

Commemoration of the beginning of World War I, 2014
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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Today

we commemorate the hundredth anniversary
of the outbreak of first World War.

It was June 28, 1914,

that Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria
was assassinated;

over the next month,

Austria-Hungary, Serbia, Russia, Germany, the Ottoman Empire, Luxembourg, Belgium, France,
and the United Kingdom became involved;

war had erupted

across Europe.

the United States didn't formally enter the war until 1917, but many Americans served earlier.

By the end of the war,

much of the world had been affected,

not only in the countries where war had been fought directly,

but throughout the world, where allies

had mobilized to offer support.

The First World War was a turning point in world history.

It claimed the lives of over 16 million people across the globe and had a huge impact on those
who experienced it.

Men enlisted, or were called up, in their millions, being sent to fight in places that many had
never heard of before. Women volunteered as nurses,

made munitions, and took on many of the jobs at home of men who had gone to war.

Whole nations pitted against each other,

battles fought on land, at sea and in the air, modern weaponry, trench warfare:

all were part of the first modern war.

It's estimated that over nine million soldiers died in the fighting;

something like six million civilians died from disease or starvation, and another million as
casualties of military action.

Twenty-one million were wounded.

The War to end war

was how it was popularly known;

sadly

it was just one of many wars

to mar the twentieth century.

Some people have asked me
why we gather here today.
Why not wait until the anniversary of the end of the war,
a time to celebrate
the hard won peace?

And the reason, at least, for me,
is that in celebrating peace
it's all too easy to gloss over the cost of war.
But now, as we mark the beginning of the war
we remember the cost of war
and the devastation
wrought by it.

Growing up in Australia, the cost of World War I was embedded in our minds.
Over ten percent of those who enlisted
died;
over fifty percent were wounded.
For Australians, the war was typified by the Gallipoli landing in April, 1915,
a disaster;
thousands dead, many more thousands wounded.
That experience of suffering,
of pain,
even of futility,
epitomized war;
yet it was undergirded by courage,
and a willingness to risk everything
for the sake, for the lives
of others.

And then there was the experience at home.
My great grandparents and grandparents
remember that all too well. They remember
the days and months and years
of wondering
if their family members were safe.
They remember the rationing,
the hardship,
the fear.
And they remember the empty grief
for those who did not
come home.

Today our world
continues to be battered by war.
In Syria,
In Israel and Gaza,
in the Ukraine, in Iraq,
they are the ones that make it to our newsscreens.
But there are more,
Sudan, Central African Republic, Afghanistan,
Somalia, Nigeria,
and more.
The war to end war
did not.

And that's why it's particularly important
to gather together today
to remember.
To remember the people
who have given their lives.
To remember
the cost of freedom,
which is itself
not free.
To remember
that life is fragile
and to treasure its every moment.

And today we gather, as we have gathered
at times like this
from time immemorial,
we gather and turn to God
for help. Asking for strength, for protection,
and most of all
for an end to hostility —
for peace.

And that
is work that we can do.
Not just to pray,
but to actively work for peace. To build bridges with people who are unlike us,
to exercise forgiveness
even when it's the last thing we want to do,
to work for reconciliation

at every level —
from our families
to our world.

Because in the end
that's the best memorial we can give anyone.
To make sure their lives were not given in vain.
To carry forward
their dreams and visions
for a better world,
dreams of freedom,
dreams of safety,
dreams of peace.
To risk ourselves
and offer generosity
in place of self-protection,
to offer justice
in place of revenge,
to offer compassion
in place of fear.
To meet hate
with the language of love;
to meet war
with the language of peace.