

Back Story:

Cover-ups, lies, scandals, adultery, rape, murder... The books of I and II Samuel are filled with so much violence, betrayal, and sin that even contemporary hearers would be astonished and blush to read it.

Our scripture today is the culmination of an earlier betrayal. King David stayed home from war and committed adultery with Bathsheba, who became pregnant. In an attempt to cover his...(tracks), David ordered that Uriah, Bathsheba's husband be given an emergency leave from the army. David hoped that after a weekend of R&R with his wife, Uriah would think that nine months later the baby she delivered was his child.

Uriah, being a loyal soldier, didn't think it right to leave battle to enjoy leave with his wife while his brothers in arms were in the trenches. Since David's scheme was foiled, David ordered Uriah to the front lines, so he could be cannon fodder. So we remember Uriah on Memorial Day as does Israel.

God was not happy with King David. As a consequence of his misuse of power and sin, the baby would die according to the prophet Nathan. Then Nathan prophesied this,

The sword shall never depart from your house...Thus says, the Lord, "I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house..."

And that is exactly what happened. We pick up the story today with the rebellion of King David's son Absalom and the men of Israel. Absalom has garnered support and risen up against his father. While David wants to put down the rebellion, he is more father than king and asks his commanders to deal gently with his son. Listen to the Word of the Lord...

2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33

⁵The king ordered Joab and Abishai and Ittai, saying, "Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom." And all the people heard when the king gave orders to all the commanders concerning Absalom. ⁶So the army went out into the field against Israel; and the battle was fought in the forest of Ephraim. ⁷The men of Israel were defeated there by the servants of David, and the slaughter there was great on that day, twenty thousand men. ⁸The battle spread over the face of all the country; and the forest claimed more victims that day than the sword.

⁹Absalom happened to meet the servants of David. Absalom was riding on his mule, and the mule went under the thick branches of a great oak. His head caught fast in the oak, and he was left hanging

between heaven and earth, while the mule that was under him went on. ¹⁵And ten young men, Joab's armor-bearers, surrounded Absalom and struck him, and killed him. *[Joab had to decide how to tell King David that he had disobeyed orders. So he decides to send a poor Cushite man, an outsider, a messenger and a decoy. We pick up at verse 31.]*

³¹Then the Cushite came; and the Cushite said, "Good tidings for my lord the king! For the LORD has vindicated you this day, delivering you from the power of all who rose up against you." ³²The king said to the Cushite, "Is it well with the young man Absalom?" The Cushite answered, "May the enemies of my lord the king, and all who rise up to do you harm, be like that young man." ³³The king was deeply moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept; and as he went, he said, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

Proclamation of the Word

Memorial Day: For many Americans, this holiday signals the beginning of summer observed with picnics, lake weekends, and special sales on everything from cars, to clothes, to coolers and all that might fill them. Its official date was moved to the last Monday in May in 1971- 46 years ago. Actually, however, Memorial is less about a holiday for leisure, and more a day to remember those who gave their lives in battle.

Memorial Day began after the Civil War. In both the North and South, citizens gathered to honor those killed in war, decorating their graves with flowers and flags. Memorial Day was first officially observed in the United States on May 30, 1868 when flowers were placed on the graves of both Union and Confederate soldiers at Arlington Cemetery.

Perhaps you have distinct memories of such acts of remembrance celebrated in your families or hometowns. I remember Miss Audrey Shillinglaw with whom I worked at Miss Smith's Dress Shop in downtown York. On Saturday of Memorial weekend, she was always peddling poppies to raise money. Miss Audrey was a member of the Veteran's Women's Auxillary.

Why poppies? Perhaps you know the poem,

In Flander's Field

By Lt. Col. John McCrae, 1915

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

Poppies were sold to raise money for the widows and orphans, to serve the families of the fallen.
Since World War I Memorial day has been designated to honor those who died in all U.S. wars.

In recent U.S. campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq since October 2001, many military men and women continue to die. According to the defense.gov website the total as of TODAY is 6,926 fallen persons.ⁱ
We remember them and their families today.

How can we honor the men and women who gave, in the words of Abraham Lincoln, the “last full measure of devotion?”

For folks like me it is almost impossible to imagine what it is like to fight a war.
Although my 21 year old brother Les died from drinking and driving while in the Air Force, not combat, I do recall having bad dreams as a child after watching the news and praying my three other brothers would not be shipped off to war and die.

What about you?

Maybe you can name aloud those who have died in service. Perhaps you are the owner of one of these (Show flag) .Think to yourself for a second. Remember them.

Now I invite you to say their names aloud as you feel led...

We remember and honor them.

Today we consider how King David would answer the question, “How do we honor those who die in battle?” David was both a soldier and a father, both a perpetrator and victim in the game of war. King David sent his troops to war, but like modern day presidents, prime ministers, cabinet members, and congressional leaders, this king stayed safe at home. People in power declare wars, but usually it is the common folk who do the fighting and dying.

David wears the crown of a king and must put down the rebellion, but he has the heart of a father who wants his son spared. So he begs his generals to be gentle with Absalom when they capture him. From our reading we know that while Absalom unfortunately caught his head in a tree, it was the commander Joab who took care of the situation. Violating the rules of “just war” and against the orders of his commander-in-chief, Joab killed the unarmed and helpless captive Absalom. Joab knows

better than to go himself and sends a Cushite- an outsider to give David the news. The messenger is in the dark about sparing Absalom, and thinks he is delivering good news to the King.

But when David hears of Absalom's death, he utters the most poignant cry of human grief and desolation in all of Scripture:

O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!

If David could speak to us today, what might he say about war? About how to honor those who have died?

As with anyone who has lost a child, David's life went on, but it was never the same. Absalom was dead, and a part of David died that day.

I imagine David would tell us to do whatever we could to prevent any more mothers or fathers having to hear that their child had died. We grieve with all who grieve. Especially this week, we remember those whose lives were cut short by suicide bomber at a concert in Manchester and at a bus in Egypt filled with Christians on the way to a monastery.

The challenge of Memorial Day is to break the cycle of violence before we come to these tragic moments of lost lives, grief, personal or collective, such as David experienced. Every veteran I have known in my churches and family, and every mother or father of a fallen soldier has told me that war is always a last resort because the cost is too high. At times war may be a necessity, but it is never glorious.

There is an old rabbinic tale about the Israelites' escape from Egypt. According to legend, God and the angels watched from heaven as the waters of the Red Sea, having parted to allow the Israelites to escape, rushed back and drowned the entire Egyptian army.

When the angels saw the Egyptians lying dead on the seashore, they erupted into boisterous festivities.

But then they noticed that God was not joining in the celebration, but was weeping inconsolably.

"Why are you weeping," the angels asked; "your chosen people, the Hebrews have escaped!"

"Why would I not weep," God replied, "for my children, the Egyptians, who have died?"

Every person who dies in war is someone's child, and a child of God.

For every person who is killed, God is crying,

O my son, my daughter, my child! Would that I had died instead of you, O my child. On a Friday, the day we call Good, God did just that.

Frederick Beuchner writes,
"If David could have done the boy's dying for him,
 he would have done it.
If he could have paid the price for the boy's betrayal of him,
 he would have paid it.
If he could have given his own life to make the boy alive again,
 he would have given it.
But even a king can't do things like that.
As later history was to prove, it takes a God."

Jesus stood in the gap, not returning violence for violence. That is the way to break the cycle of violence. If we were to ask David or Jesus, how to honor the dead, I imagine they would say that the best way to honor those who have died or been killed in war, is to pray and work for the great day as God describes through the prophet Isaiah when,

*Swords will be beaten into plowshares,
And nation will not lift up sword against nation,
Neither shall there be war any more. (see Isaiah 2:4)*

So be it. Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.defense.gov/casualty.pdf>