



NORTHMINSTER CHURCH

DO JUSTICE, LOVE MERCY, WALK
HUMBLY WITH GOD. MICAH 6:8

Keeping the Graves Empty A Sermon for Northminster Church Preached by Zachary Helton May 26, 2019

Isaiah 2:1-5

This is what Isaiah ben-Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem:

2 In the last days, the mountain of YHWH's Temple
will be established as the most important mountain
and raised above all other hills—
all nations will stream toward it.

3 Many people will come and say:
“Come, let us climb YHWH’s mountain
to the Temple of the God of Jacob,
that we may be instructed in God’s ways
and walk in God’s paths.”

Instruction will be given from Zion
and the word of YHWH from Jerusalem.

4 God will judge between the nations
and render decisions for many countries. They will beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
one nation will not raise the sword against another,
and never again will they train for war.

5 O house of Leah and Rachel and Jacob, come,
let us walk in the light of YHWH!

Revelation 21:9, 21:22-22:5

Then one of the seven angels that had held the seven bowls of the seven last plagues
approached me and said, “Come and let me show you the betrothed of the Lamb.”

The angel then carried me away in the Spirit to the top of a very high mountain, and showed
me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.

I saw no Temple in the city, for God Almighty and the Lamb were themselves the Temple. 23
There was no sun or moon: God’s glory was its light, and the Lamb was its lamp. 24 The nations
will walk by the city’s light, and the rulers of the earth will bring their treasures. 25 The city’s

gates will never be shut by day, and there will be no night there. 26 The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. 27 But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does loathsome things or tells lies. Only those whose names are written in the book of life of the Lamb will enter.

22:1 The angel then showed me the river of life-giving water, clear as crystal, which issued from the throne of God and of the Lamb, 2 and flowed down the middle of the streets. On either side of the river grew the trees of life which produce fruit twelve times a year, once each month; their leaves serve as medicine to heal the nations. 3 There will no longer be any curse. The throne of the Almighty and of the Lamb will be there, and God's subjects will serve faithfully. 4 They will see the Most High face to face, and bear God's name on their foreheads. 5 Night will be no more. They will need no light from lamps or the sun, for our God will give them light, and they will reign forever.

"Decorating the last resting places of the fallen is a fine and decent thing to do. It is especially fitting when we have done all that we could to keep those graves empty in the first place." – Benjamin J. Dueholm

Dear Soldier,

Tomorrow is Memorial Day. I'm a pastor, so I feel like it's my responsibility to talk about it, to name my uncomfortable relationship with Memorial Day, with the United States for that matter, but I really don't feel like I can do that without writing something like this, something that addresses you directly. Anything I could say just seems too disrespectful, too, I don't know, dehumanizing without talking to you directly, without remembering that you were a person who got letters and had feelings about letters. I want to remember first and foremost that you were a human, a beloved Child of God, so I'm writing these thoughts directly to you, Fallen Soldier.

I used to have a much easier time with Memorial Day, but you know, now things feel pretty complicated. Honestly, I've made a habit of avoiding talking about it, of pretty much ignoring it, but that's not fair to you or me, is it? I mean, you *died*. You gave your life in the service of this thing that I benefit from every day of my life. You deserve my respect, the dignity of my remembrance at the very least, so here you go. I want to be honest. I consider myself to

be first and foremost a citizen of the Kingdom of God, a follower of Jesus who was Love made flesh. I consider it my primary vocation to steep myself so strongly in the Spirit of Jesus that I become like him, but I've found this often comes into conflict with my loyalty to the United States. I worship a God who loves the world so deeply that God chose death rather than choosing to commit violence against God's beloved children. So what am I to do when my culture asks me to take a day to remember, to honor, to celebrate even, those who died continuing the cycle of violence against other children of God who *happened* to be born in a different country, *happened* to be brought up in a political ideology adversarial to ours, in a total accident of birth?

A decade or so ago, this was a lot simpler for me. The church I came from, it had no reservations about raising the American flag on the chancel, right up there on the same level as the cross. Every Veteran's Day, Memorial Day, and Fourth of July we unabashedly stood for a pledge to the Christian flag and then a pledge to the American flag... and then a pledge to the Bible for some reason. I guess someone felt compelled to stick that in there. Our pastor, a Vietnam vet himself, would ask family of fallen soldiers to stand and be recognized, and then our music minister would lead us in those familiar songs, anthems for each branch of the armed forces. *Off we go, into the wild blue yonder...* then, *Anchors aweigh, my boys, anchors aweigh!* We were a Navy town, so we knew the tunes pretty well... all except the Coast Guard song, of course, the lyrics and melody of which somehow managed to catch us by surprise pretty much every year.

I even heard a pastor once say, about you, "They gave their life for our freedom, just like Jesus Christ gave his life for our freedom." Soldier, what am I supposed to do with a theology like that? Funny story, you remember that 80's Lee Greenwood song, *Proud to be an American?* Well first of all, I may or may not have sung that in church as a solo, but there are these lyrics I remember. It went, "I won't forget the men who died, who gave that right to me..." Setting aside the fact that women also died, which is a whole other issue, you know I legitimately used to think the words went, "I won't forget the *man* who died, who gave that right to me." *Man.* Like, Jesus, man. I know, now it sounds dumb, but those two things were so conflated in my head that my brain didn't bother distinguishing them.

So that's where I came from. Church, state, the distinction didn't really matter all that much. Oh, but then things got complicated. Things got uncomfortable when I went off on my own and actually started reading the Jesus story for myself, something that, for whatever reason, it had never really occurred to me to do, and what I found, Soldier, really took the edge off of my certainty. "Put up again thy sword into his place," I read Jesus saying, "for all they that take the sword shall perish by the sword," What would you do with that? The deeper I got, the more I realized I was reading a story about a man so totally open to love, so totally committed to loving all of God's children on every side of every conflict that he'd rather die at their hands than return their violence with violence, than repay their evil with evil. "Abba, forgive them," he cried, "for they know not what they do." He said this about his executioners *as they were executing him.*

And I know, I know, it's impractical right? You can't be a doormat, you might say, otherwise the evil wins and no one stands up to fight them. And you'd be right, but I don't think anybody could accuse Jesus of being a doormat, because there's the resurrection part, the idea that grace can actually break the wheel of violence and give way to new life. Walter Wink once wrote, "Killing Jesus was like trying to destroy a dandelion seed-head by blowing on it." Jesus' resistance was powerful, not passive. It was courageous, it was self-sacrificial, but most of all, it was creative and compassionate. It never failed to see the image of God in an enemy, never failed to try to remind them of their humanity as well as his own, even while he was being crucified! In the Kingdom of God, he showed, both sides have to win because both sides can remember their humanity. He refused to accept that we were dependent on violence to bring about peace, because the peace it brought was always so flimsy and short-lasting. Walter Wink, also wrote, "The greatest obstacle [to non-violence] is this: the belief that we cannot change because we are dependent on what is wrong. That is the addict's excuse." So Soldier, what if Jesus was pointing out that we're addicted to this way of thinking about the world, of getting what we want by domination and violence, and then showed us how to break that addiction?

Once I saw that in Jesus, I started to see it all over the Bible. It seems like true peace and reconciliation is the *telos*, the end goal God always had in mind, and God implanted that contagious image on the imagination of the prophets. "They will beat their swords into

plowshares,” Isaiah wrote, “and their spears into pruning hooks; one nation will not raise the sword against another, and never again will they train for war. O house of Leah and Rachel and Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of YHWH!” And then there was John of Patmos in his Revelation, who described a city with balm to heal the nations, a city whose gates never had to close against an enemy. Soldier, these things changed the code of my imagination, challenged the rules by which I thought the world had to work, about what was practical, or even desirable.

This new imagination attracted me to voices like Shane Claiborne, who has consistently had a real knack for making my life more complicated. Claiborne once wrote, “If we believe terrorists are past redemption, we should just rip up like ½ the New Testament because it was written by one.” Then somewhere else, he wrote, “The Christian icon is not the Stars and Stripes, but a cross-flag, and its emblem is not a donkey, an elephant, or an eagle, but a slaughtered lamb.” And that, Soldier, brings me back to the problem: To someone who marches under the banner of the slaughtered lamb, what does it mean for me to be an American? What does it mean for me to remember Memorial Day? How can I bring myself to celebrate you as a hero, Soldier, knowing that you died perpetuating the cycle of violence our God died trying to stop? How can I remember you when your memory just reminds me that the freedoms I enjoy every day were bought by a violent conflict that took your life and asked you to take life as well? You can see, now, why I’m so tempted to just say nothing, right? Why I’m tempted to ignore it, to talk about something else until it’s Tuesday and things are back to normal?

There was this huge church I used to drive by on my way to work every day. On patriotic holidays, it would surround itself with a perimeter of flags. I’m talking about an insane number of flags. Big flags. Every time I’d pass, I remembered how straightforward it used to be for me and how complicated things had gotten, and I wanted to bust in and say “What are you all doing? Why aren’t you as challenged by this as I am? We gather under the same cross!” But all I ever did was shake my head and keep driving.

One day I was waiting for a table at a restaurant and a man walked past me wearing a black veteran’s hat. As he passed, a woman near me called out, “Thank you for your service!” And Soldier, in a moment of honesty with myself, I realized how angry that made me. It made me angry at him, angry at her, angry at you, because by God, I don’t *want* to thank you! I don’t

want you to have had to die like this! I didn't *ask* for your service! I resent this position I'm in, enjoying an historically unprecedented kind of liberty at the cost of lives, their lives, your life! I don't want this! But you, Beloved Child of God, are dead, and you died in the service of this social construct that I actively participate in, that benefits me every day, so what am I supposed to say? If I can't say "Thank you for your sacrifice," and I dare not say "Your sacrifice was in vain," then what do I say?

And now, Soldier, from the silence, from that place where I hear the Spirit speak, I hear the answer: "I'm sorry." My brother, my sister in Christ, Fallen Servant of the United States and Beloved Child of God, what I want to say is this: I'm sorry.

I'm sorry you were killed by a system that asked you to take lives and give your own.

I'm sorry for the role I've played in keeping a world spinning that asked you for that kind of service, that thinks it depends on it.

I'm sorry you were born into a system that thinks it can only achieve peace by dehumanizing political enemies and dominating them.

I'm sorry that the people of God, I'm sorry that *I* have not been courageous enough, committed enough, or creative enough not to accept violence as an answer.

I'm sorry we have not been dedicated enough to do the difficult and dangerous work of peacemaking, a work that calls for the *same* level of courage and sacrifice *you* were willing to give, because maybe if we had, your grave would be empty right now. Maybe if we had, then you and I would be co-workers, co-creators of a world of true liberty. Maybe.

Maybe Memorial Day *should* be on the church calendar.

Maybe it should be a part of the liturgical year where the People of God remember what's at stake in our own work of peacemaking, where we remember the cost of not taking seriously our vocation of Christlikeness.

Maybe, for the church, Memorial Day should be a day of deep remembrance and honest grief.

Maybe it should be a day of confession, of remembering the necessity and urgency of our humanizing, reconciling, sacrificial and often dangerous gospel work.

Soldier, I pray that I would become so steeped in the Spirit of Christ that I would be willing to sacrifice as much as you have for the cause of lasting peace and liberty.

Soldier, today, on the Sunday before Memorial Day, I am going to grieve you. I'm going to remember my loyalty to the Kingdom of God, I'm going to mourn the loss of your life at the hands of violence and war, and I'm going to remember the urgency of my own sacred, non-violent fight for peace in this world.

Thank you, Soldier. I hope this does your memory justice.

Sincerely,

A Follower of Christ in the United States