

ARLINGTON CEMETERY
May 27, 2012 –Joshua 4: 1-7 –Pentecost/ Memorial Day Weekend
The Church of the Covenant

The caisson moved with stately precision, as did the military band, the honor guard, and the horse with the backward riding boots, signifying the death of a hero of the nation. Old Glory at half staff flew gently in the breeze. The sun fell dappled and radiant through the trees across the perfectly manicured lawns of Arlington Cemetery. The Arlington Grey Lady, women who volunteered to walk with the grieving widow, walked alongside giving words of comfort and strength. A twenty-one gun salute sounded a piercing retort that disturbed some birds resting in the ancient trees. Taps were sounded at a distance. The honor guard crisply and professionally folded the American flag that had shrouded a hero. The chaplain knelt to present the flag that had draped the casket to the fallen soldier's spouse and looked her in the eye and intoned, "On behalf of a grateful nation..." Moving. Sacred. Profound. Filled with emotion. Tradition. Meaning. Significance. When I served a church in Alexandria, Virginia, right next door to Arlington National Cemetery I was honored to do many graveside services there; some for Generals, Admirals, people who had led the nation in times of war, known names of officers who had won acclaim, but also those who had served willingly, anonymously and without great public recognition.

Arlington Cemetery was founded toward the very end of the Civil War. The casualties were so horrendous in the Wilderness Campaign in Virginia, it was said the steam boats transporting the bodies from the campaign were arrayed stem to stern all the way from the James River in Virginia and up the Potomac to Washington, D.C. A General Meigs, Quartermaster General of the Union Army, decided that Robert E. Lee, the South's great military commander would never again be able to return to his home and plantation, Arlington House, and so he decided to begin burying the Union dead on Lee's property. The Custis-Lee mansion had been surrounded by Lee's plantation before the war; today it is surrounded by Arlington Cemetery, beginning with the Union dead. Lee never did return to his home. You look across the Potomac River and there stretching before your eye is the nation's capitol, Washington, D.C., the Washington Monument, the Capitol, the Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials. You keep your eye focused just on the Cemetery side of the Potomac and all you see are endless row upon row of small headstones, arrayed perfectly. Countless, innumerable, some known only to God. Though it is an immense piece of property and it has been expanded over the years we will be that generation to see Arlington Cemetery finally reach its capacity. No more of the nation's heroes to be buried in Arlington National Cemetery. What does it mean that Arlington will soon be filled to capacity? What do all those stones mean to us as a nation? On Memorial Day Weekend, what do those stones mean?

Our scripture story from the Old Testament book of Joshua is helpful and instructive. The nation of Israel has sojourned in the wilderness for 40 years; they have lost their long time leader, Moses, and Joshua has replaced him. The priests bear the Ark of the Covenant, always a sign of God's presence, favor and power across the Jordan River first, the waters, like the parting of the Red Sea, recoil, and the people of God walk across dry land into the Promised Land, the land flowing with milk and honey. It is a miracle and a sign of God's providence. The Ark of the Covenant is the sign that the people of God can never be defeated when they carry it at the head of their army. When the Ark precedes the people there is always victory. When the Ark goes on ahead of the people of God they cannot fail. The Ark is the POWER of God and so represents the Holy Spirit of the One, True and Living God. The promise of Joshua is always theirs –*"Be strong and of good courage; do not be frightened, neither be dismayed; for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."* (Joshua 1: 9) If God be for us, who can be against us? No, we are more than conquerors through Him who has loved us! With God we cannot fail; without God, we cannot succeed.

And twelve are instructed to carry twelve stones across the Jordan and to place them in an arrangement, an Ebenezer as I preached about earlier this month, a series of stones commemorating a great deed that God has done for the people of God. The twelve, significantly, are to walk by the Ark of the Covenant, by the source of their power, and across the now dry land where once was the Jordan River, and place those stones there as a memorial. As it says, *“So these stones shall be to the people of Israel a memorial for ever.”* (Joshua 4: 7) There we have it –River. God’s Power. Stones. Memorial. For Ever. Arlington Cemetery. And Joshua then says, this is a SIGN for you, this is something to remember and to memorialize; some day you’re going to forget about what God has done for you; some day you’re going to forget the sacrifices made for you by your forebears who have gone before you. But then, perchance, you will see these stones and you will remember, and something lost will be re-found, and something dead within your heart will be rekindled. Someday, Joshua says, you will have forgotten, and your children will ask you in the time to come, *“What do those stones mean to you?”* (Joshua 4: 6) then be ready with your answer –these stones were when the Lord God went on ahead of the people and the armies of God and wrought great victories in the name of the One, True and Living God.

America, what do those stones mean to you in Arlington Cemetery? Was a time, dear children, when God was out in front of us, and we were led by Him, we were united, you know, we really were the UNITED States of America because we were ONE NATION UNDER GOD. And our power was not so much worldly power as it was a holy power, and we took on evil and we made ultimate sacrifices, and we lived and died to make the world safe for democracy and I’m not cynical --it was all noble and good...was a time, dear children, there was a time...Self-sacrifice is an exclusively religious impulse; it goes against a natural human instinct which is to live; God’s power and love is what led Jesus to the cross to die for us; it is what led the nation’s war dead to lay down their lives for us. No religion, no sacrifice. No cross, no sacrifice. No sacrifice, no nation. That’s what those stones mean to me.

We are so self-centered today as a nation. It is all about us and what we want and a standard of living we want to maintain and what someone else can give us, served up on a platter. I think of President John Kennedy, also buried in Arlington Cemetery, and his famous line –Ask not what your country can do for you...” Except today we would have to twist it on its ear and say –“Ask not what you can do for your country; ask what your country can do for you...” No, beloved, sacrifice for the greater good lies right at the heart of a nation. That’s what those stones mean. You cannot have freedom, peace and prosperity without self-sacrifice. That’s what those stones mean. You cannot do it on your own, by the way, as if you have no need for God, as if everything we have and are today is not a gift from the Almighty’s hand. The Promised Land always comes from God. The Ark of God’s presence and power precedes the people of God seeking to forge a more perfect union, seeking to right wrongs in the name of the Lord, seeking to provide the blessings of liberty and justice for all. A nation who has forgotten its God is a nation that cannot have ultimate victory, ever. Children, that’s what these stones mean to me.

In the Old Testament the Ark of the Covenant is the sign of God’s presence and power. Just as in the New Testament Pentecost is the sign of God’s presence and power through the Holy Spirit. How does a nation re-remember what it has forgotten? How do a people reclaim God’s leading and HIM being out in front? How do we do away with self-centeredness and become God-centered again? Look at those stones in Arlington Cemetery and remember what we have forgotten. May the power of Pentecost fall upon the nation once again. May God lead us as a nation once again. On this Memorial Day may those who died in service to this nation not have died in vain but may their sacrifice remind us what makes a nation great again. These stones shall be for us a memorial for ever! **Glory, Glory, Hallelujah! His TRUTH is marching on! Amen.**

