

Sermon: God Remembers

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa,
on the Remembrance Sunday of November 10, 2024)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

In preparation for this Remembrance Sunday, I got curious of the Honour Roll, of the four members of Zion who died in World War I, and the eleven members of St. Giles who paid the supreme sacrifice in World War II. I wanted to find out if at all possible, who there were, where they lived, why they enlisted, where they served and how they died. So with a bit of digging through the archival material at St. Giles, and with the help of a clever app called Memory Anchor, and acknowledgement to the Canadian Virtual War Memorial made available through the government's website, I was able to find a wealth of information on these individuals.

I learn about Sgt. Frank George Cran of the Royal Canadian Army Service Corp, who grew up in Calgary, was a well known football and hockey player, enlisted in 1938, was posted overseas to Sicily, Germany, and Holland. He did spend two years in Ottawa, married a local girl (Christina of Hopewell Avenue in Ottawa South). Sgt. Cran lost his life in Holland, on June 30, 1945, at the age of 27.

I learn about Lieutenant Fernie Bemister Stewart of the Royal Canadian Infantry Corps. He grew up in Second Avenue, studied at Glebe Collegiate, excelled in track and field, and had won a medal for marksmanship. He worked at George Weston Company for seven years before enlisting in the Cameron Highlanders. Lt. Stewart served overseas in Iceland and England for a number of years, and was killed in action in Holland, in 1944, at the age of 31. He was survived by his wife Jean Brown, his daughter Florrie Jean, his parents, two brothers and two sisters.

I learn about Flying Officer Charles Robertson Olmsted of Royal Canadian Air Force. He grew up in the Glebe, on Bronson Avenue, graduated from Glebe Collegiate, and was employed by the law firm of Gowling, MacTavish and Watt. He enlisted with the RCAF in 1940, received his wings in 1941, became a Spitfire pilot, was commissioned the following year and posted to the operational training school in Bagotville, Quebec. He died of a training accident on May 1, 1944, at the age of 24. Flying

Officer Olmsted was survived by his parents, two sister, and his wife Elizabeth Bartlett Garrett.

I learned about another Flying Officer Arnold Irwin Watterson who enlisted with the Royal Air Force in 1938. He grew up on Fourth Avenue, studied at Glebe Collegiate and St. Patrick's College, was an active athlete during his student days, prominent in youth group of St. Giles and sang in choir. He lost his life as result of air operation in 1940, at the age of 23. Prior to his death, perhaps sensing something might happen, Arnold wrote to his parent a number of letters: "As I explained it all to you before in previous letters, I trust you have resigned yourself in taking things calmly. There is no use worrying over things; just take them as they come. If you come through, O.K., if you don't it's just tough luck, that's all. Anything can happen." In another letter he wrote, "Personally I like the idea, and I will get a big kick out of bombing the Jerries to h—I. But, for Pete's sake, don't start worrying all over again. It's all just as written. If one loses, one loses, that's all. I believe if you are going to get it, you will get it whether it's from the Jerries, bad weather, flying accident, motor accident or tripping on a banana peel. Keep the chins up folks. We all have to pull together in this business now."

I learn about the MacDonald brothers, Neil Richardson (age 25) and Ian Alistair (age 19), who both perished in 1941, just six months apart in separate theatres. Upon receiving the news of the death of the younger son, their father Colin H. MacDonald reacted calmly and stoically, "You have to expect these things. It is our second boy and we feel rather proud than sorrowful."

I don't have time to list all my findings, which I plan to put them up on St. Giles' website, with a special section for the Honour Roll. Lest we forget; lest we forget.

The Scripture passage today, particularly Genesis chapter 8 speaks of God's remembering of Noah during the flood. This remembering is not of the human variety, for the Lord God does not forget, as humans often tend to do. The remembering of God is of a theological variety. A careful analysis of the literary structure of the flood narrative in Genesis, reveals what biblical scholars call it, a 'chiasm', or a crossing in the shape of an X, with the single verse of Genesis 8:1 right at the middle.

Put it in plain English, prior to Genesis 8:1, the flood was building up rapidly, water had overtaken the the face of the earth, and was about to overwhelm the last remanent of life, housed in the Ark, of 8 souls and all

kinds of animals in pairs. Nevertheless, after Genesis 8:1, flood water receded steadily, until land resurfaced again, and humanity with animals exited the Ark and were given a second chance in life. And Genesis 8:1, perhaps the most important verse of the entire flood narrative, begins with “But God remembered Noah...”

Such remembering encompasses care—care for the cries from whom God created and saved. Such remembering inevitably leads to intervention and action. In the case of the flood narrative, it is more than the halting of rain, but symbolically the resting of God’s bow in the clouds as a sign of the covenant that God makes with all flesh.

Most people, biblical scholars included, understand this bow of God in the clouds as the rainbow. I suppose it is. But more importantly, it symbolizes God laying down the instrument of destruction employed during the flood. Never again will God destroy life on earth through rain. Never again will God’s anger overwhelm all flesh through water of the deep. Never again!

It is an everlasting covenant, when we see the rainbow, we are reminded of God’s grace to all creation. This grace of God does not stop there. It continues through the biblical stories. God continues to make covenants with those whom God chooses, with Abraham, with David, and the New Covenant through Jesus Christ.

The God we worship is the God of covenant, the God of promise who is ever faithful and ever true. And the most fascinating promise God made is through Prophet Isaiah who outlined an universal vision of peace, for a day will come that nations “*shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hook; for nation shall not lift up sword against nation;*” for there will be no need for any instrument of war any more. We are still waiting for that promise to be fulfilled. Meanwhile, we pray and hope that our remembering is not in vain, that it will also lead to concrete actions of love and care.

Allow me to leave with you these words of Father J.P. Lardie, who had served during World War II, as chaplain to the RCAF, No. 419 and No. 428 Squadrons. These words were spoken by Father Lardie in 1985, at a dedication ceremony at Middleton-St George, and are now engraved on Canada’s Bomber Command Memorial.

“Three thousand miles across a hunted ocean they came,
wearing on the shoulder of their tunics the treasured name,
‘Canada’, telling the world their origin.

Young men and women they were, some still in their teens, fashioned
by their Maker to love, not to kill,
but proud and earnest in their mission to stand,
and if it had to be, to die, for their country and for freedom.

One day, when the history of the 20th century is finally written,
it will be recorded that when human society stood at the crossroads
and civilization itself was under siege,
the Royal Canadian Air Force was there to fill the breach
and help give humanity the victory.
And all those who had a part in it will have left to posterity
a legacy of honour, of courage, and of valour
that time can never despoil.”

We remember, so does God.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**