

MEMORIALS

I Kings 18:20-39

Sunrise Presbyterian Church

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Tomorrow is Memorial Day - our national day for remembering those who died serving our country. Memorial Day began to be observed following the awful carnage of the war which almost tore this country apart - the Civil War. Through the years, the day has become a time to recall sacrifice and offer thanksgiving for those who died. It's a day for solemn public ceremonies, picnics, and in some parts of the country, Memorial Day has also become a day to gather at family cemeteries to neaten and clean ancestor's graves. Many of us will travel to different cemeteries to make sure fresh flowers adorn relatives' graves. It's often a time for family and class reunions - it's a time for fellowship and food. It's a time to remember people who came before us -- to think about how they lived their lives - struggled to raise their families - and helped shape our lives today. It's a day to acknowledge that we don't stand on our own - but we are connected to those ancestors who came before us - as surely as we are connected to those who will come after us.

I did not grow up celebrating Memorial Day, but I did grow up visiting the cemetery almost every Sunday. An aunt and uncle would drive over to visit and take me with them to the cemetery to take fresh flowers and to make sure things were neat. The visits were a way for them to make a memorial to their family. They were a way for me to hear stories about ancestors I never knew. Some years we'd take a trip to visit the old cemetery - where my great-grandparents and other relatives were buried. It was in the middle of farm, and we had to clear a path to find the small cemetery. The graves markers came from Scotland - like my relatives. I loved going to that old, over-grown place.

Memorials - they help us remember people, sacrifice, victories, and important events. We make pilgrimages to visit memorials - the Vietnam War Memorial - Flanders Fields - Oklahoma City - the 9/11 memorial. We visit to honor

those who lost their lives - to remember the events that happened so that we will not forget. Remembering is crucial to **our** living today.

Over and over throughout scripture, people uncover ways to remember God's presence. Remembering is also a crucial concept throughout the Bible. God remembers - and turns and relents of threats. God's people remember and turn back to God. "Remember your people" the Hebrew exiles pleaded to God. "Don't forget us and don't turn your back to us." "Remember the God who brought you to this land." "Remember the Lord your God who gives you power." "Remember the God who makes covenant with you and gives you steadfast love." Remember - Remember - Remember.

And as they remember, they make memorials. Their memorials are often stone cairns - stones stacked along the road to mark an event, a dream - or God's steadfast care. Samuel raised a cairn he called his "stone of help" called an *ebenezer* in Hebrew, after the Israelites defeated the Philistines in battle. Joshua set up 12 stones in Gilgal so that the people would remember crossing the Jordan River.

Our morning reading from I Kings is about one of the times the people forgot God. There's a terrible draught in the land - and many of the Hebrews decide to hedge their bets on God's delivering rainfall. They worship the Gods of King Ahab and his wife, Jezebel. They make offerings to them and begin to expect their help. Elijah - God's prophet - will have none of their apostasy. He calls for a great contest among the Gods. He gathers 450 prophets of Baal and calls on them to bring down fire from heaven to consume a bull on their altar. Elijah mocks and taunts them all day as their prayers and rituals fail. When his turn comes to call on God - Elijah ups the stakes - he digs trenches around the bull - he pours so much water over the wood for the fire that the trenches overflow. Elijah is determined to make the people remember God. And the fire does indeed come and consumes the bull - the wood - and licks up the water. Elijah is vindicated and turns on the prophets of Baal - he has them rounded up and killed.

Yet even though he sets up stones in memory as he sets up his altar - Elijah - himself the mighty prophet - forgets. Elijah forgets all about God's great power because he hears rumors that Queen Jezebel is out for his head. Elijah forgets his memorial because he is afraid for his life. He needs to remember that God has

been with him - that God will be with him - and that it is God who gives him power. Yet he is scared.

Perhaps we are all a bit like Elijah - we often can become afraid and forget. Elijah ran until he found a cave in which to hide. He hid and then let out a string of complaints to God that no one else remembered who God was. It's interesting that Elijah had just seen great power demonstrated - and yet just as quickly, he has forgotten. We remember God's answer to Elijah's prayers of pity - we can tell the story of how God did not come to Elijah in a mighty rush of wind or in an earthquake - but God came in a manner that we have memorialized - God came to Elijah in the silence - and God spoke in that still, small voice to ask him why he was hiding - did Elijah not remember? We all forget - we all can try to hide - we all can think we are alone. Perhaps we are all a bit like Elijah.

That is why we need to remember. Frederick Buechner writes: "When we remember someone, it means that we have carried something of who they are with us, that we have left some mark of who we are with them. It means that we can summon them back to our minds even though countless years and miles may stand between us. . . . For as long as we remember them, we are never entirely lost. 'Jesus, remember us when you come into your kingdom,' the good thief said from his cross. There are perhaps no more human words in all of scriptures, no prayer we can pray so well." ⁱ Jesus, remember us!

Let's take time tomorrow to remember: those who died while serving this country - our ancestors - our families - our friends - our communities. And let us remember that throughout the memories of our lives God acts and God accompanies us - sometimes with great power - sometimes with by simply a still, small voice. Throughout the days of our lives - in all our memories - God is with us always. Alleluia! Amen.

ⁱ *Whistling in the Dark*, Frederick Buechner,.