

**Remembering Those Who Died to Set Us Free
A Message for Memorial Day, 2020
Presented to Trinity Evangelical Free Church of Teaneck, NJ
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Introduction

On Memorial Day, people in the United States remember men and women who have served in the armed forces, and who gave their lives in service of our country.



Giving a special remembrance to fallen heroes dates back thousands of years.

In America, the idea of a special day for fallen soldiers came about to remember those who fell in the Civil war. The day was originally called “Decoration Day” because people were encouraged to lay flowers and flags and other decorations on the graves of fallen soldiers. The name was eventually changed to “Memorial Day” It was made a federal holiday in 1971.

There’s good news and bad news about making something a federal holiday. When a special day becomes an officially recognized holiday, that means lots of people get the day off. The good news is, that means more people can celebrate the holiday. The bad news is people have a funny way of forgetting why the holiday was created. They use their newly found free time to come up with all kinds of other activities.

So, if you know of someone who died in the service of our country, it’s a good idea to take some time off from other events and at least stop for a moment to remember. In fact, if you know someone who served our country, even if they’re still alive, it’s a good idea to say, “thanks.”

A story

For now, let’s go back to the roots of this holiday in our country. We’ll focus on one story. As we said, the holiday was started after the Civil war. The American civil war started on April 12, 1861 and ended on April 9, 1865, almost 4 years later.

War are confusing things. The bigger the war, the more confusing. During that war, thousands of soldiers from each side were captured by the other side. These are called “prisoners of war”. Prisoners of war must be kept somewhere. So, both sides had prison camps. In the South, one of those camps was near Charleston, South Carolina. It was a former racetrack. Prisoners of war

were herded into this camp, which had terrible conditions. Conditions were so bad, 250 men died from exposure and disease. They were buried in a mass grave behind the racetrack grandstands.



Washington Racetrack Graves

Shortly after the end of the Civil war, something very special happened on the grounds of that prison camp. The south practiced the terrible sin of human slavery. During the war, Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation stating that all slaves were to be freed. So, when the war ended, millions of slaves became free.

Soon after that day, 25 men, all slaves who had been recently freed, came to dig up the bodies of the men buried in the mass grave so that they could be given a proper burial. Then, on May 1, 1865, this camp was

visited by a very unusual procession of people. The procession included a thousand people who were also slaves only a few weeks before, and who were freed when the war ended. They were accompanied by a group of soldiers: The Massachusetts 54th Infantry.

This was a division of soldiers made up entirely by men of African descent. Many were formerly slaves who had escaped to the North, and who used their freedom to fight for those who were still slaves in the South.

These people all came to the camp to remember the soldiers who were buried there. They sang Christian hymns, and laid flowers around the graves. They dedicated their efforts to a group of men who were later known as the “Martyrs of the Racecourse.”

As I said, wars can be confusing. Many who fought in the American Civil War believed it was fought to end slavery. Some historians say “no”. It was fought, they say, over things like taxation and states’ rights. Those who brought flowers to decorate the graves of the “Martyrs of the Racecourse” certainly believed they were honoring the memories of brave men who died to set them free.

A sad principle

We need to look now at a historic principle. ***Sometimes, free people become slaves.***

Let’s consider a time in biblical history when this happened. It was the time that the early descendants of Abraham went down to live in Egypt. When they first went, one of their own, Joseph, had become the Prime Minister of the land. Because Joseph was so powerful, the children of Israel were allowed to live in some of the best real estate in Egypt. They were prosperous and happy.

This went on for years. Then, Joseph died. All his generation also passed away, one by one. Sadly, we're then told that a new king arose in Egypt. This king did not know Joseph. He decided to make the children of Israel into slaves.



Israel in Egypt by Edward Poynter

So, one day, the children of Israel were free, prosperous, and happy. The next, they watched in horror as soldiers marched into their territory. The soldiers brought chains and whips. From that day forward, the children of Israel were slaves. You can read about that in the opening chapters of the book of Exodus



Adolf Hitler in Paris

Tragically, the scene I just described has happened to many people throughout history. In the twentieth century, in the 1930s, people in Europe were free. Then, on September 1, 1939, the armies of Adolf Hitler's Third Reich marched into Poland. Other European countries like France fell one by one. Free people watched as tanks came into their towns. Those who protested were with shot on the spot or taken away, never to be seen again.

A few years later, many of the people who had been invaded, like the people of France, were freed. They celebrated when the allied nations, including the United States, rolled through. They have been free ever since. Some though, such as the people of Poland and Hungary, initially celebrated, but were crushed when only a short time later, the tanks and armies of the Soviet Union rolled in. Those people remained under Soviet dominion until 1990.

In all the cases I just described, there were two stages. In the first stage, free people fell into bondage when armies marched into their nations. In the second stage, they were eventually freed. Some took longer than others.

The Covid-19 Invasion



Coronavirus Illustration

Recently, people all over the world have gone through a sort of invasion. One day, we were all free. We could go anywhere we wanted to at any time. The only limitations were the amount of money you had and how much free time you had. Then, a virus called Covid-19 came. Suddenly, we all became prisoners in our homes. Taking a step out the front door could mean death by a horrible disease. We began to run out of things. People all over the world were getting scared – very scared. We all became, if you will, slaves of a disease, and the way our world has reacted to it.

As I said, many times in history when an invasion happened, there were often two stages. In the first, the invaders rolled through. Free people were taken captive. The second stage came when people were freed. When will that time come for us? When will the second stage arrive? ***When will we be freed from Covid-19 and its terrible effects?***

The Answer (at least to start)

When I went to seminary, one of my professors had a saying. If someone asked him about the future, he would say, “Well, I’m not a prophet nor the son of a prophet”. In other words, he was saying, “God isn’t telling me anything he’s not telling you.” I’m afraid the same is true for me. I’m not a prophet nor the son of a prophet.

However, although I’m not a prophet, I have done something that many pastors in the United States and all over the world have done. I’ve spent a long-time studying God’s Word. I’ve been gifted with the ability to sit at the feet of some wonderful Bible teachers. Those people taught me a lot.

Because of that, I believe that I and other Bible teachers all over the world can bring encouragement during hard times. Do you know how we do that? By remembering things. We look at God’s Word, the Bible, and we look at what God has done in history.

I don’t know if we can find the final answer, but whenever we open God’s word, we’re off to a good start. So, let’s do some remembering together.

The Children of Israel in Egypt

Let’s look at the Bible story we mentioned a few minutes ago: The slavery of the Hebrew people in Israel. People who were happy, prosperous, and free one day became slaves the next.

We need to ask: *How could something like this happen?* Why would God allow this to happen to anyone, much less his chosen people?

We'll look at two answers today.

We know, but we don't know exactly

The first answer is: We know, but we don't know exactly. What do I mean by that?

I've spoken about this on numerous occasions, so we won't read all the passages over again. We'll settle for a quick summary. In the opening chapters of Genesis, we're told that God created a perfect world, and gave it as a gift to the parents of the Human Race, Adam and Eve. We're told in Genesis 3 that Adam and Eve were tempted by the Serpent, the Devil, and fell into sin. When they did that, they broke a perfect world. They broke all kinds of things. The world, which had been a gift to Adam and Eve, was now under a curse. Formerly, everything Adam and Eve needed for food was either hanging off trees or could be easily grown by tending the Garden of Eden. Now, the ground would only provide food through hard work. Painful thorns would block the way to food.

This was only the beginning. Things were going to get a lot worse. It may be the Adam and Eve would never understand the mess they made, so God ended the description there.

But worse than the pain of living on earth was death. By sinning, by disobeying God, Adam and Eve now brought death into the world. So, in Genesis 3, we meet the three great enemies of Humankind: The Devil, Sin, and Death.

I said that things would get worse. That happened fast. In only a few years, Adam and Eve learned that their son Cain had killed their other son Abel. It was horrible. Cain killed Abel by beating him to death.

After he did that, God said something to Cain. "And the Lord said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground." (Genesis 4:10)

So, God introduces the idea that when we sin, it has a cosmic consequence. The earth and the universe react badly when we sin. Every time we sin, our world and the Universe break a little bit. The more we sin, the more the world breaks.

The violence of the human race became so great that God had to bring a terrible flood in the days of Noah. The sin of the first humans started a kind of fire that became so great, God had to extinguish it with enough water to wipe out most of the living things on the earth.

Unfortunately, when he did that, God didn't permanently wipe out the problem of sin. That wasn't his intent. That terrifying action only bought humanity time. Someday, the sins of all humans will once again bring forth terrifying reactions from the earth. They will also call for terrible actions from God. We call those days the "end times".

In the meantime, there is a cumulative effect of sin building up in the world. At different times, the world breaks in different ways under this load. It can be big: Earthquakes, storms, plagues. It can be smaller, a tragedy entering an individual life or a small group. Often, this appears to our limited human minds to be random

Jesus spoke about this. Luke tells us about it in his Gospel account:

There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. (Luke 13:1-3)

What were these people asking about? At the time Jesus lived on the earth, the Roman Governor was Pontius Pilate. He wasn't as bad a tyrant as Herod, but he was bad. For some reason, he murdered a group of people when they were involved in worship. There was something seemingly random about this. People could understand if these people were breaking the law, or if they were sinning in some obvious way. But these people were either worshipping or on the way to worship. No one could figure out what these people had done to cause this tragedy.

Jesus told those who asked that there was nothing these people did that was worse than anyone else. Sometimes, bad things happen, and we aren't told why. Instead, Jesus said something that we wouldn't normally expect: He told those who asked that unless they repented, they too would perish.

That seems a little cold, doesn't it? Religious leaders are supposed to give comforting words at a time like that.

If that wasn't enough, Jesus then gave another related example:

Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." (Luke 13:4-5)

Jesus heard the story of his crowd and then added one more. This was another seemingly random event. Siloam was a place in Jerusalem. Someone built a tower there. Apparently, they

didn't build it very well. One day, for no known reason, it fell. When it did, it killed a lot of innocent people.

Once again, Jesus didn't give an answer to exactly why the tower fell. He just told people that they needed to repent.

When we see something that seems terrible; When we see something that doesn't make any sense; When we see pain that seems totally random; Jesus doesn't always start with a comforting word. Jesus doesn't always give us an explanation.

Sometimes, he gives us some "tough love". He reminds us that the world is broken. And sometimes when it breaks it hurts people. At those times, we must remember: The world is broken by the cumulative effect of all the sins of the human race.

This is important: That includes you, and that includes me. We too, are sinners. So, when confronted with the seeming randomness of our broken world, Jesus told the people of his day to look to their own hearts. He told them to start with their own lives and their own sin. ***He told them to repent.***

Isaiah once said something that's important here:

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:8-9)

When we see evil in the world, it sometimes looks random. But understand this: nothing is random with God. He knows all things. He controls all things – he is sovereign and all-powerful. He has a plan. Sometimes, he lets us in on some of the details of his plan. Sometimes, he does not.

He simply tells us that when things are bad, we must take care to watch our own hearts. We must repent. We must take responsibility for the sins that we dump into the broken world.

Now, at other times we are reminded that although God is not obligated to tell us all the details of how our broken world works, he has shown us great kindness. He sent his son Jesus to walk through the world with us. Because he did that, he understands when we face pain. He too, grieves when we face pain.

Some Theories on the Current Crisis

Like many of you, I watch TV and listen to the radio. And I read the newspaper and I check around on the Internet. I'm sure you're all hearing theories about the disease that is enslaving our entire planet.

One theory says that some people who lived in China ate some strange food, and it made them sick. Another theory says that someone in a laboratory was working with some disease sample, with hopes of creating a cure, and a sample got out by accident. Another theory says that this disease was created and released on purpose by insidious people who wanted to kill lots of people. That's only the start. There are still other theories.

You know something? I am not a prophet, nor the son of a prophet. I don't know. This is what I know. I know that Pontius Pilate died a long time ago and appeared before God. He was judged for what he did to innocent people who wanted to worship.

If the person who built the tower of Siloam cheated on the building materials, and if that caused the tower to fall on innocent people, that builder has stood before God and been judged.

If some insidious people created this disease with the intent of hurting a lot of people, God knows about it, and they will be judged.

What I do know is this: I am a sinner. I know that whenever I sin, I add to the brokenness of our world. So, I need to constantly ask God to help me to repent of my sin. I know that you need to do that, too. If you don't, you will be in danger of something much worse than Covid-19.

So, sometimes terrible things happen in our world. We know why: It's the cumulative effect of sin in our world. We may not know exactly how or why the brokenness of the world affected us or someone we care about.

Sometimes we know why.

There's a second type of situation where terrible things go wrong in our world. ***In this case, we know why.*** Let's go back to the children of Israel in Egypt.

Originally, God spoke to Abraham. He told him to leave his home in what is now Iraq, and travel to the land that is today known as Israel. God told Abraham that this land would belong to him and his descendants forever. That was an especially important command. God was going to use the descendants of Abraham and this land in powerful ways in the centuries to come.

Two generations later, the grandson of Abraham, Jacob, was living with his 12 sons in this land. Jacob's name later became Israel. Joseph wound up in Egypt, where he became prime minister. Then, there was a famine that affected the entire region. God told Jacob, that he should not be afraid to travel to Egypt during that time. Because of Israel's son Joseph, the children of Israel were given a great home in Egypt during the famine. They were happy, comfortable, and prosperous.

However, one day, the famine ended. In fact, it ended exactly seven years after it started. We know that because Pharaoh had been given a dream by God. Joseph was given the supernatural ability to interpret that dream. Joseph said the dream predicted seven years of plentiful food. Those years would be followed by seven years of famine. That's why Joseph had been made the prime minister. This prediction, along with the actions that Joseph took, helped Egypt survive the famine. So again, the seven years of famine had come to an end.

Here's what should have happened on that day. Israel and his children should have said to Joseph, "Please say 'thank you' to Pharaoh for letting us stay here. It's been great. But now, it's time to go home. We need to go home, to the promised land, because that's where God told us we should be."

If they had done that, if they had left at the right time, they could have gone home with all the possessions they had collected during their stay in Egypt. They might have gone home with an escort of the Egyptian army.

Instead, they waited. Here, we have to speculate a little bit. Why didn't the Hebrew people leave when they should have? Maybe they waited because the weather was great in Egypt? Maybe they waited because they had used the few years they were there to build some small homes? It would be hard to leave when you've built something. Maybe they had friends there, or at least, people they thought were friends? Maybe they liked the idea of having a powerful person in their family who had the ear of the king?

We don't know. This is important: ***We only know that they became comfortable someplace where they were not in God's will. We know that, whenever God's people let themselves forget their mission, bad things happen.***

In the case, instead of being escorted in safety by Pharaoh's troops, the Children of Israel were enslaved by them.

Centuries ago, a group of travelers came to the shores of America. They were called the Pilgrims. They, and others like them, felt called to try to make America into a sort of Christian paradise. Somehow, a few centuries later, America had become a place where some people tried to follow God, but many didn't. At some point, we allowed the horrible practice of slavery to take root in our nation. This resulted in the American Civil war.

The American civil war took a terrible toll on our nation. Whole cities were burned to the ground. Factories and business were destroyed forever. But the lost dollars weren't the greatest tragedy. Six-hundred-and-twenty-thousand soldiers died. That was more than WW1 and WW2 combined. And that was a time when the population of the United States was much lower than today. President Abraham Lincoln represented a group of people who believed that the Civil war was a judgement on America for allowing the horror of slavery.

Generations have passed. America has grown in wealth and prosperity. In 2020 our stock market had reached record levels. We had record levels of employment. Then, this disease, Covid-19 hit. The stock market tumbled. Millions lost their jobs.

Did this happen because for reasons that we should have known? How bad is it? Have the sins of the world finally piled so high that we are beginning to see the event we mentioned earlier, the “end times”? Could it be that we will never see a “stage two” in our world?

I hope not. I hope that we, our nation, and our world, will come out of this tragic time. If we do, please know this: If we come out, we will come out because God is gracious.

However, once again, I’m sorry to say that I’m not a prophet, nor the son of a prophet. In the coming weeks, we’ll have some discussions about whether the times we live in are the end times. However, in the meantime, based on what we’ve learned today, we must ask a question: The question is not, “Is the world behaving badly enough to bring in the end times?” The question is not, “Are other people behaving like sinners?”

The question is: Are God’s people living in God’s will? As we learned from our Lord, when bad times come, we must first look at our own hearts.

What is God’s will for God’s people? The Church of Jesus Christ has a vitally important mission: a “Job one”. We are to make disciples of all nations.

Again, based on what we’ve learned today, we must first look at ourselves. Are we disciples of Jesus? Are we taking this calling seriously? Are we putting Jesus first? Are we learning about what it means to be a disciple; a person wholly committed to the teachings of Jesus?

Or, have we become too comfortable living outside of God’s will? Have we become content with a good economy and the comforts it provides? Are we absorbed in worldly forms of entertainment?

If you are not following God’s will for your life, then you need to repent. You need to repent of letting this incredible mission become second place in your life. You must recommit to becoming a disciple of Jesus.

Listen to the words of Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
Because the Lord has anointed me
To bring good news to the afflicted;
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to captives
And freedom to prisoners;
(Isaiah 61:1)

There is a great war going on – a war between heaven and earth. The human race has three great enemies: The Devil, Sin, and Death. Jesus Christ has conquered them all.

“Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?”

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you.

Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. (I Corinthians 15:55-58)

Conclusion

On this Memorial Day, if you know of someone who has given their life for our country, take some time to remember them.

At the close of the Civil War, a solemn procession of men and women went to an old racetrack to remember those men who died to set them free. They decorated the graves of those men, men who were remembered as “The Martyrs of the Racetrack”.

Centuries before, a man died to set us free. His name was Jesus Christ. Let’s remember what he did for us. We don’t remember by putting flowers or other decorations on his grave. We don’t do that because he’s not there. His grave is empty.

We remember him by accepting his sacrifice for our sins. We remember him by dedicating our lives to his service. Whether we follow him in good times, or whether we follow him in times of tragedy, we walk knowing that he walks with us.

On this Memorial Day, and for every day afterward, let’s remember Jesus Christ.



The Empty Tomb