

## MEMORIAL DAY, 2008: REMEMBERING RIGHTLY

Isaiah 49:8–16a; Matthew 6:24–34

8<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, a; May 25, 2008

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*Prayer: O God, on this Memorial Day weekend, as we remember those who have died in the service of their country; we remember as well your dream of harmony and peace for your creation. Remind us again that in life and in death we belong to our faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.*

Maake Masango is a friend of mine in South Africa. I came to know him when he was studying at Columbia Theological Seminary when I was a pastor there. When he returned to South Africa, his daughter lived with a couple in my congregation so that she could finish high school. Maake would tell stories of what life had been like for him during apartheid in South Africa. He could not vote in the country of his birth, his mail was constantly opened and phone lines were tapped; he had been dragged before the secret police and had his family threatened. So his words carried great weight when he said to our congregation, “Many Americans—especially younger ones—don’t fully appreciate the price of freedom.” It has been paid for at a great price.

I personally have been spared losing close loved ones in war, so most of what I go on is stories. I remember as a child visiting Vicksburg where a relative on my mother’s side died fighting for the north, and a relative on my father’s side died fighting for the south during the Civil War. My grandfather was too young to fight in World War I, and though my father tried on several times to enlist in the armed forces during World War II, he failed a physical and ended up serving the government in the Panama Canal zone for several years. All three of his brothers served during the war, and all came home. Two made it their career.

I’ll certainly never forget Joe Monaham. Joe was on the track team with me in high school, a few years ahead of me. Held the high jump record for our school at the time. I remember his athleticism, his kindness to a lowly freshman, his fiancée who went to our church, and I remember vividly when Mr. Madden, our principal came over the loudspeaker announcing the death of Joe in Vietnam. There were others that I knew who lost their lives during that war, but none touched me more than Joe.

What I have are stories. And Memorial Day weekend is a time to remember those stories. Stories of heroism, self-sacrifice, nobility, the laying down of one’s life, stories of the highest and best of our humanity.

But if we are to be honest with ourselves, (and I hope that the church is the one place where we can be honest with ourselves and with each other) there are other stories that we must remember as well; stories of the waste, the suffering, the millions and millions of not only combatants but innocent civilians who have died; stories of the unleashing of the very worst of our humanity: pogroms, massacres, torture, holocaust.

How do we go about remembering these stories in a faithful way? I read recently that there is only one remaining United States veteran of World War I, Frank Buckles, who lied about his age in order to enlist in the army. This was the war to end all wars. Reading about him reminded me of another World War I veteran who died a few years ago. I remember seeing him on a news show. He was the last remaining veteran of his platoon. As he was being wheeled back to his room on a convalescent home, he said that the sacrifice he and his comrades had made had been mocked by all the wars that had followed. There always seemed to be another war. What do we do when there are no more veterans to tell the stories?

We could always build more monuments. That's one way of not forgetting. One of the first instances we have of such a monument in the Bible notes that after a particular battle between the ancient Israelites and the Philistines, Samuel (who was a prophet and a judge and a leader of the Israelites) "took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Jeshanah, and called its name "Ebenezer." It was a stone of remembrance, a stone of thanksgiving, erected at the end of a war.

There were a lot of those in the Old Testament, wars, that is. Reading the Old Testament is not for those with weak stomachs. It's filled with wars and killing, and much of it done in the name of God. Samuel prayed for victory, the Philistines were routed, the Israelites chased after them all the way to Beth Car and slew them "The hand of the Lord was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel," scripture says.

Do you ever wonder if this is the same God we see in Jesus Christ who blessed the peacemakers and spoke of love, even for his enemies? Do you ever wonder if it's the same God who even speaks in the Old Testament about the beating of swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, and the lying down of the wolf with the lamb?. Or is it just that those folks didn't always get it right, hadn't seen the light that was coming? But even if we do question some of the actions of Samuel and the Israelites, what is still worth remembering, I think, about their memorial day is the claim, above all, that whatever success they had, whatever victory was won, was not their own achievement, not due to their own might or power. It was, first of all, God's doing. Whatever they enjoyed was God's grace.

They raised a monument that was to stand so that, even in the worst of times to come, they might not ever forget God had delivered them. But there is a danger to that, of course, the danger of always identifying our struggle as God's struggle, and our methods as God's methods. Maake Masango tells of a monument that was in South Africa raised to the memory of a great victory. It is several stories high. The walls are beautifully carved. It celebrated the victory of the Boers (later called the Afrikaners) over the Zulu tribes in 1838. Those Calvinists made a covenant with God that they would always memorialize that day, convinced that God had personally accepted their offer and had personally intervened on their behalf.. What they failed to realized, according to James Michener in his book *The Covenant* "was that they had offered the covenant to God, and not God to them."<sup>1</sup>

They were Calvinists, like us. And like them, I think, we also tend to lean heavily on the providence of God, guiding the events of history, but, like them, we fail sometimes to adequately remember the place of sin in all our endeavors; like them, we fail to adequately remember that our motives are seldom, if ever, pure; and like them, we fail to remember our constant need for repentance.

Over on the corner of Parkway and Central, there is a little park with a statue of a soldier. It is to commemorate those who died during the Spanish American war. It is good that we remember them, but we also must remember what led to that war. Virtually all historians now agree that it was a war that never should have been fought. It was caused by trumped up charges, deception, hubris, and the manipulation of the media. We must remember, but we must remember rightly.

So how do we remember rightly? That phrase comes from the title of a new book by Miroslav Volf, a professor at Yale Divinity School. The title is *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*. Dr. Volf begins the book by describing the time that he was considered a national security threat. He was a young man in what was then called Yugoslavia, and because he was a Christian, and studied in this country, and married an American, he was under constant surveillance. Interrogations, mail opened, phones tapped, wife threatened. When he saw the pictures from Abu Ghraib old memories that he hadn't been able to let go of surfaced. He began a theological quest: When is it important to remember? When is it important to let go? Sometimes, he wrote, memories become so entrenched in our lives that it becomes impossible to forgive, and new hatreds are generated. On the other hand, sometimes if we forget prematurely, then we are doomed to have more wars, more purges, more holocausts.

For Dr. Volf, remembering rightly begins by remembering that One died for all, including him! As he thought about the wrongs perpetrated on him by one particularly harsh interrogator, wrote "I too am a wrongdoer!" I too, am in need of God's forgiveness. This Captain and I, he wrote, were both reconciled on that hill outside the gate of Jerusalem! Furthermore, there is a chance that if he were able to take a deeper look at this "wrongdoer's" whole life, he might find more virtue there. Dr. Volf knew that he could not "remember rightly" on his own, but was grateful that he was a part of a community of faith — the Christian church — that from the start framed his memories, even in a communist country.<sup>2</sup> We remember that One died for us all, even our enemies!

But remembering rightly also means remembering forward. The people of Israel had been devastated in war, and they were now in exile. They had been taken as prisoners and marched into Babylon. It hurt them to remember what it was like back in Jerusalem. "We lay down and wept when we remembered Zion," the psalmist cried. But the poet Isaiah helped them to remember forward, to the vision that God had in mind for them. Remembering that vision kept the people from perishing and provided hope.

I am going to restore you, says God. Those who have been in prison, I'm going to say "Come out." To those who are in darkness, I'm saying "Show yourselves." There's going to be food for all, water for all." Isaiah knew that Jerusalem thought that God had forgotten them. "Can a mother forget her nursing child?" in one of the most tender images of God in all of scripture. "I will not forget!"

We remember forward, by remembering the kind of world that God wants us to have, so that we can be about building that world.

Memorial Day is a time of remembrance. A time to remember with gratitude the blessings of liberty, the blessing of God's grace and deliverance of us; a time to remember those who have died for us, a time to remember those who are still not free. We dare not forget, or we'll be doomed to repeat them.

But our Memorial Day is not a time to memorialize war — for war can only be viewed as tragedy. And hatred and revenge are better buried with the dead. Maybe, above all, Memorial Day is a day to grieve, a day to grieve over the loss of loved one and strangers who laid down their lives, a day to grieve the death of every parent's child on all sides of conflicts; a day to grieve over the divisions among us which still lead to violence and war.<sup>3</sup>

But let us also remember rightly our story, the story that frames our memories. That as Jesus faced his own death, what Jesus wanted his friends to know was that the whole creation is full of God's love. "Greater love has no one than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

At no point is Christianity more countercultural than here. This is not about getting the love you need; this is about giving your love, your life, away. It is the Christian secret. To live the very best life you possibly can, you have to give it away — to a child, to a beloved, your friends, your faith, your church, the great ideas and principle of our nation.

So may we remember, gratefully, and rightly, all of them this day.

And may we remember, gratefully and rightly, the story that frames our memories, of the One who died for us all, who taught us to trust God, to seek first the kingdom of God, and who, as he was saying goodbye to his disciples, reminded them of the essence of life and love: No greater love has anyone than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> James Michener, *The Covenant*, p. 694.

<sup>2</sup> Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*, pp. 15-17.

<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to my friend Billy Wade, pastor of the Covington Presbyterian Church for these and other insights in a paper he presented to our lectionary group some years ago.

### **Isaiah 49:8–16a**

**8** Thus says the Lord: In a time of favor I have answered you, on a day of salvation I have helped you; I have kept you and given you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages; **9** saying to the prisoners, “Come out,” to those who are in darkness, “Show yourselves.” They shall feed along the ways, on all the bare heights shall be their pasture; **10** they shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them down, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them. **11** And I will turn all my mountains into a road, and my highways shall be raised up. **12** Lo, these shall come from far away, and lo, these from the north and from the west, and these from the land of Syene.

**13** Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones. **14** But Zion said, “The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me.” **15** Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. **16** See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands ...

### **Matthew 6:24–34**

**24** ”No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

**25** ”Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? **26** Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? **27** And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? **28** And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, **29** yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. **30** But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? **31** Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” **32** For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. **33** But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. **34** ”So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.

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