war with the sword of the Lord," he wrote, and of Gideon. . . . "I have received my assurance."⁵

Many historians consider Alvin York the greatest irony of WWI. York, the reluctant, conflicted warrior, went to war.

And he become a war hero.

In October 1918 Alvin York accomplished what many consider the greatest feat of the war. A report from his commanding officer reads:

"Practically unassisted, he [Alvin] captured 132 Germans (three of whom were officers), took about thirty-five machine guns, and killed no less than twenty-five of the enemy, later found by others on the scene of York's extraordinary exploit. - See more at:

<http://sgtyork.org/christian#sthash.8JFbCvwS.dpuf>

Alvin York was awarded the metal of honor.

Later on his life would be made into a film.

It would be nominated for an academy award.

Alvin York did not rush into war.

He painstakingly and prayerfully, considered what it meant to fight.

⁵ Ibid., 41.

After the war, Alvin with through period of confidence and struggle with his decision.

On his death bed, he asked his son, if what he had done was right.⁶

We may agree or disagree, whether or not it was right for Alvin York to fight.

Some of us may believe that the Christian faith calls us to non-violence.

Other of us may believe that as Christians we are responsible to stand up to injustice

And if violence is necessary, then so be it.

But, I think, we can all learn from Alvin York's struggle.

York did not jump head first into war.

He wrestled with his decision.

Struggled with it until the end of his life.

Which is pretty different from our text this morning.

We find Jesus and his followers .

Judas has betrayed him and

Lead his executioners straight to him.

Imagine what the disciples felt as they watched one of there own

Approach them with betrayal in his eyes.

Everything that they had worked for now compromised.

The man that they followed and loved and cared for.

This innocent man was now facing arrest and execution.

The text tells us that the mob that approached them

Was carrying clubs and swords.

⁶ <http://sgtyork.org/christian>

These weren't diplomats.
John tells us that they were soldiers.

Jesus was an innocent man, betrayed by a follower,
Faced with an unjust arrest, if anyone had
The right to defend themselves it was the disciples and Jesus.
The mob that surrounded them clearly wasn't looking to talk, but to
have Jesus
Impisoned and killed. Jesus and his disciples ministry had just
been invaded.

In every single gospel this story occurs.
In our text one of the disciples cries out, Lord should we strike
them with the sword?
Before Christ get a chance to respond one of them grabs a sword,
And slices off the ear of a high priest's slave
In the gospel of Mark,
The question isn't even asked the sword is drawn instinctively.
The text says "suddenly."
In the Gospel of John,
It is Peter, head strong as always, who uses his own sword.
No questions asked.
He slices off of the right ear of the high priest's slave.
Can you blame him?
Approached by a violent mob, seeking the death of Christ,
Can you blame the disciples for want to take action.
For asking: should we strike back?

In the other three gospels the story ends there.

Jesus rebukes Peter or whoever.

He says something like put that away, if you live by

The sword you die by the sword.

But in our text, Jesus reaches out and touches the injured man's ear.

He heals his ear.

You see the disciple, maybe peter, rushed head first into a fight.

Instinctively grabbed a sword before Jesus had time to answer the question.

Or say wait.

The first response from this disciple was aggression.

And look what happen.

The man who lost his ear. It wasn't the high priest.

It wasn't a roman soldier.

It wasn't a member of the mob.

It was the high priest's slave.

Of all the people to lose their ear,

It was a person who had no choice

But to be there. I imagine that he woke up that morning

With no knowledge that that evening he would be part of an Angry mob.

He may have had no desire to be there at all.

But he had no choice.

He was a slave, a bystander if there was one.

The disciple's haste took the ear of a man

Held captive by Christ's adversaries.

The disciple thought he was striking an enemy,
Just by swinging a sword in the general direction of the mob.
But his quickness resulted in an innocent causality.
Jesus was left to pick up the pieces.

That's lucky
Unfortunately for us,
We are not so lucky to be accompanied by the physical
Presence of Jesus. Jesus can't pick up our messes.
But every time we respond with aggression, as a country or as a
Human being, we risk the possibility of an innocent person getting
caught by the blade
Of our sword.

Do you see where I'm going with all of this:
It was the quick resort to violence that cost the ear
Of an innocent man.
So what I am suggesting is this: any decision to respond violently
Even when we are met with aggression should be deliberated
slowly and carefully .
Violence should weigh on us like a boulder.
We should struggle with what it means to be violent.
We should seek every opportunity not to.
Every alternative.
10 days in the mountains fasting and praying.

Like Alvin York, maybe in the end, we'll find it necessary.
But the decision to take a life should always weigh on us.

Maybe in the end, however, we'll find that we can never make that decision.

The weight is just too heavy.

Whatever the case, the consistent theme here is struggle.

No matter what we should struggle to make that decision.