

May 25, 2020

Memorial Day 2020

Remembering Dennis P. Buckley

Joshua 4:1-9

Opening words: His name was John Logan. His name is not considered one of the great names in American history. However, he was the national commander of the Grand Army of the Republic during the 1860's. It was Logan who declared May 30, 1868 a "Memorial Day." That date was selected because the flowers would be in full bloom. The observance was held at the former home of Confederate General Robert E. Lee. Lee's home was confiscated by the government and turned into a cemetery, Arlington National Cemetery. General Ulysses and Julia Grant presided over the day. He would not become President for another year. Soldiers from the Grand Army of the Republic and orphans from the Soldiers and Sailors Orphanage placed flowers on both Union and Confederate graves. They prayed and sang as they went.

This is the truth: Logan's idea of a "Memorial Day" was not original. By 1868, communities who had lost men in the Civil War had been decorating the graves of their lost for several years. History tells us New York became the first state to make Memorial Day a state holiday in 1873. By 1890, all northern states observed a Memorial Day. However, southern states had separate Memorial Days until the close of the First World War. Since 1971, Memorial Day has been observed on the last Monday of May, ensuring a three-day holiday weekend. How do you remember those who have died in service to our country? On this Memorial Day weekend, let us remember them all. Did you know over 1.35 million have died in service to our country? Over 290,000 died in the Civil War alone. Our scripture reading for today is Joshua 4:1-9. Let me call this message *Remembering Dennis P. Buckley*.

Joshua 4:1-9 ¹When the whole nation had finished crossing the Jordan, the LORD said to Joshua, ²"Choose twelve men from among the people, one from each tribe, ³and tell them to take up twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan, from right where the priests are standing, and carry them over with you and put them down at the place where you stay tonight." ⁴So Joshua called together the twelve men he had appointed from the Israelites, one from each tribe, ⁵and said to them, "Go over before the ark of the LORD your God into the middle of the Jordan. Each of you is to take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, ⁶to serve as a sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you, 'What do these stones mean?' ⁷tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever." ⁸So the Israelites did as Joshua commanded them. They took twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, as the LORD had told Joshua; and they carried them over with them to their camp, where they put them down.

⁹ Joshua set up the twelve stones that had been in the middle of the Jordan at the spot where the priests who carried the Ark of the Covenant had stood. And they are there to this day.

They tell me 11,000 feet high in the Colorado Rocky Mountains there is a secret monument honoring war veterans. It is called "Soldierstone." It sets high in the majestic peaks and is made of polished granite. It was the brainchild of Lieutenant Colonel Stuart Allen Beckley, who served in Vietnam for ten years. It was constructed in 1985, the same year Beckley died of cancer. He was in the Special Forces, a Green Beret. His unit would parachute behind enemy lines and train indigenous people to defeat their enemies, saving American lives. That monument stands in memory of those fallen indigenous soldiers. The monument is well hidden for a simple reason. Our government denied their existence for decades. When they died, they were soon forgotten. Beckley saw this as wrong. No one should ever be forgotten. He was right. Everyone who dies deserves to be remembered. That leads us to this morning's scripture lesson.

We are in the fourth chapter of Joshua. After forty years in the wilderness, the people have just crossed the Jordan and entered the Promised Land. Moses is dead and the people are being led by their new warrior leader, Joshua. It must have been a great day. It was a day they had dreamed of for decades. They could have celebrated in countless ways, but do you remember what they did? No, they did not have a party. There were no fireworks. There were no long-winded addresses made by boring politicians. Instead, they built a memorial. God told Joshua to instruct the people to take twelve stones, one representing each tribe, from the middle of the Jordan (verse 2). The tribes do so, and God stops the water from flowing to make their task easier (verse 7). It is easy to stop a river after you have divided a sea. The stones are taken to dry ground and piled up. That pile of stones was to act as a memorial for future generations (verses 6-7). There was nothing unique about that memorial. It is just a pile of rocks, but it served the purpose. That memorial did three important things all memorials are designed to do.

First, memorials force us to look to the past! As future generations looked at that pile of rocks, they remembered the past. I do not just mean the day they crossed the Jordan. That day was just one page in the long history of the Hebrew people. They remembered everything that happened to their people to that point. How well do you remember your Old Testament? They remembered the four patriarchs. They remembered Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. They remembered how Joseph saved the people from the famine and led them into Egypt. They remembered how their favored status was evoked and slavery became a reality. They remembered how hard their lives were as slaves and their prayers for a liberator. They remembered the day they left Egypt and the parting of the sea. They remembered the day Moses came down from Sinai with the Ten Commandments and their wilderness experience. They

remembered Joshua and the generation that seized their land. Memorials force us to look to the past!

Second, memorials force us to discover what is important! Joshua's stone memorial did more than just remind them of historical events. It reminded them of the general theme of their race. It reminded them that God had always been with them and God always will. They had a special relationship with God. After all, they are God's Chosen People. That was important to them. What is important to you? Memorials force us to discover what is important!

Third, memorials force us to consider the future! When Joshua looked at that memorial made from twelve rocks, he had to think about the future. He was challenged by the events of the past and his people's special relationship with God. They were not just going to be like every other nation. They were going to be different. They were going to be better. They had a unique opportunity to be holy. When you look to the future what are your aspirations. Memorials force us to look to the future! Let me state the obvious.

Memorials are important! That is why our world is filled with all different kinds of memorials. I have never been to a country that did not have memorials. Consider this partial list me me. The Great Pyramid of Giza in Egypt, Lenin's Tomb in Russia, the Taj Mahal in India, and the Colosseum in Italy, the Eiffel Tower in France and the Great Wall in China, Christ the Redeemer in Brazil, are all memorials. Today, there are countless on-line memorials.

Memorials are important to Americans too. Did you know the National Park Service manages 30 national memorials? This is part of that list. There is Arlington House or The Robert E. Lee Memorial, Flight 93 Memorial, The Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial, The General Grant Memorial, The Korean War Veterans Memorial, The Vietnam War Memorial, The Lincoln Memorial, The Martin Luther King Memorial, The Jefferson Memorial, The Pearl Harbor Memorial, and Mount Rushmore. There are also memorials to the First and Second World Wars, as well as the Wright Brothers. Perry's Victory and International Peace Memorial is the only national memorial in the state of Ohio. There cannot be too many memories because there is so much to remember. It is sad when something important or someone is forgotten. I know that is true because I have experienced that in my own life. This is the story.

It all began with a simple phone call in April of 2016. The voice on the other end of the line was a familiar one. It was a local funeral director asking if I was available to do a service on a certain date at a certain time. I glanced at the calendar on my phone and said, "Yes." I was warned the deceased did not die recently. He died on June 30, 1951. His name was Dennis P. Buckley. He was only 23 years old. He lived in the Youngstown area as a youth and joined the Navy. When his hitch was up with the Navy he reenlisted in the Army. He was ordered to Korea to fight the spread of communism. He

was sent to a dangerous region and was taken as a prisoner of war. Returning soldiers said he died as a POW in the Susan Camp. His remains had been returned now, because our government had signed a treaty with the North Korean government. His remains were only one of several. He was identified by DNA testing and dental records. I was humbled to be asked and play a small part in the ceremony.

When the day came, I went to the funeral home. There was no shortage of military. Every other person was in uniform. A guard was constantly posted beside his remains, which fit in a hat size box. An American flag and the blouse of an Army uniform were framed. I was introduced to Buckley's only living relative, a niece, and I was introduced to the officer in charge. It was a strange introduction. There is always a tension between professional military and clergy. The two do not see the world in the same way. When the service began there was a stiffness in the air. I had read those words a million times, but this time it was different. The words seem to hit the floor in front of the lectern. There was no emotion, but a surplus of respect. When the remains were placed in the hearse by the military, I sat in the lead car next to the funeral director. We were heading to the Ohio Western Reserve National Cemetery in Rittman. Arlington National Cemetery is filling up, so regional national cemeteries have been established. The closest one to us is in Rittman. If you have never been to a national cemetery, go. They are impressive. We did not travel alone. There was a military escort, along with random motorcycles. Everyone saw us coming and everyone seemed to know the story. Cars pulled to the side so not to impede our progress. Trucks pulled into the rest area and the drivers saluted as Buckley passed. When we arrived at the cemetery more military was waiting for us. There was no waiting. They escorted us to the designated spot, and everyone exited the cars. Everyone stood. The Honor Guards represented every branch of the military, Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines and Coast Guard. Buckley's remains were handled respectfully and I walked behind the cart. I was told where to stand and when to speak. I said the committal clearly, stood to the side and watched the military say their parting words. Their words were genuine. Once the flag was folded, it was presented to Buckley's niece. Finally, taps were played. She was moved to tears. Then, as fast as it began, it was over.

As I waited to leave, the local news team appeared. The same reporters I had seen on my television. They asked me to say a few words. I said, I was humbled. They asked, the funeral director to say a few words. He said he was honored. They asked Dennis Buckley's niece to say a few words. She was out of her comfort zone. However, I think about her words every Memorial Day. She looked at the camera and thanked everyone for their kindness. They asked her about what she remembered about Dennis. She said, "To be honest, I think, I only met him once. I had forgotten about him." The reporter tried not to look disappointed, but there was nothing else to say. How do you forget someone who gave so much?

How many people have you forgotten who have died serving our country? No one should be forgotten. How are you going to remember those who died in service to our

country? George S. Patton (1885-1945) was an American general during the Second World War. He commanded the Seventh Army. He once said, *"It is foolish and wrong to mourn the men who died. Rather we should thank God such men lived."* May they never be forgotten.