

SERMON
St. John's Episcopal Church, Roanoke, VA
The Rev. Alexander H. Webb II ("Sandy")
May 29, 2011

<p>The Sixth Sunday of Easter ~ Memorial Day Weekend Revised Common Lectionary John 14:15-21</p>

In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I remember.

I remember Memorial Day in my little New England hometown. We gathered in the cemetery, the high school marching band played patriotic tunes, the American Legion fired three volleys in memory of the fallen, and Lt. Colonel John McCrae's famous poem from World War I was read out by an aged veteran:

*In Flanders fields the poppies grow ~ 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.¹*

The poet remembers.

The poet remembers, and through him, we can all remember something that we never saw.

The gunfire must have been so loud that night. The gunfire must have been so loud, the smell of sulfur so strong as it hung in the air. The shells were bursting, the ground was collapsing, and the horses were whinnying in the last great stand ever for the mounted cavalry. On the battlefields of Flanders County, Belgium, in the final days of the war that was said to end all wars, the Battle of Ypres was raging.

The gunfire must have been so loud that night. It must have seemed impossible that such a place could ever be the proving ground for freedom, the crucible of liberty. It must have seemed impossible that all this violence could ever lead to peace; that all this death could ever lead to life.

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In John's Gospel, a few verses before the passage we read today, the disciples were having dinner with their Lord. Jesus turns to them and solemnly says, "Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.'"²

¹ NB: Another Easter message can be found in McCrae's poem: Every line is crafted in iambic tetrameter, except for the last line of the second and third stanzas, wherein the phrase "In Flanders field" (half a tetrameter) stands alone. To me, this suggests that the poet did not regard Flanders field as the end of the story.

² John 13:33 (NRSV)

St. John remembers.

St. John remembers, and through him, we can all remember something that we never saw.

The sorrow must have been so deep that night. The sorrow must have been so deep as Jesus turned his face towards Jerusalem, and positioned himself for certain death. The authorities were angry, the Holy City was in turmoil, and Jesus of Nazareth — the disciples' beloved friend and teacher — was striding right into the midst of it all.

The sorrow must have been so deep that night. It must have seemed impossible that such a journey could ever be the way to salvation, a part of God's plan. It must have seemed impossible that all this violence could ever lead to peace; that all this death could ever lead to life.

~

Jesus knew that the world into which he sent his disciples was frightening and dangerous, thus he said in today's gospel "I will not leave you orphaned." Jesus said, "[I] will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth..."

St. John is the only biblical writer who describes the Holy Spirit as the Advocate, and he leaves open the question of for what and to whom the Advocate advocates. Some believe that the Advocate is our representative to the Father. But, I have become persuaded that the Advocate speaks not *to* God *for* us, but to *us* for *God*.

The Advocate remembers.

The Advocate remembers, and through him, we can all remember something that no one yet has seen: a world in which righteousness reigns and violence is banished. When Jesus returns to heaven, the Advocate comes to help us remember Christ's teachings; the Advocate comes to remind us of our obligation to stand up for peace and justice; the Advocate comes to help us remember that ours is a God who *regularly* brings new life where once there was thought to be only death.

Consider again the poem with which we began:

*In Flanders fields the poppies grow ~ 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.*

In Flanders fields, the poppies grow! Aside from "Alleluia, Christ is Risen!" I can think of no greater resurrection statement than that. The field that once was stained with the crimson red of blood has given life to the carmine red of poppy flowers. The larks are singing, the guns are silent, and there is peace in our time on Flanders field.

The poet does not invite us to dwell on death and destruction. Instead, he transports our hearts and minds to that Belgian field so that he can tell us a story of new life. I wonder if there might not be a few poppies on Calvary's hill this morning. Life springs up where once there was only death.

~

We all remember.

We all remember, and there is something about this act of remembering that stirs our hearts. With the benefit of hindsight, we can see with certainty that for which the original participants could only have hoped. We see that God can and does work his plan in and through the depravity of war and the callousness of humankind.

I do not mean to suggest that violence is always the pathway to peace, because it is not. The very presence of violence in any and every form is a sign that we are living in a fallen and broken world.

But, we do not pause this weekend to remember violence. No, instead, we pause to remember what God has been able to do *in spite* of human violence. Whether it is our weekly memorial of Christ's sacrifice on the cross or our annual memorial of fallen heroes, we pause this weekend to remember those who heard the Advocate's voice. We pause to remember those who saw a vision of what the world could be, and laid down their lives in the hope that their vision would become a reality.

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Poppies did not grow in the green grass of my hometown cemetery. Instead, American Legion flags perforated the field, flapping next to the grave of every one of our veterans, from every war in American history. Their vision had become our reality. They found their rest, and we enjoyed their peace.

Next to nearly every flag, in one form or another, was a cross. The flags drew our attention to those who had laid down their lives in the cause of freedom. The crosses drew our attention to the one who took up human life for the sole purpose of being able to lay it down again in the cause of freedom.

Until the day of our Lord's return, the epic struggle between good and evil will continue unabated. We live with the sad irony that violence is sometimes the only means to peace. But, we keep as our goal a world in which violence is a thing of the past. We keep as our goal a world in which peace and goodness reign.

On this journey, we have the Advocate as our guide. We have our Lord's promise that he will never leave us orphaned. And, we have myriad examples of God overcoming death and restoring life.

May we always remember.

Amen.