

“They Still Speak”

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible. By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain’s. Through this he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval of his gifts; he died, but through faith he still speaks. . . By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city whose foundation, whose architect and builder is God. . . All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. . . By faith Moses was hidden by his parents for three months after his birth, because they saw that the child was beautiful; and they were not afraid of the king’s edict. By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called a son of Pharaoh’s daughter, choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting abuse suffered for the Christ to be greater wealth than hidden treasures of Egypt, for he was looking ahead to the reward. By faith he left Egypt unafraid of the king’s anger; for he persevered as though he was him who is invisible.”

Memorial Day doesn't mean what it once did. For most, Memorial Day is just another Monday holiday. It marks the beginning of summer. It's the weekend of the Indy 500. The pools open. It provides the first real chance for picnics, BBQ's, and maybe an outing to the lake. But it hasn't always been that way.

Memorial Day grew out of the human need to remember where we have been. Because only then can we figure out where we are going. The cherished memories of a nation, a town, a church, or a family provide the values and dreams that one generation passes on to the next. Forgetting means dropping the torch.

All of this was on the mind of President Abraham Lincoln on November 19, 1863 as he made his way to the Pennsylvania battlefield. He feared that he might be the last president of the United States. The country teetered on the brink of self-destruction. The ceremony that afternoon would dedicate the site of the cemetery for the over forty thousand soldiers killed at Gettysburg in the three-day battle the previous July. Lincoln's remarks provided the seedbed for what would become Memorial Day.

"Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal," he began. Less than two minutes later, he concluded, "The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here" (referring to the sacrifice of the soldiers). He then went on to ask the country to remember the soldiers so that "these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth."

From that speech, many communities set aside special days to honor the fallen soldiers of the Civil War, at first called Decoration Day. After World War I the day expanded to honor the American heroes of all wars. Gradually the custom of decorating the graves of relatives and friends became a part of the day.

Eventually the official name was changed to Memorial Day. Originally, the day always fell on May 30. In 1971 congress moved the date to the last Monday in May. So what is the real purpose of Memorial Day? Well, we don't *want* to forget. But we *know* we do.

I think our tendency to forget is also one reason why God provides us with the gift of God's word that is rich in memories of our past. And as I thought about the Scripture that would help us honor our past not just as Americans, but as CHRISTIAN Americans, I found myself drawn to the letter to the Hebrews. This letter is written at an unknown time to an unknown audience by an unknown author. Yet it is one of the most beautiful jewels in all of Scripture.

Chapter 11 is often called "The Faith Hall of Heroes" because it is a recording of how our ancestors responded to God in faith. This chapter, perhaps more than any other in Scripture, helps us learn how to preserve the past while we look forward to the future. And isn't that what Memorial Day weekend is all about. It is remembering the faith that those who went before us had because they knew that they looked toward something better. And for Christians, that is the New Jerusalem.

Today, as we also look forward to the promise of Eternity with God, we celebrate not only the heroes and heroines of the Bible, but the ones in our nation and in our personal lives who give us the faith to move along in the journey of life. And one way to

do this is to celebrate that those who have gone before us still speak to us today. And in doing so, they speak with voices that, even from the grave, remind us of our call to service and of their courage and strength.

Abel seems at first glance to be a curious choice as a member of the Faith Hall of Fame. The writer of Genesis never records any words spoken by him until he is dead and then we are told that his “blood cries out to God from the ground.” What this means is that even though he is dead, he still speaks through faith. It reminds us that the good works of a righteous person speak long after he or she dies.

Of course, on Memorial Day, it is easy to recall many people, soldiers and civilians alike, whose good works still cry out to us from the grave. If I asked you to, every person in this room could name someone that you know whose example of service to God or his country still speaks to you, even if that person is no longer with us. But the one that comes to my mind is Peter Marshall, who served as Chaplain of the United States Senate. Peter was elected to his position by a Republican majority in 1947 and then reelected by the Democrats on December 31, 1948. This was because, rather than seeking to serve one man or even one party, Peter sought only to serve the Lord.

On the day when the speech was delivered that was to be the introduction to the Marshall Plan for aid to Europe, Peter began his prayer before the Senate in this way. “Our heavenly Father, if it be Thy will that America should assume world leadership, as history demands and the hopes of so many nations desire, make us good enough to undertake it.” (1) Both Peter and Abel remind us that righteous men and women seek to serve God according to God's will and without selfish agenda.

Abraham still speaks to us today and reminds us to have courage. He is listed by the writer of Hebrews in the group of those who journeyed obediently in faith. Abraham exhibits deep trust in the Lord. He was willing to displace his family for generations and take them on a journey looking forward without any idea of when the end would be in sight. And the Bible reminds us that he died in faith *without* having received the promise.

James Michener in his book Iberia recounts the medieval pilgrims who traveled the long road from France to the Cathedral of Saint James in Spain. As they neared the end of their demanding journey, they would strain their eyes toward the horizon, hoping to see the towers of the long-sought cathedral in the distance. The first one to see would shout, "My Joy!" Abraham and his descendants still speak to us as ones who could see the towers of heaven and greeted them with joy but perished without completing the pilgrimage. Surely, many a soldier has seen the victory of democracy or justice on the horizon but died before they ever personally experienced it. And surely many of our loved ones or even us will hope for something that is almost within our grasp but not get to taste its sweetness.

What do the actions of our courageous ancestors say to us today? Do they say that we are to live in sorrow of a journey not yet completed? **NO!** They say that we have a God who keeps His promises, who sent His Son so that our Heavenly journeys could all one day be completed.

Moses is one of the Faith Hall of Fame members whose actions still speak to us today about strength. His life was endangered even before its beginning by the edict of a king who was threatened by the growing number of foreigners in his land. His parents

showed faith under fire in not being afraid to act boldly to save his life and then to save his life in the face of Pharaoh's decree. Then, Moses chose to live under the persecution of his birth family, the nation of the Hebrews, rather than to live within the privilege of his adopted family. Moses teaches us that it is not enough to show strength within the church, where we are confident of our acceptance, but to take the lesson of faith outside the walls of comfort and into the world.

In agreeing to live among his country men and women and to answer God's call to deliver His chosen people from Egypt, Moses basically chose slavery so others could be set free. And I'm sure that many of you know a brave soldier who chose to enlist rather than waiting to be called up. Or a successful businessman who left money and position behind to fight for his country. Or a patriotic young woman who volunteered for another tour of duty in Iraq.

One such modern day hero that comes to my mind is pro football player, Pat Tillman who played for the Arizona Cardinals. Tillman gave up millions of dollars and relative fame to fight as an Army Ranger and was killed in Afghanistan. His strength of character is an example of faith that looks forward with the utter conviction of what is right rather than the complacency of what is easy.

Indeed, Abel, Abraham, Moses, Peter Marshall, Pat Tillman and many others still speak to us today. Theirs are stories of faith in the midst of great testing and suffering and their service, courage and strength are what we celebrate on Memorial Day. But the voice that still speaks the strongest to us is the voice of Jesus the Christ.

Abel's righteousness still speaks to us of our call to service. Yet, Jesus Christ, though he was God incarnate, the Word made flesh and dwelling among us said,

“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Then he lived his words by serving us in his death on a cross.

Abraham’s courage still speaks to us in that he led his family on a journey of which the ending was unclear. But it is in Jesus that the journey is complete. Because we know that Jesus triumphed over the grave and entered into the city of God so that we can follow.

Moses is the only person in the Bible who is recorded as seeing God face to face. He still speaks to us today and shows us that close intimacy with God is the only way to live in His strength. Jesus Christ’s strength came in his OWN intimacy with God and enabled him to say, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

These great heroes of the Bible, of our modern day and of our hearts are people whose integrity we remember and celebrate today and always. They are people who were willing to suffer on our behalf and for our benefit and who did so at a great cost. But none have shown a more willing sacrifice than God, when he sent Son into the world to live among us and then die for us so that we can look toward the horizon and exclaim “My Joy!”

Tom Long, in his commentary on Hebrews, sums up why faith allows us to hear the voices of those who have gone before us and have hope. Listen to his words. “Under the pressure of testing and suffering, the naked eye sees only the oppressor. We can only see the jackboot of tyranny, or the scars of child abuse, or the X-ray with the spot on the lung. Faith sees all that; it does not pretend there is no Pharaoh, no evil, no disease. But

faith also sees God, the God who promises to bring an end to all that harms and destroys.” (2)

So let us all live in thanks for the blessings of service, courage and strength that have been shown to us by our brave forefathers and mothers and that has been given to us by God in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

(1) The Prayers of Peter Marshall, Catherine Marshall, Inspirational Press, 1996, p.439.

(2) Hebrews, Interpretation Commentary, Thomas G. Long, John Knox Pres, 1997, p. 122