

Memorial Day 2021

By Chaplain Joshua Johnson, LT, USN, CHC

Grace and peace to each of you this day from Christ our Risen Lord and Savior.

Good morning, my name is Joshua Johnson and until a little over a year ago it was my honor to serve as a pastor in Sioux Falls, SD. Currently I am serving as a chaplain on a US Navy warship. It is an honor to share the gospel with you today. When Bishop Hagmaier asked if I would be willing to preach a sermon on Memorial Day weekend I was both grateful for the opportunity and nervous about having my voice heard potentially across an entire state. I appreciate your attention and I hope that the Good News comes through loud and clear by the blessing of the Holy Spirit.

Every Memorial Day we honor the memory of the men and women who have given the last full measure in service to our country. We recognize the sacrifices they and their families have given so that we may remain the land of the free and the home of the brave.

No less than 25 states have claimed to be the originators of what is now one of our most widely respected national holidays. Memorial Day as we know it has roots that go back to the end of the American Civil War. In efforts to remember those who had died, patriotic men and women would gather to decorate their graves with flowers and flags. North and South alike were unified in the desire to remember their sacrifice and to honor their memory.

There is something fundamentally human about the desire to pay homage to our dead. We gather around the graveside and search for meaning now that a cherished life has ended; sharing stories and comforting one another in our grief. As Christians we know that when we gather to celebrate a person's life, we trust in the knowledge that we worship the God of Life who has shattered the power of the grave forever by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus. Yet we still grieve the deaths of those who we love.

I vividly remember the funeral of my grandfather, a veteran of World War II. Though he lived to a ripe old age, he was still a casualty of that war- his mind irreparably damaged as a result of a medical collapse halfway around the world. I remember standing there in the damp Smoky Mountain fog as a bugler played TAPS and the smoke of a 21 gun salute mingled with the mountain air. I remember my grandmother being handed a flag as a man in uniform thanked her and our family for the life of my grandfather and the sacrifices made to our country. It was a holy moment and it has been indelibly marked upon my memory.

I have seen and been a part of a number of military funerals since then. There is a sense of ceremony that rivals that of the church in such moments. It is fitting that the nation should honor those who have served and remember well those how have given their lives for the cause of freedom.

Yet as beautiful as that ceremony is, it cannot speak life into the nothingness of death. No matter how beautiful the words and how meaningful the actions, death still reigns victorious if that ceremony has the final word. Yet I thank God that there are words which can speak life and offer a promise of hope beyond that misty mountain morning when I said goodbye to my grandfather. They are words of hope found in the resurrection. A reminder that death has been defeated and our hope is found in the Kingdom of God; in the return of our Risen King when heaven and earth are made anew and God will live among us forever.

In the gospel of John, Jesus told his disciples, “¹³ No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”(NRSV) This is something that anyone who serves in the military understands implicitly. We recognize there is the potential that we may be called upon to make such a sacrifice. Each of us has family, friends, hopes and dreams; none of us want to die in a war, yet it is a burden we will gladly bear if asked: for the sake of the men and women on either side of us- so that freedom may be preserved in our land and in others. For this reason freedom is never a thing to be taken for granted. It is won through the blood and sweat, trial and efforts of those who have gone before us: none more so that the freedom from sin, death, and the Devil which is found in the precious blood shed upon the cross for us all. When we are willing to sacrifice for the good of others we walk as disciples of the same Jesus who gave himself for us all. Yet there are many sacrifices we can and should make as disciples which do not

require martyrdom in the classic sense. A life of sacrifice can be just as powerful as the sacrifice of a life if we walk humbly in service to God and neighbor.

We live in a pivotal time in history. A worldwide pandemic has shaken the foundations of how we go about our daily lives and how we live together as the church. We are forced to reimagine what community looks like. On the global scene, tensions with Russia and China continue to rise as they vie for dominance against the United States and her allies. The longest-running war in American history draws to a close as later this year all combat troops are scheduled to be withdrawn from Afghanistan. Several generations of Americans have served with honor on distant battlefields against enemies of humankind whose tactics and brutality endanger not only our American way of life but the decency of life around the world. Many of those who served did not live to see the war's end and *all* who have served in the War on Terror have been marked by it in some way.

So where are we to turn when we hear of these “wars and rumors of wars” which cause doubt and fear? With the church throughout history we look to the source of our hope- the Firstborn from the Dead who told us “not to be alarmed, for the end is not yet.”

My prayer for each of you on this Memorial Day weekend is to remember well the cost of freedom. To honor the memory of over 1.3 million Americans who gave their lives so that others might live in peace and harmony. Though our nation and our world continue to struggle against the divisions of sin among us; we worship the God who “breaks the bow, shatters the spear, and burns the chariots with fire,” as the Psalmist sang. Let us be still and know that our God is with us now and always.

So pray for those who are still on the frontlines. Pray for those who serve our nation on land, on and under the sea, in the air, and soon in space itself. Pray for their families who sacrifice so much and receive so little recognition in return. If you know of someone in your congregation or neighborhood who has a spouse, a son, a daughter, a mother, or a father, who is deployed- make an extra effort to love them the way that Christ does. Show them you care and let them know you have their back, no matter what.

And finally brothers and sisters, pray for peace. Peace in our nation, peace in our world, peace in our hearts and minds. No one appreciates peace more than those whose sacrifices make it possible.

We worship the God of Life. We worship the Risen Christ. We worship the Holy Spirit who continues to move among us as God's People; spreading the gifts of Faith, Hope and Love wherever She is found. Together we echo the words of Isaiah, looking forward to the day when God's Kingdom is all-in-all; when God will judge the nations in righteousness and we shall beat our swords into plowshares, our spears into pruning hooks, our warships into fishing vessels, our tanks into tractors: when war shall give way to peace once and for all.

Until then we who serve, stand ready to defend. Remember those who have gone before us and those who have given the last full measure. Until such sacrifices are no longer necessary; we walk by faith and not by sight. May the blessing of our Risen Lord Jesus Christ be with you always; until the Kingdom comes, God bless y'all. Amen