

Sermon – Memorial Day Sunday 2020

John 17: 1-11

Tomorrow many people across the country will celebrate Memorial Day. It is a day when we collectively as a nation, pause to remember those that have died in the service of this country and in the seemingly unending world struggle for freedom and peace. We remember the men and women who served their country, and especially those whose lives were sacrificed for causes that they deemed important enough to serve and die for.

We don't know what percentage of people in the country will stop to remember those that have died for peace nor what percentage will just see tomorrow as a holiday and the start of the summer season. The further we are from the terrible events of war the less they resonate with us.

For those families though that have lost loved ones in war, or from the effects of war, the memory hardly dims because it is the personal story, the personal sense of loss and grief that keeps the flame of memory going.

At the height of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan I was often heartbroken to read of the deaths of so many young men and women, and to see the pages of their photographs in the newspapers. What struck me were the ages of those that died. Young men and women from their late teens to early 30s, just starting out in life and dying for the cause of peace and freedom.

The nightmare of war terrorizes and traumatizes many, many people. The memory of the battles does not stay in the theater of the war but remains in the mind of those that were there and had to witness so much death and tragedy. Peace does not come easily to those that return from war.

Today though, we also seem to be in the middle of another war, a war with an invisible enemy, a war with a virus, and to some extent a war with our own conscience. This war is different to conflicts between nations that claim the lives of our young people. This is a global war, happening locally, that is claiming the lives of our most vulnerable people. I am now heartbroken when Judy Woodruff of PBS Newshour reads the obituaries on Friday night of some of those that have died during this time.

There are no guns or bombs or daring night raids against an enemy. There are first responders and hospital clinicians fighting a war against a microbe with limited weapons. The damage and human toll is no less devastating to families and communities. Some might say it's more devastating because we weren't prepared as a nation. Trauma is being embedded into the psyche of the nation.

This war isn't like a military war where there is often months, if not years, of escalating diplomatic conflict before our professional soldiers are deployed overseas, always overseas, to fight an enemy mostly away from direct impact here. Those are different wars, though no less devastating to families and communities whose young men and woman die or are injured and traumatized.

It is often hard for us to make sense of the trauma of war, or terrorism, or other similarly devastating life crisis like this pandemic. It is also hard at times to put into words our feelings of fear and anxiety, our feelings of sadness and grief and our feelings of elation when something good and sweet happens in the midst of darkness. Our vocabulary is often so limiting.

Artists and poets and writers are very often the people that are very skilled at interpreting a time and crafting a response that seems to summarize exactly how we are feeling. This is the beauty of our Psalms and other poetic texts from scripture as they capture the human emotion of a time, and the emotion of the authors relationship with God.

In 1882, the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote a poem called “Decoration Day.” The poem pays tribute to what was then a new form of civic observance: a day set aside to commemorate those who had perished in the Civil War by placing flags and flowers on soldiers' graves. It was a custom that gradually gave rise to our modern Memorial Day, honoring all who give their lives in military service. Here are his words:

Sleep, comrades, sleep and rest
On this Field of the Grounded Arms,
Where foes no more molest,
Nor sentry's shot alarms!

Ye have slept on the ground before,
And started to your feet
At the cannon's sudden roar,
Or the drum's redoubling beat.

But in this camp of Death
No sound your slumber breaks;
Here is no fevered breath,
No wound that bleeds and aches.

All is repose and peace,
Untrampled lies the sod;
The shouts of battle cease,
It is the Truce of God!

Rest, comrades, rest and sleep!
The thoughts of men shall be
As sentinels to keep
Your rest from danger free.

Your silent tents of green
We deck with fragrant flowers
Yours has the suffering been,
The memory shall be ours.

This poem reflects on what we might call the peace of death. In death, the sounds of battle cease and Longfellow calls it the “truce of God.” “All is repose and peace ... Rest, comrades, rest and sleep!” he says.

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As the current pandemic bleeds its way across our country, and the world, poets are starting to document the time in word pictures, that speak to our collective experience. Here is a couple of examples:

Financing the Burials
by Lisa Ampleman

During Holy Week
a city councilman
calls for a relief fund
so his working-class
constituents can afford
to cremate or bury
their dead, the city
currently providing
only its standard \$900
and even that only
for legal residents.
He speaks
for those without
a Joseph of
Arimathea
able to step in,
claim the body,
keep their loved one
out of the potter's
field—a phrase
that began with actual
fields from which
potters removed
all the useful
clay, appropriate for
deeper trenches,
“a burial place for
strangers”—
New York's longtime
burial for the poor
being an island in
Long Island Sound,
once a prison camp,
now a bird sanctuary.
These 1,700 dead
and counting
(from his Queens
district alone)
might not be wrapped
with fine linens or placed
in a rock-hewn tomb,
but he works

to provide them
their own place.
Bodega clerks, food-
delivery drivers,
caretakers for
the sick: he hopes
to treat justly
in death those who,
he says, are keeping
the city alive.

Corona - A Pantoum

By Sande Anfang

I am waiting for the death of coronavirus
I am waiting for sheltering to end
I am waiting for the ahas! of epidemiologists
with their beautiful nomenclature
I am waiting for sheltering to end
I am waiting for the streets to fill with dogs and children
with their beautiful nomenclature
I am waiting for the lost embrace
I am waiting for the streets to fill with dogs and children
I am waiting through unnamed weeks and months
I am waiting for the lost embrace
for the great re-leveling.
I am waiting through unnamed weeks and months
for disinfecting to end and dancing to begin
for the great re-leveling
I am waiting with taut muscles
for disinfecting to end and dancing to begin
for the water to be filled with fish & swimmers
I am waiting with taut muscles
for the peal of the dismissal bell
for the water to be filled with fish & swimmers
I am waiting for the death of coronavirus
for the peal of the dismissal bell
I am waiting for the ahas! of epidemiologists.

In times like these as we patiently wait like the poet says, to hear the familiar sounds of life return, we need to hear words of assurance that speak to the deepest places in our souls. Poets bring us those words in a way that speaks differently to our souls than prose. For this is what can bring comfort to the suffering and the lonely, the fearful and the worried. When our souls are comforted we can regain our strength and sense of hope. Jesus knew this more than anyone.

The passage from our gospel reading today captures a portion of Jesus final prayer to his father, to God. We know from scripture that Jesus often prayed to his father in the quiet solitude of the dawn hours, alone. But here he prays aloud with his friends so they can hear his words of assurance.

First he speaks to the hope of eternal life, a life lived in the arms of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Importantly, Jesus defines eternal life this way, “And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” Coming to really know Jesus is eternal life. It is that simple. It is all we need in life and it is the hope that sustains us always. We worship together, we give thanks together, we study scripture together and we share in the eucharist together as a way of deepening our understanding of Jesus. We can then minister to the needs of others who seek hope like us.

Peter takes up this ministry as he seeks to comfort the fearful of his day. It is worth hearing his words again, “Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.”

Peter’s message is one of hope in the midst of the suffering and trauma of the first century Christians, persecuted for their faith. It is also a message for us today. No matter what or who comes into our lives to traumatize us and to destabilize us, we have the solid rock of Jesus Christ upon whom we can cast all our anxieties and fears. Peter encourages his followers to persevere in their suffering and to resist fear and other anxieties.

I want to encourage you all this morning in your continued struggles during this time of pandemic. I am struggling mightily as well. Life is different now. Church and worship is different now. Home and family life is different now. But Jesus Christ is not any different today than he was with his first disciples. His promise of eternal life holds true today as it did when he spoke the words we hear from beloved John this morning. No matter how long we are separated, waiting for a vaccine to free us from the bondage of the pandemic, we can rest in the knowledge of our faith in Jesus Christ and the hope of his loving embrace will sustain us each and every day.

On this Memorial Day weekend, we remember the sacrifices of those that served the cause of freedom and peace through military and volunteer service in war, and especially those that died. This weekend we also need to remember the healthcare workers, MTA workers, retail store workers and others who have sacrificed their own lives to save others during this pandemic. They too are victims of the current war on this virus. The need to be in our memories.

Peace and rest has come to those that lost their lives. For us who live we can have peace in our hearts today through Jesus Christ, the author of true peace and the rock upon which we build a hope-filled life.

Amen