**2 Pentecost**

**May 29, 2016**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,**

**The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,**

**And the power of God known in the spirit.**

**Amen.**

In our first reading this morning we heard the story of the competition between Elijah and the Prophets of Baal. The prophets of Baal built a stone altar, lay down wood for a fire, then put a sacrificed bull on the wood, and called upon their god to start the fire … but nothing happened. Elijah did much the same, but he also dug a trench around the wood, poured water on the wood three times, and then called upon the God of “Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” and fire came down and consumed the stones, the wood, the flesh, and even the water in the trench. The last words of this lesson were, “When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, “The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God.” Now, does anyone remember from the lesson how many prophets of Baal there were? Well, the very next verse reads, Elijah said to them, “Seize the prophets of Baal; do not let one of them escape.” Then they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the Wadi Kishon, and killed them there.”

Elijah had 450 prophets of Baal killed all because they worshipped a different god. In a world today where people are being killed around the planet … all because they worship a different god … this is a reading worthy of pondering. But I am not going there … not this Sunday. This is the Sunday of Memorial Day weekend, so I’m going to tell a different kind of war story.

In 1943 my father was a pilot flying B-29 bombers for the United States Navy in the Pacific Theater during World War 2. He was a member of a photographic surveillance squadron flying high over enemy positions to obtain troop and materiel information before invasion plans were made. On several occasions his plane came under attack from enemy fighters and escaped unscathed … but not always.

The version of the B-29 that my father flew was a four engine aircraft equipped with camera gear rather than bombs. It was somewhat lighter than the armament carrying model and therefore could fly higher than other B-29s. It was armed with five machine guns: one on top of the fuselage, two on each side of the fuselage, one in the nose of the plane, and one at the tail … and each machine gun was manned by a crew member.

On one of my father’s missions his plane was hit with enemy fire from a Japanese fighter plane. During the attack he lost voice contact with his tail-gunner, and another crew member reported that it appeared the tail-gunner may have been wounded. My father turned the controls of the airplane over to his co-pilot and crawled to the rear of the plane. Enemy fire had strafed the tail of the plane and shattered the glass surrounding the tail-gunner. The tail-gunner was slumped over the opening and only his seat belt kept him from falling into the abyss. My father pulled the tail-gunner into the fuselage. His right leg had been shattered and he was bleeding profusely. My father stopped the bleeding, got another crew member to stay with him, and then returned to the cockpit to pilot the plane back to his base.

The tail-gunner lost much of his leg, but he survived. The picture of my father at the man’s hospital bedside, both smiling for the camera, was my first exposure to the ravages of war. In spite of their smiles, the man lay there with only a stump where a leg had once been. It is a picture that is engraved in my memory.

My father was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his actions, but more valuable to him was a gift presented to him by his tail-gunner. The man was Jewish and he gave to my father the mezuzah that he wore around his neck. I first heard this story, and saw that photograph, when I asked my father about a slender silver trinket on a chain that he kept in his cufflink box on his dresser … it was the mezuzah the tail-gunner had given my father.

Some of you may be familiar with mezuzahs, but for those who are not let me offer a brief explanation. In the Book of Deuteronomy are these words:

*You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 11:18-20)*

These “words of mine” are those contained in what is known as the Shema:

*Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.*

Therefore, in many Jewish homes one will find a mezuzah at the front door, and some Jews, like this tail-gunner, will wear a mezuzah around their neck the same way Christian’s might wear a cross.

However, my father told me that the mezuzah his wounded crew member had given him contained the Ten Commandments. I don’t know if my father was aware of the difference between the Ten Commandments and the Shema, or if he was just offering an easy explanation to an eight-year old. Of course, I could hardly believe that the Ten Commandments would fit into this tiny silver receptacle … it was no more than an inch and a half long and very slim.

One day my curiosity got the better of me, and when I was left alone at home, I got out my trusty Cub Scout knife and cut around what looked like a seam at the top of the mezuzah. Lo and behold, the top came off and inside was the thinnest piece of paper I had ever seen, and on it was written some letters that made no sense to me at all … it was all in Hebrew!

Needless to say, when my father found out what I had done, he was very angry with me. For one, I had broken one of the Ten Commandments which, since neither of us could read Hebrew, we thought was written on the paper I had pulled from the mezuzah … obviously, I had not “Honored my mother and father.” Of course it wasn’t the first time that I broke this commandment, nor would it be the last. Later, my father took the mezuzah to a Jewish jeweler he knew in New York City and had it repaired, and years afterwards I overheard him tell the story to friends … and they all laughed at the curious eight-year old boy who wanted to see the Ten Commandments. Today, that mezuzah now belongs to Caren … my mother gave it to her after my father died 17 years ago.

I have a couple of reasons for telling this story today. This is the Sunday of Memorial Day weekend. Memorial Day, originally called Decoration Day, is a day of remembrance for those who have died in our nation's service. All too often its original purpose is lost in the hullabaloo about travel, and barbeques, and crab festivals, and family outings on this three-day weekend. Yet we must still remember that men … and women … have died, and are still dying, in service to our country. And this memorial … the memory … is not just for those who died. We must also remember that those wars of the past still carry strong memories for those who survived, even into succeeding generations. And this will be no less true for those who are presently fighting a very different kind of war in various places around the world … all in the name of our nation.

I tell the story about my father and his tail-gunner because I am proud of them, even when I feel I have no right to be, and I am proud of all who have been put into harm’s way in our nation’s service. However, at the same time I pray for peace in our world so that leaders of nations do not have to sacrifice the lives of our young men and women … physically and psychically. The best way to honor our men and women of the military is to bring them home alive and well.

I also tell this story about my father and the mezuzah that was given to him because of the Shema:

*Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.*

Our roots, as Christians, are in Judaism. Yet we live in a world where we take too much for granted, live in fear of those who look, dress, speak, act, think or worship differently from us … and we seek security by building unshakable lives. God, in creating us, made us all in God’s image, and calls all of us to fullness of life, not merely a secure existence. In Jesus God gave us the example of one who lived that full life, trusting in God to provide, and giving of himself so that we, too, might all know that fullness of life. When asked what was the greatest commandment of all, Jesus responded … out of his Jewish faith … with the words of the Shema … the same Shema contained in that tiny silver mezuzah given to my father by his wounded crew member.

Jesus died on the cross because he threatened the systems of security in both the religious and political establishments. However, the grave could not hold the divine nature of God that was alive in Jesus, and his Resurrection speaks to the new life beyond what we see as death. In this life we all too often seek security in strange and anxious situations, and this security limits us in living into the fullest image of God. Jesus’ death and resurrection teaches us that there is much more to life than just security … that when we take the risk of moving beyond our fears there is a new life waiting for us.

And God’s Spirit, which was present at Creation, is still with us now, opening for us the immense possibilities of living as if we are one worldwide community, each individual a precious divine spark … each and every person, regardless of tribe, or language or nation, or form of worship is a beloved child of God.

The power of God is known “when two or three are gathered.” It is in community, from nuclear family to the worldwide human race, that we know God’s Spirit. God’s Spirit is present and at work when people gather as congregations, as a village, as a tribe, as a people bound by language, as a faith, and as a country. However, God’s Spirit does not know national boundaries, and God’s Spirit and is work among peoples separated by rivers, who live beyond mountains, and who occupy distant shores. God’s Spirit is present and at work when people are in harmony, and when there is discord. God’s Spirit calms the troubled soul and it challenges apathy. God’s Spirit abhors the status quo yet dispels the fears that accompany change.

So, on this Second Sunday after the Feast of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came upon the beginnings of our Church, and on the Sunday after Trinity when we affirm One God in three expressions … a use of our language to attempt to describe a reality that is so mysterious that it defies words … and on the Sunday of Memorial Day weekend, I would like to end with the prayers that are found on the insert to your bulletin.

Let us pray:

Almighty God, giver of all good things: We thank you for the natural majesty and beauty of this land. They restore us, though we often destroy them.

*Heal us.*

We thank you for the great resources of this nation. They make us rich, though we often exploit them.

*Forgive us.*

We thank you for the men and women who have made this country strong. They are models for us, though we often fall short of them.

*Inspire us.*

We thank you for the torch of liberty which has been lit in this land. It has drawn people from every nation, though we have often hidden from its light.

*Enlighten us.*

We thank you for the faith we have inherited in all its rich variety. It sustains our life, though we have been faithless again and again.

*Renew us.*

O Judge of the nations, we remember before you with grateful hearts the men and women of our country who in the day of decision ventured much for the liberties we now enjoy. Help us, O Lord, to finish the good work here begun. Strengthen our efforts to blot out ignorance and prejudice, and to abolish poverty and crime. And hasten the day when all our people, with many voices in one united chorus, will glorify your holy Name. *Amen.*