

IN TENTS FAITHFULNESS
Sermon, August 7, 2016
Text: Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Rhode Island is commemorating Victory Day tomorrow (*formerly known as "VJ day"*). To be clear, it is a commemoration, not a celebration; it's a day we remember the victory over Japan and the end of the Pacific theatre warfare of World War II. Though the initial surrender announcement came on August 14, 1945, and the official surrender documents were signed on September 2, Rhode Islanders have been observing the second Monday of August as Victory Day since 1948. Other states that had recognized the holiday repealed it in the following decades, and when Arkansas abolished the holiday in 1975, Rhode Island was the only state left still observing it! Political sensitivities may have caused the other states to no longer commemorate this holiday, and I understand that to a degree, as it is painful to remember that such a horrific, tragic and violent price was paid to secure victory and liberty. But you know, it can be a good thing to remember that liberty always comes at a price, sometimes even at a terrible price. The analogy is not perfect, but each and every time we observe the Lord's Supper, we should be pained to remember another horrific, tragic and violent price paid to secure victory and liberty ... victory over sin and death and liberty to enjoy our freedom as children of God ... and we should never stop commemorating and/or remembering that. Part of the prayer I've prayed when we've observed the Lord's Supper on or near July 4th : *"Help us never to forget that all the liberty we enjoy in this great land has been secured and defended by the blood, sweat and tears of human sacrifice. And as we gather about this Table, help us never to forget that all the liberty we enjoy as Your children has been secured by the blood, sweat and tears of the sacrifice of our Lord. May we exercise our freedom responsibly out of humble gratitude for the grace we've received. may we see freedom not so much as the right to do as we choose, but as the opportunity to choose to do what is right."*

On a more personal note, I am also glad we commemorate Victory Day because of my late father in law. (*During the Time with the Children, I had shared some memorabilia from his soldiering days ... his pup tent and mess kit*). To expand a bit more from the Time with the Children about my father in law, Charles Davis: He was a forward observer with the 217 Field Artillery Battalion 44th infantry. His division saw some of the fiercest fighting in the European theatre. In his own words: *"There have been many books written and many movies made of the Civil War, WWI, WWII, and other American wars. I have read and seen many of them, but none seem to fully capture the full impact of combat. One has to be there, experience all of the emotions, feel the mental and physical trauma, and suffer the observance of death and injury, to really understand the waste and folly of war. I am sure I can never adequately express in words the nature of combat and its effects on the soldier."* Charlie had especially vivid memories of the Battle of the Bulge. Please be forewarned that I'll be using rather strong language in a moment, but Charlie told of how in the pre-dawn hours of January 1, 1945, German soldiers attacked, having been trained to scream at the top of their lungs, "Happy New Year, Yankee bastards!" That's what he woke up to that New Year's Day morning hundreds and even thousands of voices in the darkness screaming this "greeting." His future brother-in-law Virgil (his wife's brother) was among the many Americans killed that day; Virgil is laid to rest in St. Avold, an American memorial cemetery in France; it just so happens my grandfather is laid to rest about sixty miles south of there in the American cemetery at Epinal (*Virgil was killed January 1, 1945; my grandfather was killed September 7, 1944 ... about five days after he arrived.*) You may remember that about this time last year Hannah, Steve and I visited both their gravesites.

After the war had ended in Europe, Charlie was shipped home on the Queen Elizabeth along with eighteen thousand other troops, arriving back in the USA seventy-one years and ten or so days ago. He was given a few weeks furlough before he was to be shipped out again to be part of the front-line invasion force headed for the shores of Japan. So he and Elaine, my mother in law, married seventy-one years ago Monday ... August 1, 1945; Elaine's sister was matron of honor, her Uncle Armin was the pastor, and Charlie's dad was best man. While the newlyweds were enjoying a modest honeymoon in the Ozarks, Japan surrendered (*President Truman had given the order, the bombs were dropped August 6 over Hiroshima and August 9 over Nagasaki*). The other guests at that Ozark resort joined together in a toast to the newlyweds, giving Charlie and Elaine a standing ovation; the surrender meant Charlie would not be going to Japan. For thousands like him, it most likely would've been a one way trip. Because of what's commemorated on Victory Day, they went on to have children ... one of whom would become my wife ... and to enjoy the next nearly sixty-six years together (*Charlie departed this life Oct. 26, 2010*).

In Exodus 14, the Israelites thought they were coming to the end of a one way trip. The Egyptian army was in hot pursuit of the Israelites who had just left slavery. The Israelites were terrified, trapped at the banks of the

Red Sea, and there was no where else to turn; you know the story. Moses addressed the people, *"Do not be dismayed, do not be afraid, stand firm, and you will see the deliverance the Lord will accomplish for you today."* Now, the people could only see the reality of Pharaoh's advancing chariots and the sea blocking any escape. Deliverance just seemed impossible. But Moses didn't know it was impossible. Moses was a man of intense faithfulness; he had an intense faith in the God with whom all things are possible, and this God had specifically promised Moses great things. Moses told them to lift their eyes from their fears, the fears which seem all too real, and to lift their eyes in hope to see the Lord's deliverance.

We read earlier, *"By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God."* The writer of Hebrews reminds us that Abraham had two things. He had a temporary dwelling place (he lived "in tents"), and he had God's promise of something greater. Pardon the pun, but he literally had an "in tents" faith in a God Who had specifically promised him great things, a faith every bit as intense as the faith of Moses. Abraham had been given great promises that he would have millions of descendants who would possess the land in which he then lived as a sojourner. But even more than that, Abraham had the great promise of God that he would eventually come to *"... a city not made with hands, eternal, in the heavens."* He knew he was a sojourner, a short-timer in this world; his real home would be in that eternal city.

The writer of Hebrews reminds us we, too, are sojourners, short-timers, who, like Moses and Abraham, cling to the promises of God while we are here. Our true citizenship is in heaven, and we eagerly look forward to and wait for the "something better" God has for us. Does this awareness of the temporary mean we can't enjoy our lives here? Quite the contrary! When we know this world is not all there is, when we know we have an eternal audience watching us, cheering for us, an audience that grieves for us when we stumble, when we know God will one day meet our every need and satisfy our every desire, when we know that all things will be made well and whole and clear, when we know all that, then and only then are we set free to live as we were created to live! As we talked about last April, being heavenly minded has made Christians throughout history do tremendously earthly good. The knowledge of heaven made them healers and heroes ... because being heavenly minded gives hope, it gives purpose, it gives strength and it gives us reason to go on to do tremendous earthly good in this world while we are here.

We will look more into this next week, but for now I want to sum up three things: **First**, if we share the intense faith of Moses and Abraham, if we really believe God is in charge and truly believe the promises He has made to us, we become aware that we are playing to a much larger audience than just that of people around us. In a sense we are performers on the stage of this world, and our primary audience is a divine Audience of One. But there is a secondary audience as well; as the author of Hebrews intimates in the next chapter, *"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with endurance the race marked out for us."* **Second**, if we share the intense faith of Moses and Abraham, if we really believe that God is in charge and that God has made promises to us, it means that we are set free to live rightly, to live truthfully, even if we find ourselves to be in a minority ... which, in this world, is more often than not! We will be living the remainder of eternity with those who value truth, integrity, honor, faith and holy living. This healthy awareness of the eternal also means not only we are motivated and freed to live as we ought, but that we are motivated to tell people *why* we are doing so. Our thought is not, *"What will they think of me in this life if I try to tell them why I live as I do?"* Rather, it becomes, *"What will they think of me in the next life, if I don't tell them?"*

And finally, **third**, if we share the intense faith of Moses and Abraham, if we really believe that God is in charge and that God has made promises to us, we know He will keep those promises. He is El Shaddai, God the Mighty One, the God Who always delivers on His promises. We are on our way to our real home. Verse 16: *"Instead, they were longing for a better country -- a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them."* There is a sort of heavenly homesickness shared in the hearts and souls of the faithful ... a longing to be in our true home. This church is a fellowship of homesick folks, longing to be home with our Father in His house, in His heavenly home. And we are on our way there. We aren't there yet, but one day, we will be ... so, in the meantime, let us live like citizens of that holy kingdom, living our lives in light of the promises of the One who will greet us there, face to face ... and let us never fail to remember the horrific, yet gracious, price paid to make that hope a reality.

(attached is an excerpt from the bulletin insert; this was the offertory sung following the sermon)

EL SHADDAI

The offertory this morning, "**EI Shaddai**," was made popular years ago by recording artist Amy Grant; it appeared on her then-best-selling LP entitled "**Age to Age**" (*and also appears in our hymnal, p. 42*) The lyrics contain three of the many Hebrew names for God, designations which are found throughout the Old Testament to describe different characteristics of the one God. The lyrics are printed below, along with a short "glossary" of sorts:

El Shaddai, El Shaddai, El Elyon na Adonai,
Age to age You're still the same, by the power of the Name.
El Shaddai, El Shaddai, Erkamka na Adonai,
We will praise and lift You high, El Shaddai.

Through Your love and through the ram, You saved the son of Abraham.
Through the power of Your hand You turned the sea into dry land.
To the outcast on her knees, You were the God Who really sees,
And by Your might, You set Your children free.

Through the years You made it clear, that the time of Christ was near,
Though the people could not see what Messiah ought to be.
Though Your Word contained the plan, they just could not understand
Your most awesome work was done in the frailty of Your Son.

El Shaddai, El Shaddai, El Elyon na Adonai,
Age to age You're still the same, by the power of the Name,
El Shaddai, El Shaddai, Erkamka na Adonai,
I will praise you 'til I die, El Shaddai.

"**EI**" is believed to be the earliest Semitic name for God; it is derived from a Hebrew form of "to be." **EI Shaddai** literally means "God, the Shaddai," or, "God, the Mighty One." It has also been variously translated as "God the Thunderer," "God the All-Sufficient," " and God the Omnipotent." By the use of this self-designation, God describes Himself in Scripture as the One Who is sufficient, the One Who will provide, the One Who is more than able to deliver on promises, and Who really is in ultimate control. He is to be equally feared (i.e., respected) and trusted. God often used this name while appearing to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (*see Exodus 6:1-3, NIV translation of verse 2 renders "El Shaddai" as "God Almighty"*).

EI-Elyon, another name used in this song, literally means "God Most High." Elyon is derived from a Hebrew verb form meaning "to elevate, to lift high." EI-Elyon designates God as the high and exalted One (see Genesis 14:19-20 and Isaiah 14:14). **Adonai**, a third name used above, is usually translated "**Lord**" in our English Bible translations. This name designates God as the Almighty Ruler, to Whom everything and everyone is subject. "*Erkamka na Adonai*" means "*We will love You, O Lord.*"