

THE SOURCE OF FREEDOM
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University Congregational Church
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Reading: Exodus 20: 1-3 (NRSV)

“Then God spoke these words: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.”

Psalm 27: 1-5 (NRSV)

**The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?
When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh – my adversaries and foes –
They shall stumble and fall.
Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear;
Though war rise up against me, yet will I be confident.
One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after:
To live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life,
To behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple.
For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble;
He will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will set me on a high rock.**

On the way to the airport in Minneapolis two weeks ago, we drove past the Ft. Snelling National Cemetery. For blocks and blocks one passes rows of white marble headstones. They are simple, uniform, and painstakingly manicured. There are 56,111 veterans of the United States military services buried there. I have seen similar scenes at the Arlington National Cemetery and at Gettysburg. There is a quiet reverence in all of these places, for what can one say in the presence of such selfless sacrifice?

Tomorrow this nation will remember our war dead, an event that emerged immediately after the Civil War. In 1865 freed enslaved Africans gathered at the Washington Race Course, the site of a Southern prisoner of war camp in Charleston, South Carolina. Union prisoners of war were buried in mass graves. The African

freedmen exhumed their bodies and gave them individual graves. In Waterloo, New York, in 1866 citizens gathered at the cemetery to decorate the graves of fallen Civil War soldiers. The idea spread across the country and was simply called “Decoration Day.”

In the 19th Century and well into the 20th century Memorial Day brought together the entire community with parades and picnics. Military heroes were celebrated. Politicians made speeches. Ministers exhorted the virtues of God and country. This was the nature of what we once called “civic religion” where the values and church and state did not seem so exclusive of one another as they do today.

During the Viet Nam war our veterans came home to scorn and disrespect. Some felt alienated from their churches because their ministers were preaching against the war or their denominations were taking stances against it. Some of the most vocal activists, confused the war and the warrior, and treated our service men and women with utter contempt. I have friends who came home from Viet Nam that were cursed and spat upon.

I think we have learned something from those days of inglorious ridicule, and the people today that oppose the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are careful to respect the soldier while they take issue with the government.

Today the celebration of Memorial Day in liberal and even mainline churches feels a bit uncomfortable, if not, strained. Many church hymnals have dropped old tunes such as “Onward Christian Soldiers,” and “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” It is thought that such songs are too militant and stand in contrast with what many people presume to be a gospel of peace and non-violence.

Part of the issue is that we cannot absolutely separate religion and American democracy. On the one hand we are rightfully proud of this nation and cannot imagine any other way of life. On the other hand we cannot escape the beatitude of Jesus who declared, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God." The truth is that our values as Christians are often in tension with the values of United States commerce, or United States foreign policy, or United States military philosophy and practice. The tension is not simply the obvious questions of militarism and peacemaking. The tension is within the Church's own scripture, canon, creed, and belief. The tension is in the fact that we are dual citizens: Citizens of America and Citizens of Christ. Integrity demands that we cannot imagine that the gospel of Jesus Christ is somehow protected from the realities of peace keeping and the defense of the nation.

During the Viet Nam era it was quite easy to hold conversations about just-war theory and pacifism. In the era of terrorism such questions are muddled by the lack of definition. How is terrorism different from the conventional understanding of war? Who is the enemy state? There is none. How does pacifism stand up to a terrorist who uses ordinary citizens as human shields? How do you weigh and measure "collateral damage?" Before military intervention is engaged, just war criteria demands that all efforts at diplomacy and mediation are rigorously exercised. Where are the limits of negotiation with tyrants like Mahmud Ahmadinejad, Slobodan Milosevic, Muammar Gaddafi; or other former madmen such as Adolf Hitler, Osama bin Laden, Idi Amin, and Pol Pot?

If we were one of the historic peace churches such as the Quakers, Mennonites, or Amish it would not be so complicated. But we are not. Our Congregationalist forbears stood at Lexington, at Bunker Hill, and Saratoga.

The complexity of international relations, competition for limited natural resources, and the evil proclivity of nation states to dominate others make the church's hope and quest for peace and justice extraordinarily complicated. I cannot think of a greater challenge to Christian moral agency. What we can and must avoid is jingoism in national conversation and policy and puerile Christian nationalism.

On the personal level the issue is not less complicated. Perhaps like me, you could sit down in the company of students, good friends or neighbors and talk intelligently about the futility of war. You might resource your argument with references to Jesus, or the Buddha, or Gandhi. But the instant you sense that your child is in immediate danger of violent attack, would you not spring forth to fight for her life? I can listen with nostalgia to "Where Have All the Flowers Gone," but skirl the bagpipes and I am ready for battle.

I think it is like a family minivan that I saw the other day. A woman was driving. On the back of the van were two bumper stickers. One read, "Peaceful Valley Child Care." Did you get that? "Peaceful Valley." The other bumper sticker read, "I'm low on estrogen and I'm packing heat!"

My son, Christopher, sent me a photograph during his tour in Afghanistan. He is seen in the center of the picture squatted on the ground. He is in uniform with his Kevlar helmet, full Interceptor Body Armor, and holding an M4 carbine. Christopher is smiling. He is completely surrounded by very small children, gathered as close to

him as possible. They are smiling. His mission to their village is called a “mercy mission,” where his unit takes blankets, food, and cooking oil to remote and impoverished hamlets. But do not imagine for a moment that he was not fully prepared to defend himself and those children should they come under Taliban fire. That photograph captures this tremendous tension that I experience when I think about war and peace.

All that I am saying is that the desires for comfort and safety are inextricably woven with the natural instinct to protect and defeat all who threaten us. I believe that we are far more truthful to both the human condition and to our faith when we realize the confluence of our powerful impulse for survival; the importance of our community and state toward the end and means of our survival; and our highest moral aspirations. This is very personal and unique to each and every one of us, and we are all in it together.

The memorial celebration of women and men who served our armed forces in combat and who gave their lives in the name of human freedom and democracy is both the occasion of deep appreciation and humility. I say humility when one considers what it is we ask of these people. When they are in combat they cannot live with moral ambiguity and nuanced ethics. I had breakfast recently with an Episcopal priest who is a Viet Nam combat veteran. He said, “I killed my first human being at the age of 19.”

What is the cost freedom? What is the source of this powerful thrust for freedom that human beings risk their lives for? Is it more than the instinct to survive? Is it more than the interests of capitalists and politicians? I dare say it is. I believe

that the source of freedom bores right through the heart of God whose voice rings through the pages of the Old Testament. Yes, the Old Testament.

Often I hear people say something like this, “The Old Testament is just about the wrath of God.” “Why should we read the Old Testament? It is nothing more than the anger of God and punishment.” Well, yes, there is some of that. And there is a whole lot more about human nature. I don’t always find God in the Old Testament, but I always find myself. Sometimes it is not too pleasant. I sometimes wonder that we liberals avoid the Old Testament because we would rather not know so much about our selves. Yet we need the Old Testament because it is source book of human freedom. Yes, I know the ancient Greeks who wrote of democracy: Aristotle, Thucydides, Plato, and Herodotus. We ought to know them and we ought to know that democracy was a grand idea **if** you were a landholding citizen, if you were a male, and if you had the leisure to ponder government. Eleven hundred years before Aristotle we find the Book of Exodus setting the stage for God’s purpose. While we have many questions about the will and purpose of God we can never doubt it is the destiny of human freedom. Freedom flows throughout the Hebrew Bible. When Moses said to Pharaoh, “Let my people go,” he meant all of the people. Not one Hebrew man, woman, or child was to be left behind in the clutches of tyranny. The constant refrain of the Old Testament is, “I am the lord your God who brought you out of the house slavery.” In other words, it is God’s intention that we be free people. And when God goes on to say, “therefore you shall have no other gods before me,” God means, “do not enslave your self to any other master, human or material.” Always be the bondsman or woman to the God of freedom.

There is a divine impetus in human nature toward human freedom. We deny our true selves when we abate our capacity for freedom in the least amount. I think it is something like the comment made by Winston Churchill, “the dignity of a lady’s virtue is not susceptible to partial diminution.”¹

That is all well and good but does not answer how we enhance that freedom to all; how we strengthen freedom and the processes of democracy; or how we protect and defend those freedoms. We certainly hope that the vigilance of freedom is accomplished with generous aid to those in need, diplomacy, and every peaceful means at our disposal. But history has proven over and again that there are times when freedom requires martial defense after every option of statesmanship has been exhausted. We never imagined evil could loom so large as it did at Vicksburg; and again at the Somme; and again at Pearl Harbor; and again in New York, September 11, 2001. When such times arise young people are called to the defense of freedom. It is their courage and valor that we salute today, with the deepest prayer that humanity might one day absolve itself of violence. I pray for such a day as that, even as I honor those who have served us so valiantly. I close with the “Concord Hymn,” written by Ralph Waldo Emerson for the monument to the battle of Concord and Lexington:

By the rude bridge that arched the flood,
Their flag to April’s breeze unfurled,
Here once the embattled farmers stood
And fired the shot heard round the world.

¹ This was a comment that Churchill made in a rant against Prime Minister Arthur Balfour in 1903. Robert Rhodes James, *Winston S. Churchill: His Complete Speeches 1897-1963* (London: Chelsea House Publishers, 1974), Vol. I, p. 11.

The foe long since in silence slept;
Alike the conqueror silent sleeps;
And Time the ruined bridge has swept
Down the dark stream which seaward creeps.

On this green bank, by this soft stream,
We set today a votive stone;
That memory may their deed redeem,
When, like our sires, our sons are gone.

Spring, that made those heroes dare
To die, and leave their children free,
Bid Time and Nature gently spare
The shaft we raise to them and thee.²

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² Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Concord Hymn," Works of Emerson (New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1904), Vol. 9, pp. 158-159.