



St. Paul's Episcopal Church - Delray Beach, Florida
2 Pentecost - Proper 3 - Year A - May 24/25, 2008
Isaiah 49:8-16a; Ps. Ps. 131; 1 Corinthians 4:1-5; Matthew 6:24 - 34
Preacher: The Reverend William H. Stokes, Rector

Memorial Day Sell Out!

Thus says the LORD: In a time of favor I have answered you, on a day of salvation I have helped you; I have kept you and given you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages; saying to the prisoners, "Come out," to those who are in darkness, "Show yourselves."

Isaiah 49:8

In Friday's *U.S.A. Today*, a story appeared titled "Friends, comrades live on in hearts of Iraq veterans."¹ It featured interviews with seven soldiers and marines who shared memories of comrades who had been killed in the line of duty in Iraq. Among the memories was that of Marine Corps Sgt. Phillip Stephenson who told the story of Cpl. Ramona Valdez: "A lot of people say the military is like a band of brothers," Sgt. Stephenson stated, "Cpl. Valdez was the....little sister. She was a part of us that was always motivated. You could always count on her for a smile, or to come up with something to say."²

According to *U.S.A. Today*, Valdez, whose mother came to the U.S.A. from the Dominican Republic, enlisted in the Marines when she was 17. She needed her mother's permission to do this. The story reported that in 2005, "Cpl. Valdez was in Anbar province, which then was one of the deadliest regions and the center of the Sunni insurgency. Commanders needed female Marines to work at the checkpoints searching women." The story noted that it was dangerous duty, requiring regular travel on Anbar's roads. Valdez volunteered for the task.³ On the night of June 23, 2005, Valdez and her comrades were returning from checkpoint duty in Fallujah when the truck she was in was attacked by a car bomb. 20 year old Cpl. Ramona Valdez was killed.⁴

As I tell the story of Ramona Valdez, I can't help thinking of our own Coricia Campbell, who is now a Lance Corporal in the Marine Corps and who is serving in Bagdad. We heard from her recently. She is doing well.

On Mother's Day, Coricia e-mailed Susan that she was eating pancakes, because she knew that we at St. Paul's were eating pancakes that day and she wanted to be with us in spirit. Those of you who know Coricia know that she is a very special young woman. She is positive and motivated and upbeat and has a smile that steals your heart. Coricia is Esther Campbell's daughter, and the sister of Nicky, Whitney, Chase, Pavell and Tennyson who all attend St. Paul's. We need to keep Coricia and all the military personnel from this parish in our constant prayers.

For many, this weekend marks the unofficial beginning of Summer. There will be picnics and trips to the beach. For others, it is a weekend for shopping with tremendous sales offering all kinds of discounts for all kinds of things, especially new cars. Still others are excited about watching the Indianapolis 500.

Does it concern you that all of this fails to honor the true and very sober meaning that should attach to this weekend?

Monday is Memorial Day. It is set apart as the day when we as a nation are called to remember and honor those men and women who have died in service to this country throughout our history. It should be a day of prayer and reverent solemnity, a day of sadness and thanksgiving.

But, as we are wont to do in this country, we have allowed the original meaning and intention of this day to be distorted and perverted. We have commercialized it, made it fun, so that few people will call to mind or linger over the heroic sacrifices of our nation's war dead, people like Cpl. Ramona Valdez and others like her down through our history. Too few, will, I am sure, reflect on the high purpose for which we hope they have died, a purpose which we pray is integrally tied to the deepest core values of our nation's founding: the values of freedom and justice and liberty for all.

It should challenge us, this slide of Memorial Day into the crass commercialism of our society. What does it say about our regard for the men and women who serve in our nation's military? What does it say about the value we place upon the life of Cpl. Ramona Valdez and the 4,080 others who have died since the war began in Iraq, 502 in Afghanistan, never mind the 30,000 U.S. troops who have been wounded in the line of duty, or tens, or more likely hundreds of thousand of innocent Iraqis who have been killed as a result of this war?⁵ What does our cheapening of Memorial Day and our failure to remember say about us as a nation?

Last week, Gillian Lopez, a native of Great Britain and one of St. Paul's members, wife of Paul and mother of Fox and Phoenix, took the oath of citizenship in this country. What an occasion for celebration and pride, both for her and for us. We should all congratulate her and welcome her into her citizenship.

But what did Gillian sign on to? A red tag sale at Maroone Ford? Of course not! She took an oath "to support and defend the Constitution of the United States" and to "bear true fidelity and allegiance to the same." She signed on to join her personal story to the incredible story and core values of the United States, values derived from its founding documents – The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. .

I believe our capacity to transform Memorial Day, which ought to be a sacred and solemn day, into a carnival of consumerism is symptomatic of our culture of denial and manifest proof that we have lost our way as nation. We have strayed far from the core principles and values upon which this nation was founded. Our acceptance of the inane over the serious on this weekend, has many significant consequences. Among them, it lulls us into treating our nation's military cheaply, as easily expendable. This has never been clearer in our history.

You want proof? Look at our despicable negligence and treatment of the nation's veterans, and especially the seriously wounded from the current war.⁶ Moreover, beyond the military personnel and their families, no one in this nation has been asked to sacrifice anything during the prosecution of this war. Rather than sacrifice, we have been invited to purchase and to spend. Again, what does it say about us as a nation?

Men and women, many of them young, very young, are dying and being wounded on behalf of this nation, and we are being asked to go to Target or to Walmart and buy stuff. Yes, we have lost our way. We have traveled far to a distant place. We are exiles in a foreign land and we worry, we worry a lot. We worry about the wrong things. We live in a culture of fear and fear-mongering.

Still, still, God has a vital word to speak to us in our exile. God has something important to say to us in our worry, our anxiety, our fear. We hear God's vital, important, word to us in both of the readings appointed for today.

In the reading from Isaiah, God speaks a word to Judah in exile. They are in exile both literally and figuratively. They are in exile in Babylon because the Babylonians had swept into Judah and defeated them in 587 B.C., just as the Assyrians had conquered the territory of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C. and exiled them.

You might conclude that Judah's defeat was merely the consequence of going up against a superior military power, but that is not what Israel's tradition concluded. They knew that superior military strength is often not decisive. The biblical narrative is full of stories of outnumbered, "out-generalled" Jewish people, David and Goliath-like overcoming superior strength because God was with them.

We have witnessed in our own time lesser armed, lesser-generalled insurgencies standing up to superior military power and prevailing. We have seen this in Iraq. Who can forget that the Russians were chased out of Afghanistan? And, of course, there was Vietnam. It is foolish to conclude that superior military might alone will prevail. Other factors often come into play.

The tradition of Israel was very clear in concluding that their defeat at the hands of the Assyrians and later the Babylonians, and their being forced into exile, was a consequence of their unrighteousness and sin, of their having abandoned God and God's ways.

There were gross inequities in Israel. The rich were greedy and focused on the acquisition of things and on the corrupt arrogation of power to the few, power which was often exercised with callousness and cruel disregard for the weak and the marginalized.

This culture of acquisitiveness, both of things and of power, had come at the expense of justice and on the backs of the poor. People worshiped, but the worship was empty, vacuous, because while they worshiped the God of justice and love, they committed gross acts of injustice and evil.⁷ There was a fundamental disconnect between their ethics and their worship and worship and ethics should never be disconnected.

Through the prophets, God, continually tried to warn the people and call them back to him, but the people did not heed the prophets' call. One after another they came and spoke God's word. One after another they were ignored and rejected.

Eventually, the situation became intolerable for God and God delivered Judah into exile because of their unrighteousness and injustice. I'm not making this up. You can read it in the Bible. Study Amos or Hosea, Isaiah or Jeremiah or almost any other of the prophets. Study the writings of the Deuteronomist. It's right there, plain as day. God delivered Judah into exile because justice and righteousness were not in the land.

After 54 had passed, years of exile and sorrow, God delivered a word of hope to them. God delivered a word of hope to them through the voices of the same prophets who had delivered God's message of judgment. Just as the prophets had been called to give voice to God's anger and wrath, so now, God called the prophets to deliver a message of love and of hope and of pardon and deliverance. We hear this message in today's reading from Isaiah.

"Thus says the LORD, in a time of favor I have answered you, on a day of salvation I have helped you; I have kept you and given you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages; saying to the prisoners, 'Come out!' to those who are in darkness, 'Show yourselves'" (Isaiah 49:8 - 9)

From the position of this text, the people are in prisons of their own making. They are in darkness that has come because they rejected the light. But now, through the prophet's message, God is calling them out of their prisons, out of the darkness of their lives, "Come out!"

God says, *"I will turn all my mountains into a road, and my highways shall be raised up. Lo, these shall come from far away, and lo, these from the north and from the west, and these*

from the land of Syene.... Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the LORD has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones” (Isaiah 49:11 - 12).

Can you hear God’s message of love? Can you hear God’s words of hope and deliverance?

Israel couldn’t hear this message of hope and love at first. They had been in exile so long, so conditioned by this, it was hard for them to accept. Zion said, *“The LORD has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me”* (Isaiah 49:14). They had allowed the despair of the exile to define them. Like people too long imprisoned, they had difficulty seeing the hope or accepting the message of pardon and freedom.

But God reassures them; reassures them with words that invoke the deepest, most profound image of love that can be invoked: the image of a mother’s love for her infant child. *Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands...See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands* (Isaiah 49:15 - 16). And the people Israel were delivered and were returned to their land, chastened and restored.

Today’s Gospel reading is from the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus also recognizes the corruptions of wealth, and the power acquisitiveness has to dominate people and lead them away from God. *“No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth”* (Matthew 6:24). Jesus gets to the heart of the matter: Worry!

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?” (Matthew 6:25).

In Greek, the word for worry means essentially the same as it does in English. Worry means to have undo care or anxiety about something. Worry is just another side of fear. And as many have observed before, fear, not doubt, is the opposite of faith.

Jesus uses the word “worry” six times in ten verses. And these ten verses appear in the very center of the Sermon on the Mount. Do you think he recognizes how much damage undue worry and anxiety can do to human beings? Do we recognize how much harm worry and anxiety does to us?

How many people suffer heart attacks and strokes because of worry and anxiety? How many marriages break up over worry and anxiety? How many families live in tension, parents yelling at children, even striking them, because of inappropriate, misdirected worry and anxiety.

How many people allow their lives to be defined by the acquisition of things, by greed, avarice and covetousness, all because they, we, are worried about not having enough? How many countries allow their domestic and foreign policies to be shaped by these concerns?

Too often, the result is a perverse and unjust distribution of wealth, and an economic system similar to that of Judah’s of old, that neglects the poor and lines the pockets of the rich, breeding a culture of consumerism that is more concerned about things than about people. Thereby, people are led into the purgatory of an endless cycle of wants and a perpetual sense of being unfulfilled, of not having enough. Walls of alienation between the “haves” and the “have nots” are built up and reinforced and with this comes the concomitant cycle of war and violence that has marred so much of human history.

By accident or design, we have bought into a nightmare and rejected God’s dream, the dream that was Jesus’s single theme; the dream that was, and is God’s kingdom. How could we

allow such a thing? It has to do with worry. Like Martha in the familiar story, we are worried about much (Luke 10:38 - 42). We are worried about the wrong things. It gets us into trouble, this worry. Sometimes it even gets us into ill-considered and unjust wars.

And this nightmare numbs us, and causes us to be so obsessed with worry and seduced by a need to acquire, with the compulsion to want and have more, with Target and with Walmart, that we neglect the really important matters in life – the core values of justice and freedom and a passion for peace. We become so obsessed that we even neglect and forget about the sacrifices of people like Lance Corporal Ramona Valdez and so many others, who have given their lives for the sake of what? A Memorial Day sale and \$600.00 spending spree at Macy's?⁸

As Christians, as followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to higher things. We are called to be heralds of God's dreams. We are called to say to a world imprisoned in violence and hatred and war, in dungeons and cells of its own making, to those who are in darkness, *"Come out!"* We are called to sing with the heavens in joy, to break forth with the heavens and the earth into singing. To declare boldly that we are not God-forsaken, we are God's beloved. That's what Jesus says to his listeners on the mountain and what he says to us: *Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you -- you of little faith?...You who worry....You who are anxious about much....* (Matthew 6:26 - 31). *Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' Your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, strive first to live into God's hopes and dreams and love, and all these things will be given to you as well* (Matthew 6: 31 - 33).

These are Jesus' liberating words to us, his words of invitation. These are to be our liberating words, our words of invitation, our Gospel, our Good News to one another and to the world on this Memorial Day weekend and always.

1. Michaels, Jim, Stone, Andrea and Zoroya, Gregg "Friends, comrades live on in heart of Iraq veterans." *USA Today*, May 23, 2008, starting on page A-1.

2. Michaels, Jim et. al.

3. Michaels, Jim et. al.

4. Michaels, Jim et. al.

5. U.S. Military Casualty figures from <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/casualty.pdf>. Iraqi casualty estimates see Wikipedia article "Casualties of Iraq War" at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Casualties_of_the_Iraq_War

6. See, for example, Jonathan Weisman's story "Senate Passes \$165 Billion Measure to pay for Wars" in the May 23, 2008 edition of *The Washington Post*. One quote from the article made the point clear, "The White House opposed the expanded G.I. Bill, concerned that the price tag is too high and that the generous benefits could entice service members to leave the overburdened military rather than reenlist."

7. See, for example, Amos 5:21- 24

8. Most American tax payers were provided with a \$600 rebate from the Federal Government as part of a tax stimulus plan.