

## The Silent Stones

*“...A time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace.”*  
—Ecclesiastics 3:8

I have visited many battlefields.

I have climbed the knoll called “Bunker Hill” in Boston.

I have walked the “Bloody Lane” of Antietam.

I have stumbled among the boulders of “Devil’s Den” and looked across the field of “Pickett’s Charge” at Gettysburg.

I have stood on the bluffs overlooking the English Channel and the beaches of Normandy in France, and I have hiked through the woods of the Ardennes in Belgium.

I have walked over the same ground as soldiers of the Continental Army, the Union and the Confederacy, the Allies and the Axis.

I have sifted through the rubble of the Pentagon at 9/11.

I have tried to imagine the scope and scale of the human emotions played out in these places – the fear and the courage, the loss and the hope, the isolation and the bonds of friendship, the despair and the faith.

I have tried to envision the masses of men and animals and machinery moving with purpose and design across these great landscapes. I have watched with my mind’s eye the struggle, the destruction, the horror, and the brutal glory of forces engaged in mortal combat.

It seems to me that we humans have always been fascinated with warfare.

Many, perhaps most, of the heroes of history have been warriors or conquerors. Our most-often repeated legends will usually involve some element of combat. Our notions of courage and bravery frequently are linked with an individual’s performance in battle. We compare our modern heroes to those of eras past and use as our standards for judgment the victories and valorous conduct of warriors of other ages.

It should not be surprising, then, that we turn to war as a solution to differences. After all, our heroes, our exemplars, have been warriors.

Rather, the surprise would be to shun war in favor of more peaceful pursuits.

That is our calling as Christians, is it not? We are to seek peace instead of war – to be peacemakers and reconcilers.

So think a moment. When did we last build a monument to a peacemaker?

This just doesn't seem to be our nature. It seems, instead, we're being asked to do that which, in the scheme of the world, is too hard to do.

But what else is new? In my experience, God doesn't call us to do the things we already want to do!

I was inside the fence of the crash site at the Pentagon in the days following 9/11. I was working with the teams who were locating and recovering the remains of those who perished in the attack. These were stressful days and emotions were mixed.

At one point, the team was resting under a tree near the perimeter when a group of people, military and civilian, stopped to talk with us. They were part of a leadership group who had been considering the options for responding to the 9/11 attacks. During the conversation, I asked a general officer if they had decided on a course of action yet.

He said, "We're taking our time. We don't want to compound a heinous tragedy with a grievous error."

That our first impulse was to resist the urge to retaliate indiscriminately and without thought gave me great comfort. With those words of consideration and restraint, that general immediately became one of my heroes.

This weekend we commemorate those who have lost their lives in our nation's conflicts. In many places, there will be civic ceremonies that will involve speeches by local dignitaries, martial music, and the rituals of honoring the dead whose sacrifices have helped secure the benefits of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for our nation's citizens.

These are our honored dead. I doubt that many of them intended to die in war. I can imagine that some faced their final moments bravely and squarely, while others were overcome with fear at the sudden reality of their mortality. Many placed themselves in harm's way willingly and voluntarily. Others may have been less willing and without the same choices.

All of them, though, died as equals in service to a nation to which they had pledged their loyalty and to a cause that was worthy of their sacrifice. These are our heroes.

I have visited many battlefields.

I have also visited many cemeteries.

I have walked among the honored dead of the Revolutionary and Civil Wars.

I have stood speechless among the World War I and World War II dead in France,

Luxemburg, and Germany.

I have buried soldiers, old and young, at Arlington and cemeteries elsewhere.

These cemeteries are beautiful places – lush, green, clean, meticulously groomed, and, most strikingly, silent.

The most prominent feature at all of these is the arrangement of the grave markers – identically cut, row upon row, precisely aligned.

The image is one of soldiers in formation, standing at the ready, awaiting the next order to move.

But the image is illusory.

These are stones – rock-hard, chiseled, polished, immobile, and SILENT.

Our heroes, our sisters and brothers, lie at rest under these silent stones – a legion of honored dead, remembered by a grateful people.

A passage from Ecclesiastes ends with the words, “A time for war and a time for peace.”

For our heroes, war has had more than its share of time.

Perhaps it’s time to try peace.

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