

Veterans Day Nov 11, 2012 -- worship service led by Bill Huntley and the vets from Community Presbyterian Church

The first hymn was Luther's "A Mighty Fortress is our God." (source Psalm 46)

The Scripture was a quote from Jesus, "When you are smitten on one cheek, turn the other."

Then we sang **the Navy Hymn, "Eternal Father, strong to save...."**

Then came the comments I and others had prepared.

I was pleased when I realized upon Jan's request to speak today, that it would be on Veterans' Day. This is my first time to be asked to give a sermon on Veterans' Day; in fact 54 years since I became a veteran; for upon being released from the US NAVY, I left Norfolk, Virginia where the ship I had served was tied up to the dock, and I drove my then 10 year old Packard to Princeton Theological Seminary where I started a summer school session to study New Testament Greek.

The memories of those years at sea and in ports of Europe are some of the most vivid days of my life; and often I still have dreams about being at sea, sometimes not having all the parts of my uniform or responding to the summon to General Quarters. Actually, I do not have any memories of battles, or bullets flying over my head, or bombs dropped from the sky, so unlike my brother John who served in Vietnam, my days in uniform were much more mild.

I am not here to recruit anyone to go to serve. Most of you have grown too old, and perhaps the wars in which we are now engaged are not ones to test "our call to arms." But I do want to allow several of our veterans to have a moment today. Perhaps they will report a flashback to a "moment in battle. In any case this day was designed to celebrate military service.

The oldest veteran in our midst is Ed Williams, who shared the following:

"Isaiah Berlin once compared two Russian writers by using a proverb about two animals-fox & hedgehog: "The hedgehog knows one thing, the fox knows many things." My military career provided "fox training," but what I actually received, finally, was a "hedgehog"

education. My introduction to armored warfare began at Fort Knox, guided by "the General Patton alternatives": "KILL OR BE KILLED." I learned to steer light tanks (trimmed down to 15 tons), drive "medium" 30-ton Sherman tanks, aim & fire their 75 mm co-axial canon. I practiced the deadly use of bayonets & the approved method of crawling under live machine gun bullets. After gaining proficiency in several personal weapons I was transferred to the air forces, where I learned that the army would rule me ineligible for cadet status but would teach me to become a tail gunner on a B-29 bomber. Blindfolded, I repeatedly assembled & disassembled 50 caliber machine guns. After completion of firepower training, when I was about to be assigned to an aircraft, I was dismissed because of a new ruling: "B 29 gunners cannot be taller than 6 feet." I was measured as 6' 1-3/4."

"My new orders took me to Hunter Field, GA, where an interviewer--a classification specialist--asked about my likes & special interests. For reasons I still don't understand, my negative, marginally courteous answer led him to recommend training me to become--guess what--a classification specialist! That's when my "fox" education ended & "groundhog" indoctrination began. I came to see that the army was in fact fairly successful in meeting its personnel needs while turning civilians into soldiers. The basic lesson, for me, was what Abraham Maslow later described as the values hierarchy. At the cost sometimes of ridiculous mismatches in job assignments the army gets its work done--usually on time & satisfactorily. Later, as tension eases & new routines become established, corrections will occur. I know this because it became my job at Chico airbase, several months later, to find & correct "mismatches." Under the orders of Lieutenant Johnson, formerly a U. of Chicago teacher, I pored over records of "misfits" to decide whether re-assignment or re-classification might solve their problems--whether, in modern phrasing, a new job might help them become all they could be.

"My greatest success was finding a troubled "apprentice cook" who'd been kicked out of the motor pool for AWOL excursions, etc., & who was building a "screw-up" record in his new vocation. Actually, he was a skilled projectionist, badly needed at the post cinema house--astonished to be recognized. (That was back in pre-computer days when you used giant "needles" for sorting personnel data cards.) ekw"

**Mandy Lopez reflected on his service in World War II on the USS Franklin CV-13.** His last day on board was 19.5 miles from the coastline of Japan, when a Kamikazi plane crashed into his ship setting it on fire. He jumped 80 feet down into the water and managed to survive for 8 hours until his rescue. With remarkable memory he told of the other young men from Divine Savior Church who served. For example, Che Chi Soto and his brother Nathaniel served also in World War II. Also he remembered Bobby Munoz and his brother Freddy. Gil Ray served and wrote an autobiography about his military service mostly in Italy. Don Montgomery, Eddie Martinez and his brother Martin, Richard Alvarez, and John Guerro were also honored by Mandy's memory.

As I listened to the list, I looked around the sanctuary, the same beautiful warm spirited place from whence these young

men went to war, I realized how few young warriors we have in our congregation today, and I wondered who would defend our church, our faith and our nation if we were attacked again.

Larry Harvill told me recently of his days in the US Navy, especially his boot camp summer, which was followed by a year of college at CalTech, then a couple of weeks at sea on a destroyer-escort, after which his records were lost, and the last word he heard from the US Navy was a discharge certificate for meritorious service.

Pat Vieten sent his email comment (read by Annie Soto) as follows:

**“I am sorry that Linda and I are not with you this particular Sunday as we are with family in northern California. I am, however, grateful for the opportunity to share these words with you on Veteran’s Day.**

**“Upon graduation from the University of Southern California (USC) School of Dentistry in 1960, I accepted a commission with the U. S. Army Dental Corps. My first assignment was to fly to Frankfurt, Germany and travel to a small military base at Dexheim near the Rhine River halfway between Mainz and Worms. I was to serve as one of two Dentists plus staff to support four companies of the Corp of Engineers and one company of missiles, all stationed on our base. The main job of the one physician and we Dentists was to keep the personnel on the base combat ready and available at a moment’s notice to respond. Little did I realize how this would unfold over the next months and during the time of my deployment.**

**“The initial drive from Frankfort to Dexheim was a major eye opener for me particularly after we crossed the Rhine River to the West side over the old bridge to Mainz. There we were immediately surrounded by the rubble and ruins of World War II. Then, as we traveled south along the river road, the scenery changed along the Rhine to one of beautiful hillsides of grape vines similar to many areas here in California. I was destined to live with a German family in an apartment over their garage in their own vineyards overlooking the river.**

**Often, in the ensuing months as I would drive through small nearby towns, I was greeted by loud “boos” and shaking fists from residents who did not welcome the remaining forces on their home soil. Some villages were still very strongly oriented toward the Nazi’s even after more than a decade since the war ended.**

**This experience led me to one immediate and all engrossing side task when off duty. I wanted to have a better understanding of the war from where it actually happened. I did this by reading, by visiting war sites and concentration camps, and by talking with Germans and US personnel. I was very fortunate to have my brother-in-law living with us for 9 months and along with my in-laws we traveled widely across Europe visiting much of the British Isles and driving to the far north of Norway as well as south into Switzerland, France, Italy, and east to Vienna in Austria. This travel became an added incentive for**

**me to try and understand the era I was in following the war...to compare the ravages of war with the recovering prosperity.**

**Then, as refugees began to flood into West Germany from the east by the tens of thousands, we felt tensions rise in the area, especially following the now famous day in August of 1961 when the Berlin wall became a reality for us and the world at large. In very short order, this iron curtain did indeed separate East and West and made the threat of military conflict seem close at hand and very real.**

**Within two days of the initial wire enclosures, a company from our base responded and was sent as a test along the corridor from Nuremburg to Berlin to assure access was maintained in a manner similar to the Berlin airlift of a decade earlier which flew food and supplies into that very isolated city in the center of East Germany. This new barrier stopped the influx of refugees seeking freedom but separated mother from daughter and family from family for the next 30 years until the words and efforts of Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev did indeed bring down the wall. To this day when I see a piece of the original wall on display, it still brings tears to my eyes.**

**I was able myself to travel in a locked train to Berlin a short time after the wall was first erected. For me in 1961, my own focus was dramatically shifted from World War II and the Nazi regime to the threat of Communism from the East by these events.**

**My remaining active duty time was very straight forward and I could wear my Captain's bars proudly knowing we had been a part in an important piece of the cold war history. Through two more years of reserve duty assignments here in California and the many years since, I found a peace inside that integrated my military service with my Christian faith. This inner search required of me to give up many preconceived ideas of right and wrong and to reach beyond to a knowing that this is indeed God's world. This process would require of me a deepening of my own knowing faith and a trust that there truly is a purpose in God's plan for me and for this world regardless of outer happenings in our lives.**

**"Though I faced no direct combat duty, I am proud of the duty I did perform and I am immensely proud of the dedication and service given by so many others over the years in much more dangerous situations than I had to face.**

**"In our Veteran's day church service of 2012, I hope we can pray for our nation and all those who have served so well and for peace to prevail in the coming years."**

**Carlos Larralde** shared the following: "When I graduated from San Benito High School, San Benito, South Texas, in 1965, I was drafted into the navy. The navy had drafted 500 sailors (mostly Latinos, Blacks and poor whites) due to the tense crisis of the Vietnam conflict. I was frightened due to an uncertain future.

“After a grim boot-training in San Diego, in 1966 I was stationed in the Naval Station, Long Beach, Calif. Since I was drafted, I was assigned in the tugboats as a deck attendant. It was a grimy, dirty and dangerous job trying to bring in massive naval ships into the harbor with the assistance of other tugboats. I was unhappy.

“Attending to tugboat errands on the naval station during 1967, I came across numerous young soldiers. They were waiting to get into a battle ship for Vietnam. These innocent-looking soldiers were from boot-camp. Most of them were depressed because they knew that some of them were going to perish in the war. Seeing that, I realized how life was so precious and fragile that I made a promise to God that if I survived my military experience in one piece, I will go to college. I finally received an honorable discharge in the end of 1967. Then I went to college in Southern California. I finally graduated from UCLA in 1978 when I finished my dissertation. That year when I was teaching in California State University, Fullerton, there were moments when I recalled those melancholy soldiers during the Vietnam era. After all, their unfortunate circumstances inspired me to go to college to fulfill a promise to God.

If there was someone left out, now is time to speak.....

As for me, came from a somewhat military family with an uncle who was captured in the famous “Battle of the Bulge” in 1944. Moreover, our great grandfather was a chaplain to a regiment stationed in Charleston, SC where the newly formed Confederate artillery fired on Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor to start the Civil War just after Lincoln was elected as President of the US. If someone needs to calm the losers in the election last week, perhaps it might comfort them to learn that after Lincoln was elected half the nation tried to withdraw from the Union, and hundreds of thousands of young and old lost their lives in what is perhaps the most futile waste of human life of our nation’s history in what was to be called “the Civil War.”

War seems a fact of human life, perhaps the myth of Cain and Able suggests the first generation born outside the Garden of Eden shows an inborn capacity to kill a brother, and all through my Hebrew Scriptures this semester, I

have tried to make some sense and meaning from the Genesis stories of murder, rape, robbery, lies, bad dreams and near human sacrifice.

The Book of Exodus does not get much better, for in slavery Moses was called, and he led the Hebrew people from Egypt, where most of the killing was upon the bad Egyptians. Then come the battles for the “promised land”( in Joshua and Judges, the Books of Samuel and Kings), in which the Hebrew warriors felt the “promised land” was theirs to conquer, until they were defeated by the Assyrians in 722 and by the Babylonians in 587 BCE, and for a while lived in captivity.

It would be a very long time until the chosen people now called “Jews” would get that land back, and even today with 5 million Jews living in Israel one may see on the streets of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv the now “Israelis” protecting their land with machine guns, American built jet fighters and bombers, some maybe containing nuclear weapons.

Our own nation has had its share of warfare from her start in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century when Puritans landed in New England and found the necessity of arms to protect their homes. For example Uriah Oakes in 1672 gave a sermon that was preserved in what he considered was a “metaphysical struggle between good and evil ...(with) military necessities of colonial New England....Along with Samuel Nowell (note these names from Hebrew Scriptures) wrote *Abraham in Arms* (1678) in which he showed that his fellow colonists “should resist both Indians and European nations” as an obligation for citizenship in the new promised land thereby by linking the state with a form of civil religion that demanded military training. (<http://www.answers.com/topic/war-and-the-military-in-sermons-and-orations#ixzz2BkpyRzoX>) (retrieved Nov. 10,2012).

Moving on, if we skip to the 1860’s and the Civil War era, we can read the comments of a Presbyterian preacher, Joel W. Tucker, looking in his *God’s Providence for the Civil War*, to demonstrate a connection to back into the past in ancient Israel wherein God had ordained “the war for southern independence despite human efforts to prevent it.” (op.cit).

Meanwhile, Lincoln speaking as if from the winning side suggested at Gettysburg even before the war was over that those who perished in the fight to preserve the Union did not die in vain and through this sacrifice the nation would have a “new birth in freedom,” (Lincoln, Abraham (1863) “Gettysburg Address”).



Now for some comments on my own experience, skipping of another “eightscore and 10 years,” when I was about to go to college, the opportunity came for me to be a midshipman with the costs of going to college to be paid by American taxpayers, so I agreed to serve for 3 years in the U.S. Navy upon graduation.

I remember going to the Naval Science Headquarters in a building on Duke’s campus, where I swore to uphold the Constitution of the United States of America, was fitted into a uniform of blue fabric in which marched off to classes.

We were not jeered at by fellow students as happened on the same campus during the Vietnam War. We knew we would be assigned to ships, those of us at least who did not choose the marines.

Only once did anyone challenge any conflict in my being in the NROTC and being a Christian. It came from a professor of religious studies who asked me, “Do you feel you sold your soul to the devil, for being willing to serve in the navy and kill?” As I have reflected on that challenge over the years, and even stronger one comes from the Scripture reading of Jesus telling his disciples, his hearers, and me, “When someone strikes you on one cheek, turn the other!” How difficult it is for me to accept that challenge, if from our Lord. It is one of the hardest challenges I have imagined to live by, especially when the country, the culture we live in, and our instincts as a mammal demand a response to the contrary.

After the four years in college, with brief cruises and marine-like landings and a couple of flights to attract some midshipmen to become pilots, I chose large ships, when given the choice and spent two memorable years on the USS IOWA, a World War 2 battleship, traveling several times to Europe, into the 6<sup>th</sup> Fleet in the Mediterranean Sea. Thankfully I never had to kill anyone, or become engaged in hand to hand combat like a “Seal” (cf. “The SEAL’s biggest Threat,” Newsweek, November 13, 2012, pp.46-50).

Sometimes I ponder would I have killed, had I been on the 16” guns or even with a rifle, instead of sitting very much like right now at a typewriter, trying to decode messages and type them up for the “skipper” to read. Anyway about that

timI gave away my shotgun and rifle, which I was taught in childhood how to use, fearing that they might be used against me even in my own house, but there have been times in recent years, with the diminishing of strength to fight off any robbers or assailants. Recently I bought some pepper spray...a modest testimony to my defensive mode.

But what I feel about violence is evolving I must say. I might not act today as I would have 60 years ago when in uniform. Yet whatever my own response, I fear few in our nation would stand up and be counted. We seem to have a military of paid warriors, few of whom I know, unlike the days of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century when all were called to service. Those who have spoken this day deserve my respect and honor. But I will end with the words of Pat Vieten as the benediction.

**“In our Veteran’s day church service of 2012, I hope we can pray for our nation and all those who have served so well and for peace to prevail in the coming years.”**

**The final hymn was “Amazing Grace.”**