

John Sampson

“Service”

Text: Psalm 56:1 – 4

Preached at KVCC

November 17, 2019

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer.

Amen.

What can flesh do to me?

On this Sunday after Veterans Day, after the day in which our nation celebrates the service of so many men and women, living and dead, who worked and fought to protect our nation, and its interests around the world, our psalmist, our sacred hymn singer, asks what can flesh do to me?

And it's not a question asked by someone far removed from the experience of war, of someone sitting in a land of security and peace. This is a question asked by a veteran, who found himself on the battlefield, with his very life hanging in the balance.

The back-story of this psalm is that it was supposedly composed by David, the warrior and king of Israel, at the moment when he was captured by the Philistines, who were at war with Israel. There, on the battlefield, surrounded by enemies, with no hope of escape, David doesn't yell in fear, or cry for mercy. He instead sings aloud a song of praise to God; he sings a hymn of confidence in the future.

What can flesh do to me?

Embedded in the very question he sings aloud, David has already given us his answer.

Nothing. Flesh can do nothing. Because God is with him.

With God on his side, what can flesh do to him? What real violence and damage can his enemies inflict upon his person, when God is so near, and has promised protection?

Nothing. They can do nothing.

On this Sunday after Veterans Day I think it would be disrespectful to the sacrifice and selflessness of all of our veterans, it would be a willful turning away from the profound truth of military service, if I gave some kind of banal reflection saying something like be good and God will protect you. Trust in God and you will be saved. Don't give up hope in the darkest moments, because God will deliver you.

Because there is another way to answer this question about what flesh can do to me, to you, to those who have served, and continue to serve, in our nation's armed forces.

Flesh can do a lot.

Some of what flesh can do is beautiful and blessed and makes life worth living.

And some of it is evil, and poisoned and debased.

And unfortunately those who enter military service can be confronted with some of the very worst that flesh is capable of.

What can flesh do?

It can maim, and torture, kill and destroy - the innocent and the guilty.

It would be disrespectful of those who serve our military if I simply held up the example of David as a shorthand for saying there is nothing to worry about in serving our country if we have a strong faith in God, because it would ignore the true courage of those who have served our country as veterans.

It's one thing to say I will serve our nation if there is no possibility of being hurt, of putting your life on the line, of returning home crushed by PTSD, of coming home to a nation that doesn't want to acknowledge what you've done, and looks down at you like a criminal, like it did to those who served in Vietnam. It's easy to serve if you think your service will cost nothing, if you think like David, that nothing can touch you.

But it's quite another thing to look on military service with your eyes wide open and your mind fully aware of what is on the line. That the mission you are being asked to undertake may not, in the end, make the world a better place, that your sons and daughters may never grow up knowing their mother or father because you died on a beach thousands of miles away, that you'll never be able to see the beauty of these mountains again because just maybe you'll be blinded by an IED exploding under your Humvee.

And I don't think looking out on to military service with doubt and fear means that you don't have faith in God. Because we all know from our own lives that God isn't our puppet. We don't simply pray something and God delivers. We know from our own lives that good people suffer and die. We know from our own lives that God sometimes responds to us with a profound silence. We know from our relationship with God that to serve in the military means that

we are putting our life on the line, and asking a great sacrifice of all of those we love.

Standing before this uncertainty and the possibility of losing everything what can flesh do?

It can say yes.

Yes.

And I think this is the moment I want to celebrate this day, this day in which we remember all of those who have served, and who continue to serve our nation in the military. Because they've said yes – not because they were sure. But because they said yes even though they might have been unsure.

They said yes to serving, even knowing the experience of war might haunt them for the rest of their lives.

They said yes to serving, even knowing that they might never be able to attend their children's weddings because they will be dead.

They said yes, even knowing that they might suffer unspeakable things at the hands of our enemies.

They said yes, even knowing that the people they come to liberate may one day hate them.

In this yes there is a great courage and a great selflessness. And also a great hope. A hope that by serving, the world might just be able to be a bit better. Whenever I've spoken to those who have served – my brother, my friend Michael, to some of you here this morning – veterans always offer a number of reasons why they chose to serve.



Our country asked me to.

I was drafted.

I graduated from high school and I didn't know what else to do.

But there's almost always another reason. Most veterans tell me that they thought they could help, even if in a small way, make our nation, and the world better, safer.

What can flesh do?

It can serve to try to make the world better.

And as I say these words I am aware of a profound irony.

I know that we try to follow the one who we call the Prince of Peace. And I know that he has told us to love one another as we love ourselves. And I know he told us that when someone strikes us on the cheek we should offer the other cheek. But I also know that Auschwitz is not a theoretical possibility, but a historical fact. I know that we live in a world where flesh can do the most compassionate and beautiful things, but I also know that flesh can do the most horrific things to other flesh. And I know we live in world where God doesn't always explicitly show up and intervene like a good parent.

And because of these truths I am thankful for all of those veterans who, after the diplomacy has failed, and economic sanctions have been ineffective, and the Security Council resolutions have been ignored, have stepped up and unselfishly and courageously said yes.

I think this is why we celebrate Veterans Day.

It's a moment for us to look past the flags and the tanks and the speeches and the politics and look at people, regular people just like you and me, who have at a critical moment in their lives, and in the life of our nation, said yes.

Yes, to service.

And I think for me, a person who is not a veteran, this moment of transformation – of a civilian becoming a member of our armed services – by allowing our flesh to say yes is a moment ripe for deep meditation. It is a teaching moment of what service looks like, not in the stories of our spiritual ancestors, but translated into our lives here, and now.

Entering service, becoming a servant, looks like a deep love that lets go of the self, and puts others first. It understands that once we let

go of the self we enter into a profoundly vulnerable state where we may never get the self we knew back. In fact we may lose our selves altogether. And that this space of uncertainty is a space of possibility. It is where a new road and a new future opens before us.

This is one of the spiritually charged moments that lie at the heart of what it means to be a veteran.

So here, in this space, in our church, on this Sunday morning, I give great thanks to all of our veterans who have served our country at home and abroad. Who have sacrificed so much for us. To those who live, and those who have died. I am thankful for the way they have modeled the spiritual truth of what it means to serve, and be a servant.

David asks what can flesh do.

Look at our veterans. This is what flesh can do.

Amen.