

SERMON FOR SUNDAY, MAY 30, 2010  
MEMORIAL SUNDAY

Scriptures: Psalm 8; Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; John 16: 12-15; Romans 5:1-5

**WE REMEMBER**

A family had just moved into the town and they were looking for a new church to attend. On Sunday morning they decided to go to the church closest to where they lived and see if they would feel at home there. They entered through the large double doors into the narthex of the church and looked around. One wall was covered by a large bronze plaque which had many names carved into it. At the top it read "In Memory Of." Mom, Dad, and their young son stood looking at the plaque seeing all the names engraved there. The boy asked what it all meant. Dad answered, "These are the names of men and women in the last century who have died in the service." The boy looked stricken, and when it was time to go into the sanctuary for worship he held back with tears in his eyes. His mother was very concerned and asked her son what was wrong. He said, "If all those people died during the service, I don't want to go in there. "I don't want my name up there," he went on, pointing at the bronze plaque. Of course, mom and dad had to explain that it was military service not a worship service which took the lives of those who were being remembered.

Seriously, we do remember on this day the lives of many who have made the ultimate sacrifice for home and country. Who are these we remember, and why do we do it? Their numbers are legion, and they are from all walks of life. There are those who were the sometimes hotheaded and oftentimes ill-equipped and ill-experienced rag-tag men who made up the American army during the Revolution— the great heroes like George Washington and Paul Revere and the simple patriots who died of bullets, starvation, and even bad weather. There are those of both the north and the south who fought, brother against brother, so-to-speak, amidst unspeakable conditions in a struggle to preserve the Union- our United States and to end slavery. There were the heroes like Abraham Lincoln, Robert E. Lee, and Ulysses S. Grant and the very young

boys who left their farms and their mothers' arms to go away and never return, by the thousands suffering the deaths of war from bullets, gangrene, and disease.

There were the thousands and thousands who died on distant shores during the first world war, while many at home fell victim to the Great Flu Epidemic. There were the heroes both large and small just like in every war. World War Two still lingers in the memories of many today, a war which began in fear with the bombing of Pearl Harbor and ended with the atrocities of the concentration camps and prisoner-of-war camps with all their horrors. And again there were the heroes like Mac Arthur and Eisenhower, Patton and Bradley, and what my father-in-law would have called "the little guys." And it was the "little guys" who endured the trenches, the cold, the pain, the fear, and ultimately the end of their young lives. Many of those so-called "little guys" were our fathers and uncles. Some got on buses and left their hometowns not to return for years, for the duration of the war. Three of my uncles were in World War Two, all three returned, praise God; but one of them was in the Navy and on a ship for three years. He did not see his son for the first time until the war was over.

Yet, I have not begun to list all ones we remember on this weekend—Korea, Viet Nam, the Gulf and more. Wars large and small have been our history, and on this day it is no different. Men and women are risking their own lives and seeing the lives of their friends end in bloody battles and terrorist acts. When we see the flag at half staff over the post office, we know someone who once lived close to us has lost his or her life in military service. Today war goes on in Afghanistan, and hopefully settles down in Iraq, while other areas of the world stir with unrest and cause worry. ....And we remember.

Why do we make a special effort to remember the dead on this day and on Veteran's Day? For some people, remembering is a way of promising future generations revenge for events of the past. Remember so that you can one day repay is their view of things. For those from the Jewish-Christian history and heritage

remembering is something else. Jews remember and celebrate the great episode of their history, the freeing of the Hebrew people from bondage in Egypt. They remember that they were made to be slaves and were put to hard labor down in Egypt land for 400 years. Their feasts and festivals, their prayers are reminders of the providence of God. Part of the prayer, the Shema, sounds like this, "I am the Lord, your God who led you from the land of Egypt to be a God to you. I am the Lord, your God."

The Hebrew people became numerous in Egypt, and they were led by God under the direction of Moses into the promised land. There they were given the Law and the Prophets which were to help them to **remember** that the Lord God is to be worshiped and obeyed.

We **remember** the coming out of Egypt as part of our Judeo-Christian background too. Each time the Lord's Supper is commemorated, we **remember** the words of Jesus on the night he was betrayed, how he took the bread and the cup and said that they were reminders that his Body would be broken and his Blood shed for us. The meal Jesus shared with his disciples on the night before his crucifixion was the Jewish Passover meal which commemorated the fleeing of the Hebrews out of Egypt and the passing over of the angel of death. The Jews were to put the blood of a lamb on their doorposts so that their baby boys would be saved. We **remember** that Jesus became for us the ultimate innocent Lamb of sacrifice, the Lamb of God.

Remembrance is important. We all know the frustration of not remembering something, especially names of people we know we know. In our minds we go through a litany of names trying to come up with the right one. Some people even engage in mind-stimulating exercises to try to keep their minds and memories sharp. There is this story:

"Two very elderly ladies were enjoying the sunshine on a park bench in Miami. They had been meeting at that park every sunny day for over 12 years... chatting, and enjoying each other's friendship.

One day, the younger of the two ladies, turns to the other and says, “Please don’t be angry with me, dear, but I am embarrassed, after all these years. What is your name? I am trying to remember, but I just can’t.”

The older friend stares at her, looking very distressed, says nothing for two full minutes, and finally with tearful eyes, says, “How soon do you have to know?”

**Remembering** is so important. We listen to the Word of God being read and we read it for ourselves. It can be read dozens of times over, and yet it will always be new in some way, because as we see it or hear it repeated God reveals its meaning to us in new ways. We remember that God created the world, and we remember that Adam and Eve disobeyed God and sin entered the world. We remember the giving of the Ten Commandments and their importance for our lives. We remember the many passages from the Psalms which brings to us an understanding of our shared human condition– we all know fear and illness, pain and suffering. And we all know that the goodness of the Lord God will keep us even when we go through the valley of the shadow of death. We **remember** the promises of God.

Remember again the words from Psalm 8 which Karen read this morning.

“When I consider your heavens,  
 the work of your fingers,  
 the moon and the stars,  
 which you have set in place,  
 what is man that you are mindful of him,  
 the son of man that you care for him?

You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings  
 and crowned him with glory and honor.”

Why do we remember our fallen soldiers, sailors, airmen and women, and Marines? Because they are part of God’s handiwork just as you are. God has

crowned men and women with glory and honor. The One whose fingers set the moon and stars in place will cradle the dying soldier in his arms and take him home. We remember the fallen because the gift of life has been taken from them, they have not been able to enjoy all the stages of life, including old age. We remember them in gratitude they might have been us. Their numbers are so great!

American Revolution (1775-1783) 4,435

War of 1812 (1812-1815) 2,260

Mexican War (1846-1848) 1,733

Civil War (1861-1865) 140,414 (Union); 74,524 (Confederate)

Spanish-American War (1898-1902) 385

World War I (1917-1918) 53,402

World War II (1941-1945) 291,557

Korean War (1950-1953) 33,686

Vietnam War (1964-1975) 47,410

Gulf War (1990-1991) 147

Afghanistan War (2001-present) 1032 (as of April 1, 2010)

Iraq War (2003-present) 4,387 (as of April 1, 2010)

And these are just the Americans who died! This does not include our allies or our enemies!

We **remember** because for the sake of our humanity, for our souls' sake, for the sharing in the family of God, we must never forget. If we are to continue to be a good country and a good people we must remember that God is the ruler of all nations. We must give thanks to the Almighty for our freedoms and our opportunities, and we must humbly remember those who have given their lives and lie buried in so many places around the world. Carl Sandburg wrote what was really an anti-war poem titled "Grass." When I stand in the cemetery tomorrow and give the Memorial Day prayer, I will be standing on grass that covers the final resting place of many who have served their country. Here are Sandburg's words:

“Pile the bodies high at Austerlitz and Waterloo,  
 Shovel them under and let me work--  
 I am the grass; I cover all.  
 And pile them high at Gettysburg  
 And pile them high at Ypres and Verdun.  
 Shovel them under and let me work.  
 Two years, ten years, and passengers ask the conductor:  
 What place is this?  
 Where are we now?  
  
 I am the grass.  
 Let me work.”

Yes, the thousands of dead do lie under the grass long forgotten by many. Yet I say to you, that those whose very life was given to them by God should not be forgotten. Jesus Christ died for them too. They lie beneath the grass and God does not forget them.

Each year the Public Broadcasting Company PBS has a writing program for the National Memorial Day concert encouraging people to write their true stories about war. As you well know, the men who fought and came back from Vietnam were treated shamefully and that memory is a blot on our country's history. Here is the PBS account written by Ann Herd, a mother of a son who died on the battlefield of Vietnam.

ANN HERD BEGINS WITH A LETTER TO HER SON:

“Dear Ronnie,  
 My thoughts go back to the day you were born, my first and only son. I prayed that God would bless you with good health, and that when you grew up, you'd have a home and a beautiful family of your very own. I knew the possibilities when you went to

Vietnam, Ronnie – but I thought you'd be home soon. You were, but not the way we hoped.”

Ann's son Ron died in friendly fire, way off in the bush. When Ann was 79, she went with a group of Gold Star Mothers on a tour with some Vietnam vets of the places where their sons had been killed. They hiked several miles through rice paddies and watermelon patches and cattle fields, until they got close to where Ron was killed.

ANN HERD:

“I was remembering the pictures you sent home to me, Ronnie – the scenery looked the same; I felt like calling out to you. As we walked into the thick brush, the guys assured me that you were there on August 5, 1970, the day you were killed. You seemed so close to me. I felt as if I looked real hard I might be able to see you. Ronnie, I thanked God for the joy of having you with us for the 22 years of your life. I thanked God for the..... vets who brought us to Vietnam. And Ronnie, I thanked you for being such a wonderful son. You never gave us one heartache. When I walked away from that place where you died, I walked into peace.”

Let us pray:

God of mercy and grace, we ask you to help us to **remember** that you are our God and we are your people. You have led us in the past as you led Abraham, Moses and David, and you lead us now if we will take heed and follow. Remind us how to be your people in a world of hatred and of wars and rumors of war. Help us to keep our eyes on Jesus and to remain faithful at all times. Again, we thank you, O Lord, for those who have gone off to serve, for those who returned and for those who did not. Help us to be worthy of their sacrifice on our behalf. In the name of Jesus who gave Himself for all people. Amen.

