

Living Epitaphs

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Zephaniah 1:14-18

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The 30th of May, 1868, is designated for the purpose of strewing with flowers, or otherwise decorating the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country during the late rebellion, and whose bodies now lie in almost every city, village, and hamlet churchyard in the land. In this observance no form of ceremony is prescribed, but posts and comrades will in their own way arrange such fitting services and testimonials of respect as circumstances may permit.

Thus began the first official Memorial Day observance—or Decoration Day, as it was once known. It began as a way to honor those who died in the bloodiest conflict in our nation’s history. More Americans were killed in the Civil War than in WWI, WWII, Korea and Vietnam wars combined. In 1868, then General Garfield made a speech at Arlington National Cemetery, where tomorrow, of course, a wreath will be laid at the Tomb, on which is inscribed “Here Rests in Honored Glory An American Soldier Known But to God.”

But, despite the solemn and historical nature of this holiday, I have to believe that, for the majority of Americans, what this holiday REALLY symbolizes is the opening of pools, backyard BBQs and the unofficial start of the summer

travel season. And if you have many doubts about that, just look at how many times we talk about gas prices versus honoring those who died so that we might be able to freely take vacations, fire up the grill and jump in the freezing waters—or at least sit on the lounge chair while our kids tell us that it isn’t really that cold as their lips turn purple.

This Memorial Day finds our nation bitterly divided over an increasingly unpopular war. We are facing a global enemy whose lack of concern for innocent civilian life boggles our minds. Daily reports from Iraq remind us of the depth of civil unrest. Encouraging words are few and far between. And ALL of us know that the conflict in Iraq is not the last battle line our troops will see. We live in a world where serving our country as Heather is doing is truly a dedicated sacrifice. And we need to take time this weekend to honor not only those who have fallen but to give thanks and appreciation for those who stand in defense against those who seek America’s demise.

Memorial Day, if it does nothing else, should remind us of the fragility of life. Our Bible reading from the prophet Zephaniah speaks to that fragility by describing a very ugly scene in human history. Zephaniah was a prophet during the time that Josiah was king of Israel in the late 600s BCE. Josiah was a

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king who was committed to reform and to getting Israel back in right relationship with God. (We need to remember that most of the time Israel was NOT following God's commands.) The people of Israel had developed a mindset that a day was coming (The Day of the Lord) when God would squash their enemies (a technical Hebrew term, of course) and would basically set them up as the big-shots in the Ancient Near East. But Zephaniah challenges those expectations. In verse 15 he says that a "day" is coming, but it will be a day of wrath, anguish, distress, ruin, devastation, darkness, gloom. (Many believe this verse was the basis for the Dies Irae or Day of Wrath from the Latin mass for the burial of the dead.)

Zephaniah warns the people that they cannot continue to rebel against God and expect that there will be some miraculous intervention just because they happen to be Jews. Zephaniah tells them that the outcome is going to be based on HOW they choose to live. You see, it's our lives that determine the end. Israel was waiting for the END to come –the Day of the Lord –to make everything right again. But, in reality, we make the END right by getting the PRESENT right.

Life is fragile. ALL of us face an end. You know, I think we do virtually everything possible to avoid confronting the reality of death. But on this Memorial Day weekend, we cannot avoid it. This is the 25th anniversary of the Vietnam Memorial. That memorial is

a controversial monument to an even more controversial conflict. But it's impossible to avoid the reality of death when 58,000 names are inscribed in the granite. No amount of sunscreen or BBQs can change that reality.

Noted Christian author Stuart Briscoe tells the story of when he moved to the U.S. he was amazed at the number of life insurance salesmen who wanted to welcome him. One day, a well-meaning salesman said to him, "Mr. Briscoe if something should happen to you..." Briscoe interrupted, "Please don't say that, it bothers me." The man continued, "But sir, you really do need to be prepared if something should happen..." Again Briscoe stopped him, but the man persisted. "But what if ..." Briscoe stopped him in his tracks and said, "Son, what bothers me is not death. What bothers me is that you are saying 'IF something should happen.' Son, something WILL happen to all of us. The question is when, not if!"

I was in Starbucks last week, and I read the saying on one side of the coffee cup. It was a quote from a hospice chaplain who said that he had observed that the most alive people he had met were those who had embraced death. "They love, laugh and live more fully." (#251). At 1:11 PM today, Peyton Manning will drop the green flag at the Indy 500. Forty drivers have lost their lives on that race track, but no where is there a memorial, because the drivers don't want to think about it. No driver has ever been pronounced dead at that track.

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Friends, ignoring death is no way to deal with its reality.

We confront the reality of death by faithful living. Let me share a couple of epitaphs with you:

Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night: God said, 'Let Newton be!' and all was light.

Everybody loves somebody sometime (Dean Martin).

I am ready to meet my Maker. Whether my Maker is prepared for the great ordeal of meeting me is another matter (Churchill).

My Jesus, Mercy (Al Capone).
Epitaphs can often tell us a lot about both life and death.

Perhaps one of the most famous “death” stories is about Albert Nobel. Nobel woke one morning to literally find his own obituary printed in the paper. It was the result of a simple, albeit embarrassing journalism error, for it had been Albert’s brother who had died. But even more disconcerting to Albert was to see that he was listed as the “Dynamite King” – an industrialist who had made a fortune by making explosives. Albert decided then and there to dedicate his fortune to furthering the causes he truly believed in, particularly that of Peace and breaking down barriers that separate people.

How differently might we live if we knew what our obituary or epitaph would say? One of our practices of discipleship is to “live faithfully.” What does that look like for you? Tim McGraw sings a great hit song, *Live Like You Were Dying*. We all are—it’s not IF. We’re ALL gonna die, but how are we gonna live? I want to suggest to

you that one of the best ways we can honor those who have fallen is for us to live faithfully. Live faithfully to love and honor the God who has blessed you with life. And live faithfully to bring God’s love into the world where God has placed you.

