

HONOR THE TROOPS
Sermon for Memorial Day Sunday 5/25/08

the Rev. Ken Wyant

Memorial Day is a great combination of patriotic holiday and religious holiday. It's a day to renew our idealism and honor those who have died on behalf of ideals we hold sacred, so I thought I would call your attention to some Old Testament stories about honoring the troops. Some of these stories are not often told in Church. Some of you might hear some parts of the stories that compare with our times. I'm just trying to tell some old stories and trying to keep it relevant to our own experience.

Of course I can't hope to compete with the greatest Memorial Day speech in American history. It was actually delivered many years ago during the month of November rather than May when the President of the United States went to a small town in Pennsylvania to dedicate a military cemetery. It was a brief speech that most of you have committed to memory at one time or another: The Gettysburg Address.

Alright, here go the stories. The Scripture lesson for this morning is from the Book of Judges. The Book of Judges offers many military heroes to choose from. Perhaps (to be more contemporary) I should have chosen the story of the great female judge, Deborah. She prophesied to the general of the army of Israel, whose name was "Barak," that their enemy, Sisera, would fall to the hand of a woman. (Listen carefully, I did not say that Barak would be defeated by a woman, I said that Deborah told Barak that Sisera would fall to the hand of a woman.)

Sure enough, an Israelite woman gave Sisera some milk and invited him into her tent to rest; and while he slept she took a tent peg and a hammer and drove the peg into his temple until it went down into the ground. Deborah's poem of triumph over Sisera includes the poignant lament of Sisera's mother. Deborah pictures Sisera's mother peering out through the lattice of her window wondering why it's taking so long for her son to come home from the war. She comforts herself by imagining that Sisera is selecting something beautiful from the spoils of war to bring home to her. All the while, her son has died in vain at the hand of a woman—just as Deborah told Barak. How many mothers have looked out the window wondering why it's taking so long for their sons to come home from the war?

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I chose Gideon for the Scripture lesson. Could have chosen Joshua—everyone knows the song: "Joshua fit the battle of Jericho and the walls came tumbling down," but I chose Gideon. Gideon was a reluctant hero. He questioned whether or not God really wanted him to attack the powerful Midianite encampment. Foreigners had invaded Israel and they had camels countless as grains of sand on the seashore. Gideon wasn't sure he wanted to fight this massive coalition army. He tested God, "I'll spread a fleece out on the ground. If you are really going to use me to defeat the Midianites, then in the morning the fleece will be wet and the ground will be dry." When he woke up it was so, and he wrung out the fleece. Then he said to God, "Just one more test. I'll spread the fleece out again, and if the fleece is dry and the ground is wet tomorrow morning, then I'll know that you really, really want to use me to defeat the Midianites." It was so.

Well you already heard God's scheme to defeat the Midianites. Send home all the reluctant draftees. Send home the soldiers who drink water from their hands. Reduce the troop strength from 32,000 down to 300. How do you think Gideon did with his 300 raiders? You can guess that he won since God was on his side. Gideon had the 300 put clay pots over their torches in one hand and trumpets in the other hand and surround the enemy camp. At his signal they broke the pots and sounded the trumpets. The shock and awe of the bright lights and loud noise put the Midianites into such confusion that they started killing each other. Thousands of them ran away and they decided not to invade Israel for at least 40 years.

Of course the point of the story is that God determines the outcome. Fighting on God's side gives victory regardless of the relative strengths of the army. Honor the troops, but recognize who gives the victory.

You know the story of David and Goliath. The young shepherd slays the giant Goliath. Who knows Goliath's full name? It was Goliath of Gath the Gileadite the Shaft of Whose Spear is as Great as a Weavers Beam. Long name, big guy, felled by one smooth stone.

God chose some unlikely warriors in the Old Testament: a woman with a tent peg, trumpet players with clay pots, a kid with a slingshot.

Few of God's warriors receive as much attention in the Old Testament as King David. I have a son named David—and that's not a coincidence.

One of my favorite stories is about David and the "Mighty Men"—early in the Davidic kingdom—before David established his throne and palace and seat of government at Jerusalem he gathered a band of guerrillas to fight against the Philistines. The Philistines had established their headquarters in Bethlehem—David's home town. One day when David was feeling homesick he said, "O that someone would give me water to drink from the well of Bethlehem that is by the gate." Three of those guerrilla warriors heard him and they snuck through the enemy lines and brought up water from that well for David. When he received the water he said, "Can I drink the blood of the men who went at the risk of their lives." He dedicated the water to God and poured it out on the ground.

Strange way to honor the troops.

How would you feel if you were one of those three warriors? Would you feel that you had made the raid upon Bethlehem in vain? Or would you feel that you had become part of a sacred ritual that bonded you with your brothers in battle, with your ruler, and with your God?

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Later, when David established his kingdom and was beginning to look to his legacy and his place in history, he had a terrible problem with his favorite son, Absalom. Absalom was a very good looking young man, and he was extremely clever, and he was ambitious. He wanted to be King right now, and he couldn't wait for his father to die and pass the kingdom to him. Absalom would sit by the city gate and talk to the travelers coming to town, "Oh you are going to the King to settle your dispute with your neighbor? Tell me about your case." After he heard their case he would say, "Well, I don't know what David will do, but if I were the King, I would say you would win that lawsuit." Later when the other neighbor came by he would tell him the same thing. By the end of the court case, one of those neighbors was eager to have Absalom as King instead of David.

Eventually, Absalom mounted an insurgency. He led a rebellion, started a Civil War, and tried to take over the government by force. David's four star general was a man named Joab. Joab had been with David from the early days of fighting the Philistines. Joab saw immediately that Absalom was a dangerous traitor who threatened the Kingdom. He led the royal army against Absalom, but David gave strict instructions regarding Absalom—"Bring him back alive!" All the soldiers knew how much David loved Absalom. So when they captured him none of them dared to dispatch the enemy. Absalom's army had been defeated and Absalom rode away through the woods on his mule. His long flowing hair got caught up in the branches of an oak tree and he was jerked out of the saddle suspended between heaven and earth. When General Joab arrived at the scene, the soldiers were standing around watching him swing, not daring to kill him nor to cut him down. Joab grabbed three spears and thrust them into the heart of the traitor.

When the King heard about the great victory that his troops had won, how did he honor them? He wailed and wept, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son, Absalom! Would that I had died instead of you, O Absalom my son, my son." The victorious troops stole into town that day as soldiers steal in who are ashamed when they flee in battle. Joab went to his Commander in Chief, his friend, his brother in battle and told him how this looked to the public. He convinced David to sit in the gate of the city so the troops could pass in review and have the honor of a parade on their behalf to welcome them home from Israel's heartbreaking Civil War.

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Perhaps the most shameful episode of David's long reign concerned his adulterous affair with Bathsheba. After all David was the most powerful man in the country. He could have any woman he wanted. He lusted after Bathsheba and brought her to the palace. She responded to his authority and his charm. One thing led to another. She became pregnant. Her husband—an immigrant Hittite—was a sort of "colonel" in David's army. He had been away fighting for several months, anyone who could count to nine would know about the scandal.

David sent for Bathsheba's husband, Uriah the Hittite. "Come back to the capital and report on the progress of the war." Uriah came back to Jerusalem and gave his report, David thanked Uriah and suggested he go on home and take a few days of R&R before going back to war. But Uriah was a great soldier; he said, "I can't go home and enjoy my family while my fellow soldiers are bivouacked in the field prepared for battle." So he slept on the front steps of the palace to honor the troops. David tried again, "You stay another night and we'll have a State Dinner in your honor." David tried to get him drunk and send him home. But Uriah, the foreigner, was loyal to his comrades in arms and slept on the palace steps again.

David sent him back to the front with a secret message for the General in the field. Unbeknownst to Uriah the message said, "Attack the enemy's strongest position and have Uriah lead the charge." How many good and brave soldiers died in vain that day to serve the selfish desires of a lying, cheating, scheming ruler? But they weren't through using and abusing the life and death of the honorable Uriah. After the disastrous battle the general told his messenger to go report to the King about their failure. "If his anger rises and he says to you, 'Why did you fall for this ambush?' Then say to the King, 'Your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead too.'"

Honor the troops.

I have often thought about what Abraham Lincoln could have meant when he referred to the idea that we have a responsibility to ensure "that these dead shall not have died in vain." What does it mean to say that a soldier might die in vain? Does it mean that the thousands of Confederate soldiers who died at Gettysburg did, in fact, die in vain? What about the British soldiers who died in the American revolution—did they die in vain? How about the North Koreans who defended Pork Chop Hill? How about the soldiers in Santa Ana's army who were killed by Davy Crockett before they killed him at the Alamo? Oh we know that the good guys died with honor; but what about the other casualties—is that what Lincoln meant to differentiate when he exhorted us to "highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain"? Was he saying, "Might makes right, only winners have honor, all else is vanity?"

No, Lincoln had a clear and simple vision of the ideal that made the Civil War worthwhile, that made the suffering and death honorable. We, too have an opportunity to honor the troops in the way Lincoln laid it out. We too can resolve with Lincoln: "that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth."

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Will you pray with me?