

Heros
Veteran's Day Recognition
1 Peter 3:13-18
November 10, 2019
Twenty-second Sunday After Pentecost
Pastor Dea Sharp, Pikes Peak UMC

1 Peter 3:13-18 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹³ Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? ¹⁴ But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear,^[a] and do not be intimidated, ¹⁵ but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; ¹⁶ yet do it with gentleness and reverence.^[b] Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. ¹⁷ For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil. ¹⁸ For Christ also suffered^[c] for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you^[d] to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit,

When Gene and I lived in Richmond, Virginia, we took opportunities to visit Washington, D.C. Just outside of town, overlooking the Potomac River is Arlington National Cemetery where we learned about the brave heroes buried there – some are “even famous.”

In 1921, an unknown World War I American soldier was buried there at what has become a focal point of reverence for our veterans.

A few years earlier, ceremonies, like in Arlington, occurred in England and France. An unknown soldier was buried in each nation on November 11 giving tribute to the ending of the “great war's” fighting at 11 a.m., November 11, 1918, the day known as "Armistice Day".

Armistice Day officially became a national holiday in 1938. It was the hope to celebrate Armistice Day because it was when the “war to end all wars” had ended. But we know, just a few years later, WWII broke out.

A couple of decades later, Congress wanted to recognize that peace had been preserved worldwide by veterans of the Second World War and in Korea. So, in 1954 President Eisenhower signed a bill to make November 11 a day to honor those who have served America in **all** wars.

Sadly, history records that two more unidentified American soldiers, from WWII and Korea, were brought home and were placed with the Unknown Soldier of WW I. Then, again, in 1984, an unknown serviceman from Viet Nam was placed alongside the others.

The Army Honor Guard keeps vigil night and day, rain or shine, heat or cold. The back side of the crypt bears the words: "Here rests in honored glory an American soldier known but to God."

Today we remember those who have served, some of who died, protecting our freedoms. I don't know what public events will be happening tomorrow but we can praise God – God **knows** all the stories of bravery and sacrifice. But, it's Sunday and we're in church – one of the freedoms that has been protected – and so I want to re-focus and remember what it means to be a part of the army of God – soldiers of the cross.

The freedoms we enjoy today (and I pray we don't take for granted) –
Like...

- Being able to travel from place to place
- To hold our elections last week
- To worship...

All these were bought with a price.

We're reminded of that when we read the news headlines.

Every conflict the U.S. has been involved in has had casualties. Too many sons and daughters lost. Praise God many more sons and daughters come home safely, sometimes to a hero's welcome.

And occasionally, during those conflicts, a soldier does something out-of-the-ordinary and Congress recognizes those efforts by awarding the Medal of Honor for service above and beyond the call of duty.

The Medal of Honor has been awarded to 3,506 individuals since 1863.

Suffice it to say, we could spend hours doing a roll call of those who performed deeds of (quote) *personal bravery or self-sacrifice so conspicuous as to clearly distinguish the individual above his comrades and must have involved risk of life.*

I read a few testimonies – that involved:

- Being surrounded by enemies
- Saving wounded comrades
- Being wounded and still standing up to the enemy
- The event may have been on land...or at sea...or in the skies above
- And the heroics included outstanding leadership and planning, dauntless devotion to duty, and too often giving of the soldier's life for his country.

There are many (too many) stories, but the picture is clear.

These men put their lives in extreme danger for their fellow soldiers.

Those of you who have served our country (or are serving) and those we pray for every week know, too well, stories of heroic actions.

And sometimes, those heroic actions come from individuals you'd least expect!

These days, I am saddened that we don't teach enough history or give enough public recognition to our war heroes.

I don't have personal experiences (mine or close family) to share but I'm guessing that in the days that followed a Medal of Honor recipient's actions, there was inspiration for those around them...to fight for their friends and country...perhaps with more passion than ever before.

In a small, Middle Eastern country about 2,000 years ago, that's exactly what happened.

When we take a closer look at **this** hero we see some strong similarities to the military heroes I just spoken about...with some significant differences.

I've been preparing for BOTH our Bible studies for Advent (I mentioned during the announcements and I pray you'll join us) and our ultimate hero's...

...name was Jesus.

He was the son of Joseph the carpenter.

He grew up in Nazareth but our Scriptures don't give us much information about his early life, other than the Christmas story, the Magi's visit, and the time Jesus stayed behind at the Temple and his parents had to look for him. There are commentaries and "extra" books that hint about "this and that" but none of that is in Scripture.

So, after the event at the Temple, there's a Scriptural void of details about Jesus' life until he was an adult and began his ministry among the Jews AND the Gentiles.

This is one of those "never would have expected it from HIM" examples. Who would have expected heroic action from **this** man.

The OT prophet Isaiah tells us there wasn't anything about him physically that would have hinted at the possibility of any heroics – not like we'd picture our heroes.

BUT: like so many of the Medal of Honor recipients, he gave of Himself.

Paul wrote to the Philippians: (from the Message Translation)

"He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! (Phil. 2:5-7)

Like the soldiers I described, Jesus put himself in harm's way, endured pain and suffering for the benefit of others. In Isaiah 53 we read:

*But the fact is, it was our pains he carried—
our disfigurements, all the things wrong with us.
It was our sins that did that to him,
that ripped and tore and crushed him—our sins!
He took the punishment, and that made us whole.
Through his bruises we get healed. (Is. 53: 5)*

And He did it willingly!

Matthew records in his gospel that not once, but twice, Jesus responded to the pain and suffering He was about to endure with the words, *“Not my will, Father, but Yours be done.”*

Like so many soldiers in the wars around the world, Jesus willingly endured this pain and suffering on behalf of His people to the point of death.

Paul describes for us in Romans chapter 5:

“Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

And that’s where our comparisons falls short.

We can all agree that the men and women of the military put their lives in danger for the sake of their fellow soldiers against other human beings, but the battle Christ fought was against something far more powerful and devastating.

The ultimate victory of Jesus Christ wasn’t the taking of a strategic spot or even another country.

Christ secured our souls.

Christ’s victory was over the power of Satan and sin in our lives.

Ultimately, the victory was (and IS) over death.

And, that victory, the sacrifice made by Jesus Christ, inspired those who witnessed it and even us who have heard about it.

In addition to the words Kim read for us earlier, the first epistle credited to Peter, one of Jesus' "lieutenants," gives us encouragement with the lessons he learned from his "commanding officer."

"But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. Do this with gentleness and respect." (1 Peter 3:15)

Later in the letter, Peter's words of caution speak to all of us:

"Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers [and sisters] throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings."

And, praise God, the clearest example of how Christ's life and death AND resurrection inspired His people is the fact that we are gathered here today to worship...to sing hymns, hear the Word of God, to pray and encourage one another in our faith.

I won't get into the politics and issues of the military (not from here) but I'm proud to believe that America has the most well-equipped soldiers in the history of the world.

Living in Colorado Springs, we know about the 21st century weaponry of technology and that makes us seem almost invincible but we also know the anguish of our weaknesses and that terrorist attacks (acts of evil self-sacrifice) happen – and we remain, in some ways, vulnerable.

But as Christians, we can be assured that on the spiritual front, it's a different story.

We know (Paul reminds us) in 2nd Corinthians: *"For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds."*

Paul gets even more graphic in Ephesians (6) when he describes the armor of God: the Belt of Truth, the Breastplate of Righteousness; our feet, fitted with the Gospel

of peace; we carry the shield of faith; have the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit. (And that's another sermon.)

That armor, combined with a life of faith and right living (and all the disciplines that entails) will protect us from evil and, ultimately keep us for our eternal life in heaven with the saints we celebrated last Sunday.

I'm sure there are more but, there's a story about a soldier who lived with that confidence even as he found himself in battle.

He and his buddies were pinned down when a fellow soldier was hit by sniper fire. Everyone in the foxhole discussed what to do, but the sniper fire was too intense to get out and pull their buddy back.

And for a while no one moved, but they could hear the yells for help.

Then one of the soldiers began to look intensely at his watch.

He wouldn't take his eyes off it.

The others noticed. "What the???"

But the one with the watch kept quiet, until, all of a sudden, he jumped out of the foxhole, crawled over to his wounded buddy, grabbed him by the collar, and pulled him back to the foxhole, amid the sniper fire. They both got back without any more injuries

Later, after the wounds had been tended and the sniper fire stopped, the troops asked the soldier with the watch, "Why did you wait so long to crawl out there?"

"My mom said," he told them, "that every day at the exact same time she would be praying for me. According to my watch, I left the foxhole exactly when she started praying."

Now, we might not always get answers to our prayers in quite so dramatic ways. Sometimes, even when our prayers are for physical protection or to save a life, they may seem to go unanswered.

But, listen close: WE HAVE God's promise that the ultimate victory in this world—the one THAT GUARANTEES us eternity with God...that victory is ours, through our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Whatever we do for the rest of this Veterans Day weekend, let's be encouraged as we remember those who have served and those who continue to serve our country; perhaps even sharing our thanks for their (and their family's) commitment to our country and to our freedoms.

But also, Dear Ones, give thanks to God for Jesus Christ, and HIS willingness to serve, His commitment to our spiritual freedom and His sacrifice for our eternal salvation.

Then, we can be confident in our daily "faith battles," knowing that we are equipped by God to be faithful warrior, serving our Ultimate Commander, and are making a difference in the world around us. In Jesus' name we go!

Amen.