

## *“Remembering the Fallen”*

*2 Samuel 1: 1, 17-27*

*Sixth Sunday after Pentecost/June 30, 2024*

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And David lamented: “How the mighty have fallen!”

I grew up with my father’s stories about the navy— some that I will not recall for you because he was the saltiest of sailors. However, those stories that affected me deeply were stories of comrades in arms, standing with each other in difficult and dangerous moments. My father served in World War II in the South Pacific on a battleship, the USS South Dakota. My father served with distinction on the battleship as a signalman. It’s hard to imagine him as a young 19-year-old on the signal deck sending semaphore and Morse code and raising battle flags in the heat of horrible conflict. He told me that a bomb narrowly missed the deck on which he was working and detonated on the deck below, killing 30 men. That was a day filled with great sorrow, and he never forgot watching the burial at sea as his comrades were laid to rest in the ocean depths. How the mighty have fallen! He chose to reminisce often about his shipmates, those who bore the brunt of battle with him. Talk to the veterans of any war. It’s the same with them. They talk about the men and women of their unit and often express a bond to their fellow comrades-in-arms that exceed any connection to their own families. They have entrusted their lives to them and vowed to protect them.

In our Old Testament lesson, we sense that David feels the same when he shares his grief and pain over the loss of Saul and Jonathan. This David grieves for his band of brothers, his fallen comrades. In fact, he is a wonderful study in what it means to be human, to succeed wonderfully, to fail tragically, and to grieve admirably. His story is in the words of Eugene Peterson “earthly and godly.” We do well to attend to it.

As the story goes, a messenger has come to David to announce that King Saul and Prince Jonathan have died in battle against the Philistines on Mount Gilboa. The messenger thinks that this will be good news for David. And why wouldn’t it be? David has spent a great portion of his life on the lam, running from Saul’s anger and jealousy. Now with the death of Saul, the way is paved for David to claim his throne. This should be a time of rejoicing, but instead a great cry arose within David. Upon hearing the news, we read in the first chapter “David took hold of his clothes and tore them; and all the men who were with him did the same. They mourned and they wept and fasted until evening for Saul and for his son Jonathan, and for the army of the Lord and for the house of Israel.” (2 Samuel 1: 11-12) David gathers all the grief together into a shattering lament, and remembers the fallen and remembers his country. David uses language that captures both the horror of war and the honor of those who fight. (Peterson, *First and Second Samuel*, 142). War is horrible: blood is spilled and fat butchered. But there is honor too: the courageous bow and the relentless sword. We cannot be sentimental or laudatory about war; but those who fight are honorable and brave people.

Three times David uses the phrase, “how the mighty have fallen.” The first time he says it to describe the deaths of Saul and Jonathan and pays tribute to them. “In life and in death,” David says, “they were not divided; they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions.” The second time he uses this phrase he speaks of his deep affection for Jonathan. Those who love, as David loved Jonathan, feel the sting of death the deepest of all. And the third time David uses the phrase, he speaks of the loss that the nation feels and the futility of war. “How the mighty have fallen, and the weapons of war perished!” Warfare brings such violence that even the mighty fall to its destruction. How the mighty have fallen! David mourns for himself and for the nation.

As we prepare for the 4<sup>th</sup> of July and the celebration of our nation’s birth, we need to do two things. First, we need to remember the fallen who died to preserve our nation. The nation’s existence bears with it a great cost. Inscribed near the entrance to a cemetery in Okinawa, where many American personnel are buried, are these words: “We gave our todays in order that you might have your tomorrows.” Men and women in countless wars have answered the call to serve, to expose themselves to heartache and danger for the sake of the country we love. We cannot forget them or the costs that they and their loved ones have born. Many veterans will ask the question, “Was it

worth it?" And some will rephrase that question and ask, "You mean, were you worth it?" And the answer they will give is, "Yes, you are worth it." Our armed forces are filled with people who believe that that we are worth their sacrifice, and they believe that the United States is worth their sacrifice. For that we must always be grateful and remember the fallen. And we need to remember this too. We who have benefited from their sacrifice have a responsibility also. ***Soldiers lay down their lives for something worth fighting for, and they know that in the long run, whether or not that objective worth dying for will be achieved, depends, not just on the outcome of war, but on what we do, after a war has ended.*** Our military has made sacrifices for the great dream we hold for our country.

Others besides the military also have made great sacrifices for America, some with their own lives. Think of Abraham Lincoln or the martyrs for the cause of civil rights, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. They too served and gave their lives for a dream of justice and peace for all people. Great Americans all! Will we, who have benefited from the gift of the fallen, sacrifice too to make that dream a reality? The true way to remember the fallen is to claim our responsibility as citizens to realize in our time the hope of America. ***The true way to remember the fallen is to rise and accept the responsibility God has given us to perfect our nation.***

On this weekend before the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, I invite you to pause before you rush to the picnic and the fireworks and to reflect on what our society needs, what it needs of us as citizens. The fallen have bequeathed to us a legacy of values. We as a nation do not have a monopoly on all values. But I do believe at their core that American values reflect human values; they are the values for which the world hungers, and we are stewards of those values. On this holiday remember our history, our great hope of drawing people from all over the world to form a nation, a nation not built on any ethnic identity or race, but on an idea, captured by the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Remember the four freedoms articulated on the verge of the Second World War by President Franklin Roosevelt: freedom of speech, freedom from want, freedom of religion, and freedom from fear. Those freedoms are both American values and also human values for all people.

An idea of freedom, equality, and justice for all people, is what courses through our veins. We have been on a journey as Americans to bring about that reality of freedom, equality, and justice in our nation. And let us acknowledge, that the journey has been a less than perfect journey. Civil War. The fight over amendments to the Constitution. The struggle against Jim Crow and for civil rights. The right to vote. The struggle for justice for LGBTQ people. Every nation that has ever existed on this planet has had an ambiguous history and a struggle for goodness to emerge. America too. There are sad stories in our history, but we overcame and still do. There are great stories of good people who stood by the dream of our country for justice, freedom, and equality. Many have fallen in death and in life for that dream. That dream will not die, because that dream is more than an American dream; it is the dream of God, and God will not surrender to evil or deem the struggle against evil as not worth it.

It is this dream that I think is at the heart of America's goodness. You see, long before America was a superpower or an economic giant, America was a good and great nation. And its goodness was not found in its military prowess or in its manufacturing base. It reflected goodness when, for example, the Puritans, wholly devoted to their God, came to America in search of religious freedom to build what they hoped would be a new Israel. They wanted a society that reflected God's goodness and mercy. Success, for them, was not material wealth or power, but the creation of a community in which a genuinely moral and spiritual life could be lived and neighbor cared for neighbor. John Winthrop, one of the early Puritans, believed that freedom was a moral freedom, not a freedom to do as you please, but a freedom based on the covenant between God and humanity, "a liberty to that only which is good, just and honest." Freedom to be decent, good, and just. Freedom to be a good society. A compassionate society, based on love of God and neighbor – I want to hope that such a dream is part of the American dream. And it is worth dying and living for.

Remember in dark days when we feel that the dream of God is not worth it, remember that God in his Son was one of the fallen too. God considered dying for us and the dream of a renewed humanity worth it. God became human in Jesus, and bore our injustices, our prejudices, our renunciations of God's dream, our cowardness, our easy

accommodation to the powers of darkness and demagoguery. God bore all that in loving mercy because human beings are worth it.

It's so easy to become a cynic, but if we do, then we do not believe the rest of the story of God, that on the third day, Christ rose from the dead, triumphant over terror and evil and the enemies that want to crush love and compassion. Christ rose. And that is the promise. That is the promise that inspires hope now, that inspires courageous work, arduous laboring in the vineyard of creation to fix our world. Because Christ rose, we cannot deem our sacrifices as unworthy. We dare to believe that the long arc of history moves towards freedom, equality, kindness, justice, and love – because God has a purpose with creation.

“How the mighty have fallen,” cried David over the deaths of Jonathan and Saul. Remember the fallen of our nation's many wars and all Americans who have given their life for a more just and equitable world. Do not forget the sorrow that sacrifices engendered. Instead, let us remember and re-dedicate ourselves to the values that motivated the fallen. Let us re-dedicate ourselves to the cause of peace, to helping the poor, to welcoming new people to our country, to creating the inclusive society envisioned by our founders and our history.

As we remember that God's Son fell for that dream and rose again, let us look forward to that future day when there will be no more fallen, but instead a kingdom of peace and justice for all!