

REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY MEDITATIONS

John 1:1–4, 6, 9, 25–27

A series of meditations given by Larry R. Hayward around musical selections chosen for Remembrance Sunday on November 12, 2017, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going....I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me...Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.

“I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

Let us pray: *O God, through word and music, prayer and silence, let us remember, confess, give thanks. Through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.*

I.

I have chosen this passage to serve as an introduction and umbrella under which we will stand as we hear our music and reflections on Remembrance Sunday. This passage is popular at funerals and memorial services, and over the centuries it has provided great comfort for people who have faced the loss of someone they love.

For those who have died in service to their country, and for those mourning, it reminds us that as distant, transcendent, majestic, and mysterious as God is, in the life of Jesus Christ, we have seen of God all that it is possible for us to see in this life. As Jesus says: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”

While I do not want to romanticize the battlefield nor remove the suffering it brings from the list of those things that genuinely cause God to grieve, the sense of being dedicated to something larger than self, the sense of losing one’s life for one’s country, the sense of laying down one’s life for one’s fellow combatants and citizens indeed for one’s friends – is on a *human* level akin to the willingness of Christ to lay down his life for all of humanity. In those who are willing to give up their lives, we see a hint of what Christ did, of who Christ was, and therefore of who God is.

In this passage as well, Jesus reminds his disciples – just as he is about to face his own death – that the peace he offers is different than the peace “the world gives,” even in those rare occasions in history when the world gives peace. As we remember those who have passed away – serving our country or enjoying its fruits and freedoms – the peace they now know exceeds in quality and quantity even the best peace for which many have fought and died, and which many have enjoyed, in our nation, in our history, indeed in our world.

*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.
I do not give to you as the world gives.
Do not let your hearts be troubled,
and do not let them be afraid.*

II.

Two weeks ago, in celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, we stressed that one of its driving forces and crowning achievements was in placing the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments into the hands of all the people. One of the original translators of the Bible into English, William Tyndale, wrote:

It is not enough to read and talk of [scripture] only, but we must also desire God, day and night, instantly, to open our eyes and to make us understand and feel [why] the scripture was given, that we may apply the medicine of the scripture, every [person] to his own sores.¹

In God's giving of life, in the loss of life, and in our mourning of such loss, scripture is our ultimate source – indeed our *sole* hope – for *gratitude* for life and for *consolation* at its passage. As Tyndale says, we apply the medicine of scripture, each to our own sores.

Following this meditation, the choir presented the *Cantique de Jean Racine* from Faure's *Requiem*.

III.

I have shared with you before that though my father served briefly in the army and was stationed in Korea shortly after the Korean War ended, and my uncle, after whom I was named, was a navy pilot in World War II, killed in an air show shortly after the war ended, long before I was born, I knew no peers in the military and had little exposure to it until I began to conduct the funerals of World War II veterans while I was a minister in Iowa, have conducted many such funerals here, and in this congregation and community have come to know the many of you who have served or currently serve in the military.

Our choir will next sing *Flanders Fields*, written by British Lt. Colonel John McRae, in memory of a friend and former student who was killed by a German shell during World War I.

- It is one of the most famous anthems in memory of those who have died serving their country, and from it we get our Memorial Poppies.
- The poem ends with fallen soldiers asking those who remain to carry on, to “take up [their] quarrel with the foe.”
- It bears witness to the reality that ours is a God in whose name we carry forth the tasks and callings bequeathed us by those who have gone before, including “tak[ing] up our quarrel with the foe” in ways that in our most cautious and discerning minds we have determined are just.

Let us listen now as the choir sings Paul Aitken's arrangement of *Flanders Fields*.

IV.

Perhaps the most important consolation and support that God provides us when we remember those who have gone before is God's reminder that what we do on earth – in seeking to defeat evil, in defending the good, in fighting for justice and making peace – is a mere parable of the ultimate triumph over evil God brings and the peace Christ gives “not as the world gives.”

¹ William Tyndale, Preface to the translation of the Pentateuch, translated, 1530. Cited on the frontispiece of Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976).

The hymn “My Soul There Is A Country,” written in the 17th century by the Welsh poet Henry Vaughan, was originally entitled simply “Peace.” It bears witness to the utter and absolute distance between God’s peace and our peace, and God’s promise of ultimate peace to us all through “the One born in a manger.”

Like the hymn we sang to open the service, “O Day of Peace,” “My Soul There Is A Country” was composed by Charles Parry. The two works share a common theme in their words as well. During the opening hymn we sang:

*Then enemies shall learn to love,
All creatures find their true accord;
The hope of peace shall be fulfilled,
For all the earth shall know the Lord.*

In the hymn the choir will now sing, we hear:

*If thou canst get but thither,
There grows the flower of Peace,
The Rose that cannot wither,
Thy fortress and thy ease.*