

The Things We Carry

The Rev. Anne B. Bonnyman
Trinity Church in the City of Boston
Pentecost XXIV
November 11, 2007

Long ago on a spring day in Belgium, a man named John McCrae scribbled a hasty poem on a scrap of paper. The year was 1915, and the poet was an army surgeon in the trenches of World War I. He had been in a 17 day battle, immersed in the screams and suffering of combat. On this particular afternoon, McCrae had just buried one of his former students from McGill University. Then, with a heart full of grief, he sought refuge in the back of an empty field ambulance. As he stared out the window at rows of wild poppies and fresh graves, the blood and the flowers and the dead all converged and he wrote down these words:

*In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.
We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields*

The poet then tossed his paper away and became the doctor again, tending his wounded men. The poem was retrieved by an officer and published several years later. By then John McCrae had died in a French field hospital. His writings joined a distinctive body of poetry that emerged from the Great War, the war that was to end all wars. There were other, greater poems, but this one caught the public's imagination, and the red poppy became the symbol of WWI veterans in Europe.

Today is Veteran's Day, a time when we honor all those who have served our country in the armed forces. This was originally Armistice Day, recalling the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month of the year in 1918 when WWI officially ended. Many years later after yet another world war, President Eisenhower established November 11 as Veteran's Day. He declared it a day to honor all veterans, to remember those killed in combat, and to promote peace. So to all the veterans among us at Trinity Church today, we honor you and thank you for your service to our country.

This country has been sending men, and now women, to war since it was founded. Hundreds of thousands, wave upon wave of American citizens and immigrants have carried weapons and fought on our behalf. They leave home carrying their military orders and our goodbyes. But they also must carry much more, as Tim O'Brien describes in his book, *The Things They Carried*. He and his fellow soldiers in Viet Nam carried heavy loads on their backs as they walked through rice paddies. They carried radios and tents

and maps and machetes. They carried the standard-issue M-60, the M-16, the M-79, and other weapons picked up along the way. They carried grenades and tear gas. O'Brien says, "They carried all they could bear, and then some, including a silent awe for the terrible power of the things they carried." There were also the letters and the stationery and the Bibles and the good luck charms, and the photographs of those left behind. Most of all, O'Brien says, "They shared the weight of memory. They took up what others could no longer bear."

When American soldiers come home, they no longer carry their weapons but their load is scarcely lightened. Many American veterans bring home courage and also wounds and unforgettable images of war. Some also carry the effects of silent destroyers that linger long after combat: mustard gas from WWI, shell shock and malaria from WWII, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Agent Orange from Viet Nam, poison gas from the Gulf War, missing limbs and neurological damage from roadside bombs in Iraq. For many veterans, the suffering only continues when they come home. They continue to bear the weight of memory, and now they must carry it alone.

This week the *New York Times* reported a new surge, and this surge is in the number of homeless veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan. Veterans from our current war are becoming homeless more quickly than ever before after their return, and those homeless include unprecedented numbers of women. Contributing factors include PTSD, traumatic brain injury, addiction, and the effects of repeated tours of duty which make re-entry ever more difficult. The VA reports that on any given night there are 196,000 homeless veterans living on American streets. We honor these men and women on Veteran's Day, too.

It is fitting that we hear from the Book of Job today. Be advised that this book in the Bible is not for sissies. Let the reader beware. It was written in a time of suffering and despair in the life of ancient Israel. The great temple in Jerusalem and the city lay in ruins. The people had been conquered and sent into exile. The story of Job is a painful tale about the capricious nature of evil and suffering. A good man loses everything: his family, his land, his livelihood, his health, and his community. He is shunned and left in the street among the dumpsters. Three old friends come to see him but they bring no comfort. One says that Job is a disgrace to his religion. The others say that he must be getting what he deserves, even though they don't know what he did. Whatever it is, it is Job's own fault.

But Job is not having it. He pleads his case and demands explanation from God. He calls out for a redeemer. "I know my Redeemer lives" is a wonderful 18th century aria in Handel's *Messiah*. In that setting it has come to sound in our ears like an affirmation of trust in the coming of Christ. For Job, it means something different. It is cry for justice in the midst of suffering. "O that my words were written down! O that they were inscribed in a book! O that with an iron pen and with lead they were engraved on a rock forever!"

Let the record show that Job's suffering is unwarranted and let justice be restored! He appeals to a redeemer. In his social context that's an advocate, a member of the family who pleads your case, bails you out, who even exacts revenge, if that's what it takes.

Job demands a conversation with God and he gets one, although it nearly takes his breath away. Then after 41 chapters of anguish, Job's fortunes are restored. He will always have painful memories to carry, but he gets a life back, too. God turns on the three friends for their lies and false judgment, while God praises Job for his integrity.

American veterans also deserve restoration as they return from tragedy and violence. They are due our care and our listening and the support that is needed as they carry the burden of combat for the rest of us. For some the need is for healthcare, for others it is housing, and for many it is a job or a place to tell their story. Too often we have failed them and played the role of Job's three friends. We blamed our Viet Nam veterans 35 years ago and now we do not provide a safety net for Iraq veterans and their families.

Today we honor all those who have served their country. They lie in Flanders fields, in Arlington Cemetery, and in fresh Massachusetts graves. We also honor the veterans in our homes, in our pews, in our neighborhoods and in our hospitals. We honor veterans who are drowning in debt, who are living behind dumpsters and struggling with addiction. They carry all they can bear and then some.

O, that they could write it all down, the things our veterans carry.

O, that we could lighten their burden as they bear the memories of war forever.

O, that their words were engraved with iron on a rock and we could read them everyday.

O, that we would never ask anyone to carry such things ever again.

Amen.