

Honoring Our Veterans

When I was a chaplain in the United States Army Reserve, there were rumors that the nation might go to war. Iraq had invaded Kuwait, and there was a sense that a major conflict was at hand. As part of the preparation for deployment, the troops were gathered and told to write or revise their wills in case any of us were killed.

As it turned out, Heather and I had just updated our will, but I kept asking myself, “What if I had less than a year to live?” How would I live my life if I knew the end was at hand?”

On this Veterans’ Day weekend, I think about those questions still. Many brave men and women in our Armed Forces have asked those questions, considering the possibility of their own deaths. These are the people who fought, and in some cases died, in two world wars, on the Korean Peninsula, in Vietnam, Kuwait, Iraq, Afghanistan, the Middle East and on the African continent.

You and I may not die in combat, but someday we will die. That thought should not fill us with dread. Jesus says in today’s gospel that God “is not the God of the dead, but of the living...” Christians enjoy eternal life in this life culminating in heaven. We don’t live as dying men and women, but as people who know that the best is yet to come.

In our lesson from Job, we have words that have comforted mourners throughout the centuries. “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God...” No Christian lives without hope. We believe that the same God who raised Jesus from the dead will raise us as well. Death is not the end of life, God is.

Let me ask you a question: Are you living a hopeful life? By that I mean: are you living as if the best is yet to come? Are you approaching life with assurance and resolve, maintaining the perspective that ultimately life triumphs over death, love prevails against hate, truth surpasses falsehood, and hope supersedes despair? Are you living in such a way that you genuinely believe, that amid all the turmoil and upheavals in our world, God reigns?

More than 75 years ago, at the end of World War II, there was a cluster of remarkable leaders ready to show a demoralized international community broken by the carnage of war that there were still grounds for hope: America's Harry Truman, England's Ernest Bevin, Germany's Konrad Adenauer, and Italy's Alcide De Gasperi. Winston Churchill was still around to sound the trumpet-tones of his oratory. In the 1930s, as the fires of civilization were burning low; it was Churchill – the only giant in a generation of appeasers and tyrants – who spoke the authentic tones of democracy and decency.

In world of immense economic, political, and social upheaval, we need leaders like that today – as well as ordinary men and women like you and me – to stand and work for the deepest human values and beliefs that make life worthwhile.

So where do we begin? You start by resolving to make this world a better place by your living in it.

When I was a priest in San Diego, I met a remarkable man at the Veterans' Hospital. As we were waiting for the elevator, we struck up a conversation. He told me he was a volunteer who had been coming to the hospital almost every week for 15 years, to visit the veterans. Since he wasn't an ordained minister, I asked how he got involved in such work. He said he responded to an ad in the newspaper asking for volunteers to visit the veterans. When I started to praise him for his commitment, he stopped me. "No, Father, these veterans give me far more than I give them. They served their country faithfully. I figure the least I can do is to offer them some companionship."

And then he went on to say, "The sad part about it is, as these men and women get older, fewer people come to visit them. They get lonely, feel forgotten. That's where I come in. I'm here to show our appreciation for their service and thank them."

Here was a man, an ordinary fellow like you and me, who was doing something quite extraordinary – caring about others by serving the ones who served their country. In the process, he was getting far more than he gave.

It happens, doesn't it? You save your life by giving it away. You think of others and not just yourself, and in the process, you make the world a better place for everyone.

So first, make this world a better place by your living in it. And second, leave this world a legacy of love.

Imagine being a person of Jewish descent living in Poland in the 1930s. Nazi forces are advancing across Europe. Jews are being rounded up and arrested. Their possessions are confiscated, their homes destroyed. Most Jewish people are sent to concentration camps, where they face beatings, torture, forced labor, starvation, and mass executions. Many of these Jewish people coped with their losses by writing what has been called "ethical wills." Since they had nothing of material value to leave future generations, they wrote wills stating who they were, and what they valued most in life, and the values they wanted to pass on to their children and grandchildren.¹

What would you include if you were writing an ethical will for your children and grandchildren? I suspect that most of us would want to leave a legacy of kindness, compassion, decency, and generosity. As we take our final breath, we would want to look back on our life and feel that we have made some worthwhile contribution in the world – that we are leaving this world a better place because of our passing through it.

Eleanor Roosevelt, in quoting an ancient Chinese proverb, said, "It is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness." We may not be able to light the entire world, but we can light our portion of it, in our own place and in our own way, according to the resources and abilities that God has given us. We can speak the truth, refuse the lie, express our love, and never let hate take hold of our hearts.

In Stephen Spielberg's epic World War II film *Saving Private Ryan*, a squadron of young soldiers is sent on a mission to find one soldier behind enemy lines and bring him home. Most of the young men in the squadron, including the captain, die in the rescue attempt. As he lay dying, the captain's last words to Private Ryan are, "Earn this."

Many years later, Private Ryan, now an old man, visits the grave of the captain. As he kneels at the grave, he says, "Not a day goes by I don't think about what happened... And I just want you to know... I've tried... tried to

live my life the best I could. I hope that's enough. I didn't invent anything. I didn't cure any diseases. I worked on a farm. I raised a family. I lived a life. I only hope, in your eyes at least, I earned what you did for me.”

In many ways, we are all Private Ryan. We are the beneficiaries of those who served and even died for our country. Freedom is ours today because of their sacrifices. Veterans Day is a call to sacrifice and serve. Those of us who love liberty must answer that call, however we can, as best we can. We may not be called to lay down our lives for our country, but we can live for our country, making it a more compassionate, more civil, more tolerant place for all. We can care for our veterans, as Advent Church is doing so generously in our outreach. We can lift people up who are unable to help themselves. We can respect differing voices, work for reconciliation, and be unifiers and not dividers. We may never fight for America abroad, but we can make a better America at home.

Navy SEAL Michael Monsoor could have run, but instead he chose to lay down his life for three fellow Navy SEALs on September 29, 2006, when a grenade was tossed into their rooftop post during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Monsoor's deployment in Iraq was almost done. Running to preserve his life would have been understandable. Instead, he threw himself into the grenade, using his body to shield the others from the explosion. Thirty minutes later, he succumbed to his injuries.

In his biography written by his father George Monsoor, we learn of a young man overcoming asthma, defending kids who were bullied, deepening his devotion to God, and making it through SEAL training, which pushes even the strongest people to their limits. Michael Monsoor died because sacrifice, selflessness, and commitment to a cause greater than him were all part of his spiritual DNA. In addition to the Medal of Honor, Monsoor received the Silver Star, the Bronze Star and the Purple Heart for his action in serving our country.²

What will it take to have a nation of Michael Monsoors? I ask myself that question as we approach Veterans Day. For America to continue as a shining city on a hill, we need to rekindle a willingness to sacrifice, to serve and to preserve our liberties. Benjamin Franklin reminds us: “Those who would give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety deserves neither liberty nor safety.”

Thank God for the men and women in our Armed Forces, for those who served our country faithfully, and for those who made the supreme sacrifice with their own lives. So, if you haven't already done so, say a prayer for our veterans, give thanks for their sacrifices, and remember their heroism. Act courageously, faithfully, and boldly, and never forget that at the end of history God wins, Christ wins, love wins. The battle for freedom and goodness is never in vain because Christ has won the victory.

The Rev. Dr. Gary Nicolosi

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Text – Job 19:23-27; Luke 20:27-38

Proper 27, C

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1. Dick Capen in *The Transparent Leader* by Dwight L. Johnson (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 2001), 161-163.
2. Patti Maguire Armstrong, "Defend us in Battle: The Heroic Faith of Navy SEAL Michael Monsoor." *National Catholic Register online*, November 11, 2003.