

The Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
The Reverend D. S. Mote, PhD
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
November 13, 2022
Isaiah 65:17-25
Canticle 9
2 Thessalonians 3:6-13
Luke 21:5-19

Seasons of Sacrifice

In May of 1990 I graduated from seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. My brother Steve and I celebrated by going to visit our cousin Joe, who is like a second brother to me. We met up in Portland, Oregon where Joe lives. We spent time in the woods, time at the beach, and time in Portland's rose gardens. We went whitewater rafting; we watched movies; and we visited Stonehenge. Not the Stonehenge on the Salisbury Plain in England but the recreation of Stonehenge, a full-scale replica of it, at the Maryhill Art Museum in Klickitat County, Washington.

The Stonehenge at Maryhill was the first World War I memorial in the United States. It was built in 1918, even before the war was over. Maryhill's Stonehenge was built to commemorate the sacrifice of fourteen men from Klickitat County, soldiers, marines, and sailors, who died in World War I.

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One hundred four years ago on Friday, November 11, 1918, at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, the Great War, as it was called then, came to a stop. It was an armistice; literally, a laying down of arms. It was not a peace; it was a cessation of fighting. Essentially, it was a surrender by Germany. And as the French leader Marshall Foch presciently predicted, it was a suspension of war that would last at most 20 years.

The issues and conflicts that led to the Great War's beginning in the middle of 1914 and to its raging for the next four and a half years had not really even been addressed much less resolved. Yet, those four and half years resulted in over 35 million casualties including 16.5 million deaths: 9.7 million military deaths on all sides and 6.8 million civilian deaths on all sides.

The United States entered the Great War in April 1917, almost three years after it had begun. Over 4.3 million US personnel were deployed in World War I; 116,516 of them were killed, including those 14 from Klickitat County, Washington. Over 204,000 more of them were wounded.

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The eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month. The eleventh day of the eleventh month. St Martin's Day.

It was fitting that the fighting ceased on St Martin's Day, for November 11 has long been a pivotal day in the seasonal life of Europe and nowhere more so than in Germany. November 11 marks the end of the commemorations of all the saints and all the faithful departed that begin on November 1 and 2. St Martin's Day also traditionally marked the end of the agricultural year and the beginning of the harvest.

In much of Europe up through the Middle Ages, November 11 marked the beginning of St Martin's Lent, a long, ascetic, and penitential observance of Advent starting two or three weeks ahead of when we now begin that season. Even today St Martin's Day is among the very most popular saints' days in Europe. And who was St Martin? Do you know him?

Martin was the son of an officer in the Roman army. He was born in the year 316 or 317 in a small town in what is today Hungary. He was named for Mars, the Roman god of war. Because his father was an army officer, he was both expected and required to become one as well. Soldiering was the family business, and he didn't have any choice about it, really. However, before his army career began, his interest in Christianity was sparked. So, he became a soldier at fifteen as scheduled, but he was already a catechumen, studying and preparing for baptism.

The most famous story about Martin is from this time before his baptism. Perhaps you've heard it before. He encountered a beggar on a cold winter's night. Martin took his sword and cut in two his cloak, standard issue for Roman officers, a white cloak lined with lambskin. He gave half of it to the beggar. Imagine how he must have looked returning to barracks in half a cloak. He probably got written up as well. That night he dreamed that Jesus, wearing that half a cloak, was in conversation with the angels and said, *Look there, that's Martin. Though he is only a catechumen, he has clothed me in his own cloak.* Though he did not in fact beat his sword into a ploughshare, Martin models for us how implements of war can be put to new uses.

Because he was an officer, Martin was assigned a slave to assist him with various chores. As he sought to follow Jesus, Martin became convinced that slavery was wrong. So, he would serve his slave in a variety of ways rather than be served by him. And when others would comment on this, Martin would reply that he saw no reason why he shouldn't serve as well as be served. He subverted the system in a variety of ways while embedded within it. Martin shows us a mode of critique *from within*, of bearing witness from inside the dominant paradigm, from within the

institutions and systems in which ourselves are entangled.

Though some historians and biographers have stumbled over these next facts, it appears that Martin fulfilled the requirement of twenty-five years of military service. After he was baptized, he continued to serve in the army. He was in the imperial guard and as such was a non-combatant. The work of the imperial guard was to secure military posts, maintain public order, escort prisoners and dignitaries, and other such duties.

As Martin's twenty-five years of service were drawing to a close, Caesar Julian began stepping up efforts to push back against incursions into the northern frontiers of the Roman Empire. To encourage soldiers to engage these battles vigorously, Caesar Julian was giving out bonuses. Martin knew his conscience would not allow him to fight, so he decided this was a good moment to put in for his discharge. He said to Caesar, *I have been your soldier up till now. Now let me be God's soldier. Please give your bonus to someone who will fight and not to me.*

Caesar was enraged and replied that Martin was a coward. Martin was only more committed to his position: *I am not afraid, he said. If you won't release me, **I will go out tomorrow unarmed and stand between us and them**, but I will not fight. I will cross the enemy's lines unscathed, protected by the cross rather than a shield and helmet.*

Caesar Julian believed Martin would not fight and threw him in prison to spend the night. The next morning, envoys from the enemy came requesting terms for peace. So, Martin did not fight and was discharged after twenty-five years' service. He was forty. And he began the next season of service in his life.

Martin is the patron saint of soldiers and veterans, and in this willingness to bear witness to war as a non-combatant, as a person who would go unarmed and stand between, we see that he is the patron of chaplains as well.

Like other saints who were soldiers, including Francis of Assisi, Ignatius of Loyola, and dozens of others, and like thousands of other veterans across the ages and decades, including those in our diocese and those here this morning, Martin continued to serve as a veteran. As a veteran, like other veterans, he was well trained to focus on the mission at hand.

Martin's next season of service involved being ordained priest and later bishop and founding and leading a monastic community. As bishop, even though a monastic, he traveled all over the geographic bounds of his diocese in France, preferring encountering people where they were, in the midst of their lives and their work,

even more than encountering them inside the walls of church buildings. The chaplaincy of St Martin of Tours continued into, through, and throughout his episcopacy.

*[To learn more about St Martin of Tours, I highly recommend **Martin of Tours: Soldier, Bishop, Saint** by Régine Pernoud (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006, translated by Michael J. Miller)]*

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Our gospel from Luke today is redolent with the vibrations of that much older and longer Advent season that long began on St Martin's Day on November 11. Jesus speaks in apocalyptic tones of how the temple in Jerusalem will be destroyed and how wars and insurrections, earthquakes, famines, plagues, and instability are what should be expected until God's reign comes in full.

In such a beautiful and broken world, work is required. The reading from 2 Thessalonians admonishes that everyone should do their part for the common good.

And Isaiah's words in the first reading come as good news to those who have done their duty. Those who have lived in the midst of turbulence and honored God and others the best they can will live to see the new thing that God is doing. Their labor will not be in vain.

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The eleventh day of the eleventh month. Beginning on November 11, 1919 we in the United States observed Armistice Day, and it was made a legal holiday in 1938. In 1954, following the sacrifices of US personnel in World War II and the Korean conflict, Armistice Day was renamed Veterans Day, a day set aside to honor the service and sacrifice of all veterans.

On Veterans Day we express our thanks to veterans—not in a glib expression of “Thank you for your service;” not in a breezy, easy expression of patriotism that doesn't cost us anything; not in a celebration of nationalism; and not in a glorification of militarism. Not in any of those. But rather we express our thanks in a recognition of sacrifice, which is distinctively and nearly inescapably a *religious* term and category.

Sacrifice: the giving up of something valued for the sake of something else regarded as more important or worthy.

Service members give up lots of things of value for things understood to be of greater value. They are not all motivated by the same things or for the same reasons. But they all give something up. Comfort. Choices. Personal safety. Personal preferences about many things. They give up some things for some other things understood to be of greater value, including the common good.

Sacrifice, though often undertaken in faith, is not undertaken without risk. Some veterans who sacrificed much come home with visible wounds, others with mostly invisible wounds. Most of them transition successfully back to civilian life and find a new mission. But an average of 17 veterans a day, 17 every day, die by their own hand in our country. And we know that statistic is underreported. 17 veterans and one active-duty service member a day.

Is this category, this religious category of sacrifice connecting with you today? Is the Spirit stirring up something in you, something you will risk giving up for something even greater? Whether you are a veteran or not, are you being called into a new season of service? Is sacrifice making some new sense, taking some new shape? What is God asking of you, of me, of us in this season?

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When the Maryhill Stonehenge was built in Washington in 1918, it was thought that the original Stonehenge had possibly been a place of ritual sacrifice. Maryhill Art Museum founder Samuel Hill asked as the memorial was opened, “What is war but the sacrifice of our sons?” As a native of Klickitat County, Washington, he saw what the Great War had cost his home county in those fourteen particular lives. And from this came the idea for the recreation of Stonehenge there.

When I visited that Stonehenge replica, that first-in-our-country World War I memorial with my brother Steve and cousin Joe, I thought about sacrifice.

The Vietnam War divided our family. Joe could not see his way clear to becoming a combatant in Vietnam. He thought of going to Canada. Facing the disapproval and disdain of our elders and his own internal objection to that war and with his draft date looming, he joined the Coast Guard. Steve knew his draft number was about to come up, and he joined the Navy so that at least he had the choice of his branch of service. He became a corpsman and was embedded with Marines on the front lines in Vietnam. He was wounded twice in four months.

After Vietnam, Joe went back to school and became a psychologist. He became a consultant to families in business, assisting them in dealing with and working to

resolve divisive issues that often lead to the dissolution of family-owned businesses.

After Vietnam, Steve went back to school and became a physician. He taught in two medical schools and was briefly in private practice. He came to understand medicine as his vocation in conversation with the Navy surgeon who patched him up while in rehab in the Navy hospital in Pensacola after receiving his second purple heart.

The sacrifices of my brother and cousin were real. Their seasons of service have continued as veterans. That day at the Maryhill Stonehenge we stood at the altar dedicated on July 4, 1918: Steve, the eldest, in the middle; I on his right; Joe on his left. We opened a bottle of Veuve Cliquot, our favorite champagne, poured it into camping cups, lifted them up, and drank a solemn toast to the dead of World War I, grateful for their sacrifice. And grateful also for the blessings of our continuing life together, for new callings and meaningful work, for milestones reached, for life on the other side of death.

This morning, this Eucharist, once again we will offer our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. And as we enter that liminal space, that place in between heaven and earth, between death and life, offering ourselves, may we be bold to risk sacrificing something valued for something even greater. We will lift up our hearts, and then, let's lace up our boots.