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The Royal Poinciana Chapel

Sermon By

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"WE WERE SOLDIERS ONCE . . . AND YOUNG"

Text: "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people he has chosen as his heritage!" -- Psalm 33:12

A couple of years ago Harold G. Moore, Lt. Gen. U.S. Army, retired, wrote a book called **We Were Soldiers Once . . . and Young**. It became a New York Times best seller. I borrow his title for this sermon. It is a sad story. Set back in 1965, Moore writes, "When one era was ending in America and another was beginning." That was the year our nation went to war in earnest, over in obscure and then distant Vietnam. He tells of the first American combat troops who engaged the enemy in the infamous Ia Drang Valley Campaign. "We were young and confident and patriotic. We thought we were invincible. . . . Little did we know that this battle would set the stage for a decade of conflict, which came as near to destroying America as it did to destroying Vietnam." Two hundred thirty-four young Americans from a single regiment died in that first four days of the conflict. Forgotten for a while, their names are now engraved on the third panel to the right of the apex, Panel 3-East, on the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C.

In 1975, ten years after that initial battle, one million American soldiers had served in Vietnam, 58,000 of whom died in battle, and triple that figure were wounded, maimed or missing. Then, with little fanfare, the Vietnam War wiggled and sputtered to a compromised halt. No one won, but America lost, a lot.

Today the alumni of the First Calvary Division gather in Washington each November, as countless other units do all across the nation. They rise to read the roll call of those who fell in battle, and those who have joined them since, "Then one by one, we stand up to call out our own names, ranks, companies and battalions, and where we fought in

the Valley." A few loosen up and tell their stories of what happened back there. . . . "Now," he writes, "we begin to understand why old soldiers gather to murmur among themselves of days gone by. Those were the days, my friend." (P. 408)

I remember talking to a British Army Veteran when I first lived in Scotland in 1958. That was still close to the last days of World War II, at least in his memory. He couldn't stop talking about the war. "War is hell," the General said, "but war is fascinating to many. It gives purpose to life, it clearly defines the enemy. It tells you exactly where you have to go and what you have to do to gain victory. My life," he added, "has been boring ever since."

In General Patton's biography, as he came to the end of his career, it was fearful for him. All he knew was war: how to fight, to command troops, how to try to defeat the enemy. . . . He was scared to death when he thought the war might be over, for he would not only be out of a job, but out of the reason for his existence.

We watched a great P.B.S. television series a couple of weeks ago about Harry Truman, still one of the unsung Presidents of American history. One of the most intriguing parts of it was the time when he had to remove General Douglas MacArthur from his Commander-in-Chief post in Korea. It could be that the General was feeling something the same as Patton had a generation previously. MacArthur wanted to escalate the war and win by invading Red China. Maybe he was right, who knows? Certainly the Cold War had an alternative happy ending much later on. But, "Old soldiers never die,

they just fade away," still echoes in the chambers of Congress.

"Not many people remember the names and dates of the great battles any more," Harold Moore wrote, "and perhaps that is good." . . . Perhaps . . . "But those who fought remember; they have no other choice. They remember the day and the year and especially they remember their comrades in battle and those who did not return." We were soldiers once . . . and young.

A lot of young American men have lost their lives in battle. Not counting the Revolutionary War, when it was less clear who should be called American and who not, listen to these figures: During World War I, 126,000 Americans died in combat, to say nothing of three times that seriously wounded; in World War II, 407,000 Americans died in battle. In the Korean War, 54,246 were killed; 58,000 more died in Vietnam fighting. Add that to 622,511 soldiers who died in the Civil War, plus other battles and skirmishes like the Spanish American War and Desert Storm, etc. The terrible toll is painful, especially to those who can put names and faces on those numbers: fathers, brothers, sons, now daughters, too. . . . But to all of them, if you asked them, America and the freedom we represent, was worth fighting for.

And America still is: to preserve our way of life, to continue to honor people of all nations and places, to protect and preserve justice and human rights throughout the world, to be instruments in the hand of the living God, America's dream is worth fighting for. "Long may our land be bright with Freedom's Holy light, Protect us by Thy might, Great God our King."

Some are given great fame out of military battles, but the widely known heroes are only an introduction to the story. The military might as well as the strength of the nation is in ordinary people, but so extraordinary they really are. They are God's people, those who struggle daily just to make it through from paycheck to paycheck. They go to their churches and synagogues. They do what

they can to help their families and neighbors. They love their children and try hard to be good people. Then, all of a sudden, they are/were drafted and off to war. These people are not celebrated. But they and their families are the real heroes, the stuff out of which America is made -- the heartbeat of who we are.

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At the time of the Civil War, the same question was asked of Walt Whitman: "Who are the American heroes?" He responded in a beautiful poem, "The American People." See if you agree with him:

"The genius of America is not best or most,
In its executives and legislatures,
Nor in its ambassadors and authors,
Nor even in its newspapers or its inventors.
But it's almost always in its common people,
In their manners and speech and friendship,
In the picturesque looseness of their
carriage,
In their deathless attachment to freedom,
In their curiosity and welcome novelty,
In their self-esteem and sympathy,
In the air they have of persons who never
knew
How it feels to stand in the presence of
Superiors, who look up to no one, and
Look down at no one either,
Their delight in music,
The sure symptom of tenderness and
The native elegance of their souls.
The devotion to things religious . . .
This is the genius of the American people."

* * * *

I chose as the text for our sermon today the passage which Bill Jehlen read for us in Psalm 33, one of the loveliest Psalms of all. The Psalmist declares that the Lord has made everything in His time, and His steadfast love never departs from the earth. By the word of the Lord, the heavens were made and their host by the breath of His mouth."

It goes on to say that the Lord directs the activity of nations as well as individuals. I was thinking about it this last week in light of the renewed controversy between Iraq and the United States. All the plans that people make to trouble each other. A few years ago General Schwarzkopf could have been correct there, too, when he said that we should have settled Saddam Hussein's problem and finished the battle while we had him on the ropes back then. The Lord sometimes directs His people to be firm.

Then, the Psalmist adds (verse 10): "The Lord frustrates their plans." Time and again the Bible warns that however great and grand and mighty you think you are, unless you have found the Lord's direction, you will be frustrated and it will all come to nought. "The council of the Lord stands forever, the thoughts of His heart to all generations." Then comes the crowning touch (verse 12): "*Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people whom he has chosen as his heritage.*"

In ancient Israel they meant that literally. I have an ecumenical and inter-faith leaning. I applaud attempts at interfaith dialogue and understanding and cooperation. . . . But not to the extent of diluting what I believe. When the Psalmist said, "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord," he meant the One Creator God who made the earth and keeps a watchful presence over it. To the end that His purposes will prevail.

When Jesus Christ came to Earth, He was uncompromising. He was kind and loving and forgiving, but . . . He insisted that each and everyone on earth had to relate to His incarnated presence. All religions might be on a similar search; each might well be on the same road; but that does not mean that they are all at the same point of progress on that road.

We each and all need to be humble, lest we end up trying to usurp God's prerogatives to run the world as He chooses; but we also need to be bold and clear about what we believe. Even Confucius said, "Keep an open mind . . . but don't let your brains fall out." St. Paul added, "Test all things . . . but

hold fast to what is true."

The nation is blessed, and our nation will continue to be blessed, in proportion to the way it holds steadfast to its faith in Christ, the Living God. Psalm 33 adds, "A King is not saved by his great army . . . our soul must wait for the Lord."

* * * *

We were soldiers, once, and young, sailors and airmen, too. But while we are young no longer, it all still belongs together. . . . To those of us who never served in the military because of age or difficulty, the title still holds true. We all were "soldiers" once, and young. We all had battles that we wanted to win and sometimes did. Sometimes we didn't. But it was clearer then somehow. I thank God for the passing days and decades of my life. It has not been perfect . . . but then I am not perfect either. I thank God for the times as they came, some good, some not so good. The not-so-good made the good seem better. And there are battles still to be fought for all of us. Maybe it is just in the prayers you offer, or the support you can give, or the kind word, or the contributions. We have a debt to pay to those who gave themselves for us.

John McCrae, a young Canadian soldier in World War I, wrote the following poem:

"In Flanders fields the poppies grow
Between the crosses row on row
That mark our place, and in the sky
The larks still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the dead, short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved, and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrels with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw the
torch.
Be yours to hold it high.

If ye break faith with us who die,
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields."

Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord . . .
for now and evermore. Amen.

* * * *

The following prayer was offered by Dr. Cromie at
the Recognition of Veterans during the Service:

Let us pray:

O Lord Our God, as we enjoy the freedoms of this
great and marvelous land, drop Thy still dews of
quietness upon us all as we offer up our prayers of
gratitude for your gracious keeping through the
years. We praise you for those who were vigilant
in defending the honor and liberty of our land.

More especially, Lord God, we praise You for
those who stand before you now, who gave up a
portion of their lives in military service, and who in
some cases suffered pain, captivity, and loss. We
also remember those who did not return, who gave
the ultimate sacrifice of life.

To those here, give health and strength and peace.
Keep them and their families safe from every harm
and danger. Take them in Thy gracious keeping,
until the day far away when each of us will hear,
"Well done, my good and faithful servant, enter
Thou into Thy peace." Through Jesus Christ our
Lord. Amen.

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