

The Torch

Psalm 62 and John 17: 6 – 20

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May 24, 2009

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.

These words are from the popular poem written during World War I called In Flanders Fields. The poem ends with this image of the torch being tossed from the dying, whose voice you hear, to the living. The poem is probably best known for its reference to poppies, which have been used to decorate the graves of those who have died. As so many years have passed, for the majority today “Flanders” might suggest not fields of poppies but the happy go-lucky Ned Flanders on the Simpsons. So that we might be on the same page, here is the poem.

In Flanders Fields

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved, and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

— Lt.-Col. John McCrae (1872 - 1918)

It is said that Lt. Col. John McCrae wrote these words when he saw the burial of a friend who fell in battle. This, then, is his oath to continue the battle until its victory. It is a promise still taken up today by men and women of honor.

Yet, in the 20th century we have witnessed, or have been nurtured by those who witnessed, unimagined battlefields. With the splitting of the atom came the power to stop a war, and the ironic fallout that as we move further along in the world of the atom our lives often times feel less secure. We worry about who will get the bomb next, knowing that the technology has increased beyond destroying a single city. 911 reminded us of our vulnerability. We may have cheered when we entered into Iraq and took out Saddam’s tanks with our precise weaponry, but now we may worry about what new terrorists will accomplish.

The origin of this age may be represented in the man Albert Einstein, who patiently pondered the ways of the universe that he may see the design of God. In the 1940s we were impressed with the results. $E = mc^2$ and the theory of general relativity that showed gravity was a manifestation of curved space. Einstein became the living American symbol that, if we applied ourselves, we could unveil the secrets of the universe. God is not random.

Yet, no boat operated by a human goes in a straight line at a constant speed between two points. While God may not be random there is no end to human caprice. The torch that Einstein tossed us led humanity not only to wonder but also to create weaponry so powerful that we have the means to destroy humanity.

That was the reality many of us grew up in. A new myth emerged that gave rise to new stories--technology taking on a mind of its own and turning against the human creator: 2001, the Terminator movies, the Matrix. The innovations, the genius of humanity, the weapons created to protect humankind became, in the human imagination, one of the greatest threats to life.

In some depth of our consciousness we saw what theologian Mirsolav Volf gives voice to today: “We are made vulnerable not just by external threats but by the very means we keep them at bay.” In his essay,

Security, Vulnerability, Theology, Volf argues that our search for security has made us less secure and muses “To be inviolable is to be divine; to be human is to be, and I think is always to remain, vulnerable.”

Vulnerable, yes. Alone, no.

One of the recurring themes in John 17 is our vulnerability. Jesus asks God to protect us. Verses 11, 12 and 15...protect them, I protected them, I ask you to protect them.... Protection is the work of God.

In the Old Testament Psalm 62 is a song of trust which places in between two almost identical statements of trust in God...who alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall never be shaken... words that describe an abiding trouble, How long will you assail a person...all of you, as you would a leaning wall, a tottering fence?

It isn't the splitting of the atom. It isn't the fallout of 911. It isn't the economy. The Biblical view is that wherever we are, we humans have always experienced trouble that does not go away, trouble that, at times, threatens to undo us.

But trouble in the Psalm is sandwiched between praises. Trouble isn't the beginning, nor is it the end. On God rests my deliverance and my honor; my mighty rock, my refuge is in God. So trust in him at all times, O people.

Jesus prays for our protection. The Psalmist cries out for our trust. Those who sang the Psalmist's words were ones who knew what it was to be conquered, first by Assyria, and later, Babylon. They were no superpower. Similarly, those who are part of John's community knew what it was to live under threat. There is reference within the gospel itself that Christians have been kicked out of the synagogue, out of the protection granted only to Jews not to worship the emperor--a decision that put Christians in danger of becoming sport in the Coliseum.

What is striking about the scriptures is not some kind of visionary pacifist plan that will save all nations. Instead, what is remarkable is that when God's nations fell, faith in God remained. In the midst of the threat, the faithful heard, not a war cry nor, in this gospel, see an apocalyptic vision, they saw and heard Jesus praying for their protection. Later in Christian history, different rulers would come into

power who believed that Rome's turning away from the Roman gods was responsible for the crumbling of the empire. They would seek to stamp Christianity out. The Christian response was to continue to sing out God alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall never be shaken. They continued to remain part of those Jesus prayed to protect, refusing to renounce their faith.

Today the body of Christ lives.

There's a time in a toddler's life I've heard called the coffee table age. That's the age where the child's head and the coffee table bang together marked by an unmelodious howl. One of the images I have stored in memory is watching my daughter hit her head on the table, her falling to the ground underneath said table, and before I could reach her, watching her try to stand up again. Aargh! Another bump; another howl.

When the gospel of John refers to “the world,” to the “kosmos,” he is referring to a sphere of enmity towards God. “The world hates me,” Jesus says in John, “because I testify against it that its works are evil.” (John 7:7) In our scripture Jesus points to us as he speaks to God...“the world hates them because they do not belong to the world (17: 14).”

Our existence in John's gospel is not divided into what is sacred and profane. Rather we are urged to crawl out from under the table that is the world, that place that keeps us from rising up, that we might stand fully embraced by God. The larger sphere is often a place of greater vulnerability. Yet when we find our way out, there is Jesus smiling and tossing to us the torch as he turns toward the cross, unprotected, unhindered, at one with God.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:

To you from failing hands we throw

The torch; be yours to hold it high.

The torch of Christ we Christian Soldiers hold high is not defined by the suffering or the choices of war. The torch Jesus tosses us to carry is his joy.

“I speak these things,” Jesus intones, “that they may have my joy made complete in themselves.”

These things are his words of protection. Jesus wants us to know that he has lifted us up to the Father. Jesus wants us to know that we are watched over, we

are cared for, not one of us will be lost.

In his prayer, Jesus seeks God's protection of us that we may stop spending so much time trying to protect ourselves. Not only does such an inward focus usually invite more reason to harden our defenses but it doesn't allow the Holy Spirit room to move. It is more likely to lead to fear than joy.

The spiritual battle of a Christian Soldier is to stay connected to Jesus, to call on his name knowing that to do so is to enter into the protection of his prayer and his faith. As we enter into the faith of the one who lived fully by God's faithfulness, we know his joy.

No soldier should enter the battle without the shield of community prayer. In prayer we become one, as Christ and the Father are one. In prayer we are protected, sanctified, and sent out.

Sanctification and sending out is not something best done in solitude. The human mind creates its own circles and cycles that can lead us to an unsanctified choices. Jesus entered into prayer of chapter 17 holding the community with him.

We're not meant to fight on our own. That, perhaps, is the fallacy of our age that I've often bought into, that somehow we have to battle for joy on our own. John Calvin once quipped, "There is no worse screen to block out the Spirit than confidence in our own intelligence."

Let me suggest another way. The more I pray with others, the more I know joy. Somehow disagreements fall away. A common vision starts to emerge. Healing occurs. Those who are in the circle of prayer linger because the time is so sweet.

You have an opportunity to enter into such prayer with us this Wednesday. We are meeting in the sanctuary at 6:30 to pray for our church. Your church leaders are eager to have each one of you come and pray with us. While I am certain our church is healthy, our church life is just as much in need of prayer as is the life of our friends. Especially as we continue to seek how God would send us out.

The Congregational Way asks us to carry the torch high that all may see, to be the "light on the hill" or the light just above sea level as the case may be.

In these past few weeks our church has taken a step

of opening the sanctuary during the day to anyone who wants to enter in. At first, I wondered, won't that diminish the spirit, won't that cause more maintenance needs in our sanctuary, won't that invite in unwelcome elements? Well the Trustees were willing. The doors are open, the signs are up, and every time I walk by, I smile.

Still, not many people have entered in. It takes time for a person to trust enough to walk through the open doors. But I've seen a few notice our signs. I've seen a few peer in as they walk by. It takes time. The doors are open. It takes time.

We are soldiers of Christ. We stand together and call on the protection of God in the name of Jesus. By doing so we free ourselves, we who are the church, to do something other than protect ourselves. We open the doors wide.

This day, Mary and Chip, Katie and Matt, Rick, Ann, Emily and Sarah Woods are in Mexico at Open Door. Many won't go because of the stream of bad news...drug wars and swine flu. But Mary has been told by those who are there that they will be okay. She trusts their prayers. She trusts what she keeps hearing in staff prayers, we are meant to be there with them. So with rice and beans in hand, our little army arrives.

Today we remember those who sacrificed their lives that we might have that the freedom to come together in prayer. Today we remember the early Christians who would not pray to another because they knew that their power, their hope, was in Jesus. People didn't get in trouble for little private devotions, my friends. They fought for the power to pray together. Because they had experienced, as we have experienced, in prayer, together we can catch the torch of Christ's joy and be sent out to call others into the light.

We pray together because soldiers of Christ need one another in order to have the courage to enter into the battlefield.

We pray together that we may set free the Holy Spirit.

We pray together that the Holy Spirit might set us free.

