

Roaring Lambs

The Rev. Dr.
E. Stanley Ott

Ezekiel 22:23-30

Sermons Series:
In Christ Together
for the World
Gospel Endings

*We stand as
those ready to
heed God's
call as God's
roaring lambs
that stand in
the gap on
behalf of
those in our
land.*

Two weeks ago, I attended a backyard gathering in Herndon of some seventy-five members of the Yorktown High School (in Arlington) class of 1966. It was a fascinating time connecting with people I had not seen for ages although none of my closest friends were present. About six years ago, you may have noticed the news item that General William C. Westmoreland had died. He served as the commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam at the height of that conflict. Before that, he was the commanding Superintendent of the West Point Military Academy at the same time my dad was stationed there, and General Westmoreland's daughter was a classmate of mine. Since my dad and my uncle knew the family, I sent her a letter of condolence, although I haven't seen her in a long, long time. That experience launched me on a search to locate my three closest friends from high school. We attended four very different universities. In those pre-email and Facebook days, we utterly lost track of one another. I set out to reconnect with them.

The first person I tried to find was Pat O'Neil. Pat and I were teammates in our senior

physics class competition to build a do-nothing machine, a machine with a lot of moving parts that accomplished nothing on purpose. We came in second place and always believed, "We were robbed," although the person who did win has remained a friend. Pat went on to the Naval Academy, so I contacted their alumni department to learn his whereabouts and eventually received a letter back saying, "Mr. Ott, It is with great regret I write to inform you that Lieutenant Patrick Warren O'Neil '70 is deceased as the result of an aircraft accident at Patuxent River Naval Air Station, MD on June 13, 1978." That wiped me out. Pat had been dead nearly thirty years, but for me it had just happened. Deep grief. I was able to learn he was married with three children, but his family was untraceable.

What is Memorial Day? It's a day of grief and gratitude. Grief for loved ones who died in the service of our country and gratitude for their service and their sacrifice, knowing some will give their lives for us this very day. We know the grief of loss is real and immediate for many dear families no matter when the loss occurred. Of course in our country,

***The term
“roaring lion”
in our text for
today,
describes
people who
use, who
abuse, take
from, and
destroy other
people for
their own
gain.***

Memorial Day is also seen as the early start of summer, and we have events such as the Viva! Vienna! festival going on outside right now. Some people may feel that such festivals are incongruent with the spirit of Memorial Day, but I believe the joy of community life and the freedom to enjoy it is very much a part of the reason many loved ones gave their lives for this country.

Of course, Memorial Day is not the only time to show honor and appreciation for those who serve and those who have given “the full measure of their devotion.” A good devotional practice every Monday is to take the page of prayer requests in our bulletin where it lists those who are in harm’s way and pray for them. If your son or daughter, mother or father was in harm’s way, you would appreciate others taking the time to pray for them. I have a dear nephew in the middle of basic training this very day. One day his name will join the list. Every so often, the Washington Post publishes pages of pictures of those who have died on our behalf in the previous few months. I find it a slow but deeply significant practice to look at each face, thank God for their lives, entrust them to the Lord who loves them and pray for their loved ones. Again, if it was someone you or I loved, we would so appreciate others taking the time to be grateful for them.

Years ago, a friend of mine gave me a copy of a book by Bob Briner with the curious title of *Roaring Lambs*. Consider two biblical images in the Bible—the image of the lion and the image of the lamb. The term “roaring lion” in our text for today, describes people who use, who abuse, take from, and destroy other people for their own gain. “Like a roaring lion... is a wicked person ruling over a helpless people,” says Proverbs 28:15. The Apostle Peter summed it up: “Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (I Peter 5:8). A roaring lion is any person who takes advantage of others, using, abusing them. We know the suffering from such behavior right here at VPC.

In our Ezekiel text for this morning, we read a very blunt passage about roaring lions, the princes, priests, officials, and people who are users, abusers of others. That Ezekiel text ends with this word from God: “I searched for a person among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none” (22:30). God searched for someone who would serve the people and stand in the gap on their behalf, neither using them nor abusing them. Someone to stand in the gap. What gap? The gap between a person or a people and those that threaten them.

As you and I put our trust in Jesus and commit our lives to follow him, he who is the lamb that roars lives in you and me and roars through us.

Now, in contrast to the Bible's image of the roaring lion that devours people, is the image of sheep and lambs as symbolic of God's beloved people. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want." says David. "I will shepherd my flock," said the Lord, "I will search for the lost...bind up the injured, and strengthen the weak" (Ezekiel 36:11-16). "I am the Good Shepherd," said Jesus Christ. "I know my sheep and my sheep know me." Jesus said to Peter, "Feed my lambs, take care of my sheep, feed my sheep." Jesus Christ, himself, is the lamb of God.

So, what is a "roaring" lamb in contrast with a roaring lion? God said, "I looked for someone among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found no one." Yet, God did find someone to stand in the gap. Jesus Christ is the true roaring lamb, who stood in the gap between the Holy God and us deeply sinful people; he stood in the gap on behalf of the land at the sacrifice of his own life. As the Apostle Paul wrote, "There is one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people"¹(I Timothy 2:5-6). Jesus, the true Roaring Lamb, who put himself

between us and the wrath to come.

As you and I put our trust in Jesus and commit our lives to follow him, he who is the lamb that roars lives in you and me and roars through us. So you and I are called to be roaring lambs as well, to stand in whatever gap we see on behalf of those who are experiencing less than God's best intention for their lives. As we get to know the heart of God, it is clear that God's heart is the heart of a roaring lamb that looks for the gap and stands in the gap on behalf of children, co-workers, friends, whoever God has put into our lives.

There's the classic story of Telemachus, a monk who lived perhaps in the area of modern day Turkey, early in the 400s AD. During his lifetime, gladiatorial games were very popular in Rome. The gladiators were often slaves or political prisoners who were condemned to fight each other unto death for the amusement of the spectators. One day in prayer, Telemachus sensed that the Holy Spirit was encouraging him to leave his community and go to Rome without any understanding of why he was to go. When Telemachus arrived in Rome, he was caught up into a celebration of a recent victory by the Roman Legions over the Goths. Telemachus didn't know exactly where he was going in Rome, so he just followed the movement of the

¹ New International Version

***Whatever
Jesus Christ
would say or
do in a given
situation, a
roaring lamb
would say or
do.***

crowds. He soon found himself on the way to the Coliseum.

When the crowds arrived at the Coliseum, they began to get excited by the sounds of the lions roaring and the gladiators preparing for combat. Telemachus followed the crowd into the Coliseum where, to his horror, he saw gladiators fighting one another to the death after speaking first to the Emperor Honorius saying, "We who are about to die salute thee." At one point, when two gladiators were fighting, Telemachus leapt on the floor of the Coliseum shouting three times, "In the name of Christ, forbear!" as he tried to get between the Gladiators. The crowd was enraged with his interference and began throwing stones killing Telemachus. Some versions of the story have Telemachus run through with a sword. When the crowd saw the little monk lying dead in a pool of blood, they fell silent and began leaving the stadium. Because of the death of Telemachus, three days later, the Emperor Honorius, by decree ended the Games.²

Telemachus was a roaring lamb who stood in the gap on behalf of the land. The Roaring Lamb who is Jesus was roaring through him. A roaring lamb is a follower of Jesus who speaks up and acts in the defense of the helpless, even at great personal

expense. Whatever Jesus Christ would say or do in a given situation, a roaring lamb would say or do. More broadly, a roaring lamb is anyone who stands in the gap on behalf of the land. On this Memorial Day, those are precisely the ones we remember with grief and gratitude, with honor and appreciation for their sacrifice on our behalf.

When I was pastor of a congregation in Pittsburgh, I became friends with a member of the church by the name of Wayne Alderson, a former U.S. Steel executive, who leads an organization called the Value of the Person, bringing love, dignity and respect into life and the workplace. During the Second World War, Wayne was 18 years old with the 7th Infantry Regiment of the 3rd Army. In 1945, he was the first soldier of the Third Division of the Regiment across the German border.³ During the attack, a German soldier hurled a hand grenade at his position, leaving Wayne with horrible head wounds, the indented scar on his forehead still very visible today. Wayne's personal counterattack broke the enemy assault, for which he was awarded the Silver Star for gallantry in action amid much discussion that it should have been the Medal of Honor.

One Sunday morning in church, Wayne was sitting on the front pew of the sanctuary

² Foxes Book of Martyrs, Born Again by Charles Colson,
http://prayerfoundation.org/favoritemonks/favorite_monks_telemachus_coliseum.htm, other websites.

³ See Stronger than Steel, R. C. Sproul. The Wayne Alderson story.

See what is not right and do not ignore it only because to oppose it is uncomfortable.

with other elders who were to serve Communion that morning. I stood directly in front of him behind the Communion Table while I was preaching, and I realized that he never made eye contact with me. During the entire sermon, his eyes were on the Communion Table. Afterwards I asked him what was going on. He said, "I was looking at the elements of the bread and body of our Lord Jesus and remembering when the hand grenade exploded in my face and the Germans were firing on our position that my friend 'Red' Preston, a 22-year-old from Derry, New Hampshire said to me, 'Don't be afraid, I won't leave you,' as he threw his body between me and the enemy. He was hit in the head from behind and was killed, and we fell, his blood flowing on me." Wayne said, "As I sat facing the Communion Table, I was remembering that Jesus Christ sacrificed his blood and body for me and that my friend, 'Red' also sacrificed his blood and body that I may live."⁴ I found that a deeply humbling moment. As Christ died to make us holy, so we die to make men—and women—free. "Red" Preston stood in the gap on behalf of the land, on behalf of a friend. He was a roaring lamb. Grief and gratitude for him this Memorial Day.

Since Jesus Christ lives within you when you believe in Him, he has something he wants to do through you, say through you where you are. You, in his image, are to be his roaring lamb. The significant thing is this: roaring lambs don't roar only on the battlefield but in all of life. They roar in the home, in the workplace, in the community and right here in the church. A quiet lamb says nothing, does nothing on behalf of Jesus Christ in the world and allows the abuse and suffering to go unaddressed. A neighbor of mine fell at a gas station right here in Fairfax and broke her hip. Five people stared at her. None stood in the gap. No one helped her. A roaring lamb makes a difference. Stands in the gap on behalf of the defenseless even at great personal expense. As Elton Trueblood said, "The test of the vitality of a religion is to be seen in its effect upon the culture."⁵ Be ready to heed God's call when God calls you as his roaring lambs to stand in the gap on behalf of the ones who are downtrodden.

Be the roaring lamb filled with the power and presence of the Lamb of God within you. See what is not right and do not ignore it only because to oppose it is uncomfortable. See what is unjust in your world, that which is inappropriate or

⁴ <http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/07141/787756-85.stm> See also *Stronger than Steel* by R.C. Sproul.

⁵ *The Company of the Committed*

We stand as those ready to heed God's call as God's roaring lambs that stand in the gap on behalf of those in our land.

unethical, whether it involves your children and their schooling and sports activities or your own conduct of business or your involvement with some club or organization, something in your family relationships or something in the wider world. You may not say the words of Telemachus, "In the name of Christ, forbear," but you act in the name of Christ when you seek to stop what is unjust and when you do what you understand to be right out of the compassion of Jesus Christ.

My grandfather was Edward Stanley Ott and I am his namesake, Edward Stanley Ott, III. He had retired as a Brigadier General, had been seriously wounded in the First World War and commanded the 15th Artillery Corps during the Second World War. My father, also an artillery man, had fought in the desperate Battle of the Bulge on the Elsenborne Ridge. When my grandfather died, we flew to New Orleans to attend his funeral. Dad picked me up, and as we drove heading for the Ott Family Cemetery north of the city, I said, "Dad, I assume this will be a military funeral." Dad said, "Yes." "Will there be a flag on the casket?" "Yes." "Will they fire three rifle volleys?" "Yes." "Will they play Taps?" "Yes."

I said, "I assume that you appreciate Taps and find it meaningful when the trumpet plays it." My father rarely showed emotion. That was not

his way. But when I said, "I assume you find Taps meaningful," Dad became extremely upset, angry, and said, "I hate Taps!" I was stunned. I had always enjoyed Taps at Boy Scout camp, "Day is done, gone the sun..." I never thought more about it. I said, "Why, Dad?" "Because I have heard Taps played at ever so many funerals of fine young men and women whose young lives were surrendered in the service of their country." It was a very sobering moment. Now I don't hate Taps and find it appropriate and good in the setting of a camping trip. Yet, ever since that conversation with my father, in the setting of a military funeral, when I hear Taps it calls me to grief and to gratitude. To know the one who lies before us has been a roaring lamb and has stood in the gap on our behalf. That is what this day is about.

In a few moments, we will hear the powerful music of the "Highland Cathedral" with organ and bagpipe. Halfway through, we will stand to the majesty of the music to formally recognize the grief of many of our nation's citizens and our gratitude for those who, as roaring lions, have stood in the gap on behalf of the land. We stand as those ready to heed God's call as God's roaring lambs that stand in the gap on behalf of those in our land.