

Dunbarton Congregational Church
Sunday, May 27, 2007
10:30 a.m.

Pentecost and Memorial Day
Acts 2:1-21
“*Mostly*, and Other Thoughts”

I begin this morning with a poem. It's called, *Mostly*.

When I watch the news about the war
I think of things tan,
khaki-colored Up-Armored Humvees,
camel-colored T-62 tanks and
cream-colored Avengers.

I think of all that taupe-colored dust swirling
behind mushroom-colored Saxon Armored Personnel Carriers,
coating the backs of the soldiers like a thin
layer of mocha-colored frosting.
Rumpled patrols prowl the streets in
manila-splashed uniforms.
A fawn-colored boot rises
and kicks in a coffee-colored door.

I must confess that all this nightly brownness
makes me thirsty,
for sunsets and rainbows~
for a stealth yellow curl,
a clear green eye,
or the whiteness of teeth shining
through a sweat-soaked, powder-caked face.

Mostly,
color-deprived that I am,
I want to tell you how I gasp
when I glimpse our nation's trinity~
red and white and blue.
You see, I am a sentimental patriot, too,

I do not understand this war;
I do not understand war.
But I still reliably weep when I consider
the radiant, star-spangled brilliance of our soldiers
hidden beneath all those thick, dull
layers of beige.

CEB 2007

If you are looking for content for a Memorial Day sermon, I suggest you hang out in the Military History section at Barnes and Noble and it will come to you. I was looking for a book by Maxine Hong Kingston called, *Veterans of War; Veterans of Peace*, an anthology of writings by veterans about their experiences of war. Through poetry and story, over 500 servicemen and women and their families expiated memories of combat and its aftermath. Guided by National Humanities Medal winner Kingston, the project was featured on Bill Moyer's Journal and I just had to have a copy. Why on earth it would be in the Military History section is beyond me. Perhaps they could think of no other place to put it.

The Barnes and Noble clerk that escorted me to my destination informed me that Military History was not much sought after, eyeing me strangely as in, "You just don't seem like the type." So there I was, in a cocoon really, caught in a web of curiosity. "Are you looking for anything in particular," a voice said. I looked up. There was a small man with a swath of gray hair and a broad, denture filled smile. He carried a cane and was wobbling quite noticeably. I wanted to reach out a hand to steady him, but I didn't. "Well, I said, I'm looking for writings by soldiers." "Like diaries?" he inquired. "Yeah," I replied, "something like that."

He bent down with great difficulty and drew a thick paperback from the bottom shelf. "This isn't a diary but it's the best book about World War II around." He handed it to me and looked directly into my eyes. I knew at that moment this was a God sent moment and I had better pay attention. I took a deep breath and forced myself to slow down, to be wholly present. I studied the title: *An Army at Dawn: The War in North Africa, 1942-1943, Volume One of the Liberation Trilogy*. I smiled and returned his gaze, "Thank you."

"My brother fought in North Africa. 57th Fighter Group. It's job was to assist Montgomery. They flew Curtiss P-40 Warhawks."

"Was he a pilot?" I asked.

“No! An armaments specialist. The Army was in such a hurry to get soldiers into the field, he had no training, none.”

“And did you serve?”

“Yes, regular Army. I never saw combat though. This leg is from arthritis, nothing more.” He paused. “Our job was to ready the troops for D-Day. We did training out of Camp Drum, N.Y. They ran maneuvers in the Pottsdam, NY area. Do you know where that is?”

“Yeah,” I whispered, thinking of the dinner we’d had in Pottsdam for Kat’s graduation last weekend.

We stood in silence for a moment. It felt reverential.

“You know, people today say that our soldiers are not properly equipped for battle, but no one had proper equipment during WWII. B-17 bombers held 10 men with no fighter support—do you know why? The US hadn’t figured out how to make a long-distance fighter. It was only after we reverse-engineered a downed German fighter that we were able to provide support. Until then, those bombers would go down, ten men at a time.” In the beginning, a tank was a truck with the letters, T A N K on the side.” He laughed. I laughed.

“I am an old man so I get to tell stories,” he laughed, somewhat self-consciously. We seemed to occupy a sacred space as customers buzzed silently on the periphery. “I like stories,” I said softly. “Well, I’d better be running,” he said, an odd turn of phrase as he shifted his cane and turned precariously.

“Wait!” he said, facing me again. “I want to tell you that my entire family was military. My father served in World War I, fought at Chateau Thierry. My Uncle fell at Verdun. The Army was the gel in which I lived. Life was so good back then. When I was a boy, we used to play ball in the open fields all summer. By August, our denim shirts would be bleached by the sun. And when it came time to serve we served. My brother enlisted the day after Pearl Harbor—kind of like 9/11.”

He was beginning to quiver and I was on the brink of suggesting a coffee and a chair. He spoke instead, “I do not like this Iraq war. We are fighting people who have been fighting one another for thousands of years. We did not commit to win, no soldier can abide that. But we go where we are called; I mean no disrespect.”

“Yes, I understand,” I replied. “May I ask your name?”

“Al.” He extended his hand and I took it.

“Thank you, Al, for your service to our country.”

I swear his eyes watered, but then again, perhaps it was mine.

On a certain morning in Jerusalem, eleven frightened and beleaguered disciples gather in one place to celebrate the festival of Pentecost. Jesus has ascended and abandoned them yet again. How are they to build a church? How are they to spread Christ's word to all nations? They can't even speak more than one language. Then a mighty wind sweeps through the house where they are sitting and they see what seem to be tongues of fire that separate and come to rest on each of them. And all are filled with the Holy Spirit, with *Christ's* spirit, and they begin to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enables them. In the square, where God-fearing Jews from every nation assemble, amazed that they are hearing what is being said in their own language. "These disciples must be drunk!" they say. Of course that's what we think when the spirit speaks, isn't it?

My friends, I am not suggesting that my Barnes and Noble friend Al was an incarnation of the Holy Spirit, but the words he spoke to me cut me to the heart, they were honorable, and there must be a bit of Christ's spirit in that, don't you think? Today is a day to honor all who have served our great nation, especially those who have paid the ultimate sacrifice. Jesus would not understand war, and he certainly would not understand this war, but he would reliably weep when considering the radiant, star-spangled goodness of our soldiers hidden beneath the thick, dull layers of their government's misdeeds. For Al, for all the soldiers who have served and are serving this great country, let's us sing together a prayer for peace written deep in the midst of the Cold War over fifty years ago.

Amen.