

Scary, Beautiful Words

A Meditation for Sunday Morning Worship on Memorial Day Weekend
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

May 28, 2017

Text: Psalm 46

My understanding of and my relationship to Memorial Day has evolved over time, growing up with me as I grew up. Like everyone, I have a lifetime of Memorial Day Weekend memories: planting geraniums and marigolds at the graves of my mother's parents, the first swim of the summer at our lake house in Pennsylvania, counting down the days to school's end, anticipating all the joys that summer could hold. When I was a child I experienced Memorial Day and the holiday weekend created around it only as a flag-bedecked celebration like Independence Day, but without the fireworks.

Only as an adult, has my full appreciation of Memorial Day and what it's supposed to mean become clarified. No doubt that is because of my father-in-law, Winston Clarkson Hainsworth, MD who served as a front-line, parachuting physician in the 11th Airborne Division of the US Army. Win, as everyone knew him, was part of the Philippines Campaign under General MacArthur and was one of the most decorated physicians of WW II. His medals, along with the flag that draped his casket for his burial with full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery, now reside in our home. Peter and I were practically newlyweds when

Win died and it was that moment on a long ago, snowy January day as Win was laid to rest amongst the honored dead of Arlington that Memorial Day changed forever for me. That's because "Dad" was now a part of those rows and rows of simple white headstones. I knew in that moment that every person buried there and in every National cemetery in this country was so much more than their military service, important as that was. They were husbands and wives, sons and daughters, friends and soul mates for the people they left behind. That's when I understood in a whole new way that Memorial Day is about the people willing to serve, even to the point of giving their very lives. Those people as people are the real story of Memorial Day, the reason for Memorial Day. Flags adorn their graves this Memorial Day Weekend to remind us of their service but it is their living memories in the lives of those they left behind that are truly precious.

So, today we will try to catch a glimpse of those very real people for whom Memorial Day was created. We will do this in the words written about them in the case of the Civil War, the war which gave rise to the holiday itself. Then we will hear of the experiences of a combatant from each of the major wars in which the United States has been involved since the Civil War in their own words, through poetry they created themselves. Their words tell of their experiences, their sacrifices much better than

anything else could. It is their words we will use to honor the experiences and memories of all who served in the United States Armed Services from 1860, the beginning of the Civil War down through to today. To put the poems somewhat in context, each will be prefaced by some very basic information about the war from which the poem originated, including dates and casualty figures. Assisting me with the reading of some of the poems will be two of our Deacons, Jenny Brummund and Lynn Murray. Listen now to these scary, beautiful words and the stories of real people they tell.

Our first poem is *The Blue and the Gray* by Francis Miles Finch, written in 1867 to commemorate the Civil War and the men who died fighting it. The Civil War began on April 12, 1861 and concluded on May 9, 1865. A total of 3 million combatants fought on both sides of the conflict and 600,00 died.

The Blue and The Gray

By the flow of the inland river,
Whence the fleets of iron have fled,
Where the blades of the grave-grass quiver,
Asleep are the ranks of the dead:
Under the sod and the dew,
Waiting the judgment-day;
Under the one, the Blue,
Under the other, the Gray

These in the robings of glory,
Those in the gloom of defeat,
All with the battle-blood gory,

In the dusk of eternity meet:
Under the sod and the dew,
Waiting the judgement-day
Under the laurel, the Blue,
Under the willow, the Gray.

From the silence of sorrowful hours
The desolate mourners go,
Lovingly laden with flowers
Alike for the friend and the foe;
Under the sod and the dew,
Waiting the judgement-day;
Under the roses, the Blue,
Under the lilies, the Gray.

So with an equal splendor,
The morning sun-rays fall,
With a touch impartially tender,
On the blossoms blooming for all:
Under the sod and the dew,
Waiting the judgment-day;
Brodered with gold, the Blue,
Mellowed with gold, the Gray.

So, when the summer calleth,
On forest and field of grain,
With an equal murmur falleth
The cooling drip of the rain:
Under the sod and the dew,
Waiting the judgment -day,
Wet with the rain, the Blue
Wet with the rain, the Gray.

Sadly, but not with upbraiding,
The generous deed was done,
In the storm of the years that are fading
No braver battle was won:
Under the sod and the dew,
Waiting the judgment-day;
Under the blossoms, the Blue,

Under the garlands, the Gray

No more shall the war cry sever,
Or the winding rivers be red;
They banish our anger forever
When they laurel the graves of our dead!
Under the sod and the dew,
Waiting the judgment-day,
Love and tears for the Blue,
Tears and love for the Gray.

World War I, known as the war to end all wars, began on July 28, 1914 and ended on November 11, 1918. During the course of this horrific war, civilian and military casualties topped 38,000,000 with 17 million deaths, 11 million military and 6 million civilian. The poem I chose for this conflict is *Dulce et Decorum Est* by Wilfred Owen. Published after his death in 1920, the title of the poem, taken from the ancient works of Horace, means "it is sweet and honorable...", with the implication that it is followed by *pro patria mori*, which means "to die for one's country". Reading this poem for us is Jenny Brummund

Dulce et Decorum Est, by Wilfred Owen

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys! - An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime ...
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, --
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old lie: *Dulce et decorum est Pro patria mori.*

World War II, the war which followed the “war to end all wars” began on September 1, 1939 and ended on September 2, 1945. The United States entered the war following the bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese in December 1941. The Allied war casualties were 16,000,000 military dead and 45,000,000 civilian deaths. The poem I have chosen for this war is *The Sentry* by Mike Subritzky who served in the 161st Battery of the United States Army National Guard which saw active duty in the European theatre. This poem captures beautifully both the monotony and the importance of the sentry during time of war.

The Sentry

The wind is crisp, it blows from the West and the moon slips behind a cloud.

It is 4.45 as I rise half alive, feet numb, fingers numb, and the barrel of my rifle a dark silhouette against the grey dawn sky...Duty.

Tussock cold and wet about my legs, webbing tight about my waist, boots stumbling blindly towards the machine gun post.

Test the phone, check the gun, turn up the collar on my combat jacket, back resting against the wet clay walls of the pit...One hour till dawn.

Eyes blur, mind wanders, thoughts of home, wife and kids; water bottle presses against my back, knees drawn up, helmet and head resting between them for warmth.

Time drags, mind plays tricks on my vision, heaven would be a warm bed or a hot cup of coffee...Half hour till dawn, test the phone.

Dawn nears, hills take shape, trees take shape, to my front is the black menacing shadow of a field gun; lethal against the sky line.

The tannoy clicks, the phone rings, "Stand To!" is quietly passed by word of mouth, human shapes move quietly, each in the direction of its own slit trench...silence.

Experience shows this to be the most likely time for an attack. Time lapses, nothing moves, save only the chill wind blowing gently through the tussock...silence.

Birds break into song, the first rays of the new dawn sun burst forth spreading warmth and life into everything it

reaches out and touches; and for the Gunners another day begins..."Stand Down!"

The Korean Conflict began on June 25, 1950 and a truce went into effect on July 27, 1953. During this brief but brutal conflict 5 million soldiers and civilians were killed among all combatant nations. The poem chosen from this war is *Fourteenth Regiment* by John Taylor Jones, who served with Company D of the First Battalion of the 17th Infantry of the United States Army. Jones saw action through the Korean War, including the infamous Heart Break Ridge memorialized in his haunting poem.

Fourteenth Regiment

We sat there on the hill
At Heartbreak Ridge
Waiting for the
Fourteenth Regiment
To relieve us.

They should have been there at dawn;
Now it was afternoon.
There would be trouble
If they didn't get there soon.

Finally, a lieutenant arrived
With just a fistful of men.
I said, "Where is your platoon?
Where in the hell have you been?"

“There in these hills
Somewhere,” he said.
“I’m sure they’ll be here soon.”
My heart sank at his sorry words,
I saw forthcoming doom.

Finally, he said,
“I’m relieving you now.
I know you have to go.”
I said, “We can’t leave you now.
It will only bring you woe.”
But he ordered us away,
And we did go.

I jumped into the jeep,
My troops into the six-bys.
We headed down the road
To the Valley of Death.

When we passed through
The camouflage netting
That hid the open road,
The bullets winged overhead,
My face was against the floorboards.

Ahead, I saw a major
Standing in his jeep.
He waved me to pull over,
My driver stopped,
The major said,
“Where am I, Sergeant?”
“Heartbreak is just ahead,” I said,.
“But spread this convoy out, Sir,

Or all of you'll be dead."

His hair was red,
His face was white
Until he heard my words.
He turned a million colors,
Thanked me and drove ahead.

That night quite late,
The rest of our company
Came back into reserve.
I said, "What's it like up there?"
They answered with out reserve,
"It's like a boy scout jamboree,
All of them are lost,
Stepping on mines,
Flashing their lights,
Calling for their friends."

I felt so sad because
I knew what was coming next.
The Chinese would wait
To make sure we were gone,
Then their might they would flex
Against this untrained regiment
That had never seen a fight—
Other than among the prisoners
They had been guarding
On an Island
Near Pusan.

In a few days
The bad news echoed
Across the Korean hills,
The Fourteenth was running

From the fight,
The Chinese did not sit still.

Our Thirty Second Regiment
Went to their relief
And took the Ridge once more,
That treeless, indefensible Heartbreak Ridge,
So cruel throughout the war.
We were called up too,
To defend the MLR.
To back up the Thirty Second,
To not let the Chinese get too far.

That was the story of the war,
Untrained men,
Bad equipment,
Faulty ammunition in short supply.
And The Brass
Who failed to keep their men action-ready,
And cost the lives of many.

The Korean soil
Holds the blood
Of soldiers brave and weak,
Who cared not for the war at all—
But freedom there still keeps.
The Korean people
Where the ones who knew
What that great war was about
And when I went there on business,
The people make a fuss
About me fighting there;
“Thanks for what you did for us!”

I say to every Korean veteran,

From here or lands afar,
Go to Korean to get your thanks;
They're the only ones who care.

The Vietnam War began on November 1, 1955 and ended on April 30, 1975. Total casualties among military and civilian personnel included 807,311 dead, of which 58,315 were US Military, and 1,340,000 wounded, of which 303,644 were US military. The poem I have chosen to capture the sense of this brutal, jungle war is *One Fine Day*, written by Curt Bennett, a former pilot who saw active duty in Vietnam. This poem captures eloquently the haphazard nature of life and death in a war where exhaustion is as dangerous as the enemy.

ONE FINE DAY

As far as the eye could see
The cloud cover stretched the horizon,
Broken only by tops of tallest mountains,
A soft, gauze mantle protecting the earth,
As to the east, the day star sun
Glowered the horizon in yellow fierceness
Promising to soon burn the thin mantle off
And bake the tropical forests below.

We loitered, skimming the cool, white sky sea,
The shadows of our aircraft ringed in rainbows
Hanging in silence the stillness of the morning
The radios crackled quietly in the background,
From unseen frantic men in crises below,
Running from an enemy closing in to kill them,v

As helicopters swarming the clouds below
Urgently coordinated the rescue.

The first Huey labored up and broke the clouds,
Trailing wispy tendrils of cloud-moisture
Off the ends of frantically whipping white-tipped blades,
Rotors fingers hungrily clawing the thick morning air.
An umbilical rope stretching down dragging behind,
Attached to six desperate men clinging to the cord,
Like fish anchored to a line, they trailed the clouds.

Slowly the Huey gained altitude climbing towards the sun,
Then another and another rose from the clouds,
Each trailing men holding on for life,
Green khaki knots they stretched the wind.
We lazily turned parallel to escort the Hueys
Back to the nearest landing zone
Where they would take aboard the men
They had rescued from certain death.

As we turned in orbit behind the choppers,
One of the green blobs lost hold on his lifeline,
Plummeted, arching towards his death.
In helpless, grim fascination, we watched him go
Plunging down through the quiet morning sun.
At the last moment, he spread his arms out wide,
Like Jesus on a cross, he swan dived and seemed to float,
For a brief moment skimming the clouds
Then disappeared.

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This brings us to the current war our country has been embroiled in since the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in 2001. This “war on terror” has much less well-defined parameters. It has two distinct geographical locations, Afghanistan and Iraq. Its start date is even murky with the Afghanistan conflict beginning on

November 7, 2001 and Iraq on March 30, 2003. Theoretically each of these conflicts also has an ending date: Afghanistan on December 29, 2014 and Iraq on December 18, 2011 and yet armed forces are still on the ground in both regions. This makes it difficult to get at precise casualty numbers but at minimum 500,000 civilians and military personnel on both sides of these conflicts have perished with at least that many wounded and permanently disabled. Exact figures on wounded but not permanently not disabled were not readily available. I have chosen two poems by BJ Lewis to highlight this ongoing war: *Incoming* and *I Serve*. BJ took up poetry writing as a means of dealing with his experiences in the war zone in Basra, Iraq. Reading this poem for us is Jenny Brummund.

INCOMING

Another familiar day turns to night,
another day closer to the homeward bound flight.
Servicemen move around, each lost in own thoughts,
some dressed for battle, some wear nothing but shorts.

Incoming!

The siren wails with its chilling sound,
like puppets, strings cut, we all drop to the ground.
Face down in the dirt with racing pulse
we wait with the hope that the warning is false.
Alas no, too soon comes a distant thud
and with it a tremor that's felt through the mud.
More impacts rumble as we struggle to hear
if the next round to land will be anywhere near.
Throughout the attack the siren screams;

a relentless echo that will haunt my dreams.
Time stops. The ground rises with an ear-splitting crack,
senses reel, eyes tight shut, everything black.
Its okay, it was close, but this time we're safe
The rockets fell short, relief comes in a wave.
Hands shake. Alarms silence. Quietness descends.
Alone now, just waiting for the stillness to end.
The All Clear is sounded, we rise from the floor
and return to the normal routine of before.

I SERVE

No matter how much frustration there is,
fear, trepidation, anxiety or unease.
Despite all the hardship. Adversity aside,
as long as I wear uniform I endure all with pride.
For service and loyalty are what matter to me,
honour, courage, respect and integrity
are the armour I wear to counter all foe
and give me strength when into harm's way I go.
I depend on my comrades, and defend them I must,
for in turn they depend on me keeping the trust.
Together we shall overcome the toughest of test,
our resolve will not waiver as we all give our best.

And so we come to the end of these scary, beautiful words
written to make sense of the wars in which their authors found
themselves. In this powerful legacy we sense both the horror of
war and the unique lessons it teaches about honor, loyalty,
commitment, responsibility and courage. May we never take the
sacrifices made on our behalf by these men and women for
granted. May we honor them even as we pray with the Psalmist,
that our God will make all wars cease, shattering our weapons and
our hate for the other for all time. May we remember always and

in all circumstances that God is truly our refuge and strength, our very present help in trouble. May we hold on to God's truth that we need not fear though the earth should change and the very mountains shake. May we dare to live boldly and in confident hope that our God does want a future for us bright with promise, and free of war. As we love to sing here in this church, "Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me." Make it so, God. Make it so. Amen.