

## ***Tender Ground***

**Text: Joshua 4: 1-7; Matthew 5: 9**

**Rev. Dr. Geordie Campbell**

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*In Flander's field 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.<sup>1</sup>*

**Memorial Day always meets me on tender ground.** It wields mysterious and evocative power. It holds in balance values held dear: pride and reverence; memory and loss; sacrifice and longing. It lifts me up and it sets me down – in nearly the same breath.

And this, too: in all of the strange mix, it calls out a profound love of country, rightly called patriotism, a love far beyond the narrow vision of nationalism, as it also reveals the edges of abiding sadness for the continued anguish and suffering of the world.

I want to take a walk among such thoughts with you today, and I want us to hold a few stories together as we stroll. The first one is about a cairn of stones from long ago; the second is of the distant sound of weeping; and the third is about the importance of never losing a single name. God willing, taken together, they will bear this weekend of Memorial in its deserved and honored light.

**Let me start with a circle of stones from a rich and ancient story.** It illustrates how the human mind and heart in every place and time needs help remembering - markers and monuments and such;<sup>2</sup> tangible reminders, lest we forget even those things we vow never to lose.

Some strands of legend have called this story the first Memorial Day. It comes from the distant past, the book of Joshua. You may recall that Joshua was the successor of Moses in the early nomadic days of the Hebrew community. It was Joshua who brought them out of slavery in Egypt to the land that had been long promised.

We pick up the story on the last leg of the journey. They had made it as far as the Jordan River and were not at all sure how they would be able to cross over. But then, by what could only be the power of God, came this miracle. As they dipped their feet into the edges of the water, the river flowing from above stood still. And the waters below held in suspended safety as the whole of them crossed over to dry ground.

Then the Lord God, Yahweh, instructed Joshua: “Take twelve stones and set them in a circle so that it may be a sign of remembrance. And when your children say to you

in times to come, 'what do these stones mean to you?' then you shall answer 'this is where we crossed from danger to safety, from slavery into freedom. It shall be a memorial forever.'"

You'd think that with a taste of new freedom so sweet they would never forget! But wisdom knew better and deeper, and what a good thing for a circle of stones like that, lest what seems unforgettable somehow fade!

**Story number two takes us deeper.** This one is not about a cairn of stones in memorial of freedom gained, but a single monument that marks both a birth and a death. This one is about a mother's last cry blending with her infant son's first cry. Hers was of dying as Rachel crossed over, and his was of birthing as Benjamin was born.

The narrative of Rachel's tomb in Genesis actually describes the pillar erected in her memory. It's along the wayside on the road to Jerusalem to Bethlehem. I sat in the gravel around that pillar three different times along my journeys to the Middle East. Each time I closed my eyes and opened my hands and listened. Countless millions have sat there, too, over the years, just as I did. Because legend says that every now and again the crying of Rachel fills the space around that memorial and can be heard as an echo of weeping.

I listened hard, but did not hear her gravestone cry. Still though, there in shadow of that place I was transported to a sacred awareness and humble reverence as I thought of all of the people, God's people, who, like Rachel, die serving a future that they never get to see. Men and women and children, who, as a part of the unfolding of their lives, leave the world far earlier than seems right or fair or just; children and women and men for whom Rachel still weeps. Some are lost by affront of war, others by tragedy of violence, and countless more in ways unknown - but all in loss and sacrifice and too young, too soon.

It is a good thing that a place like Rachel's weeping tomb still reminds us, lest we ever forget.

**One more story, and this one comes very close.** It vividly conveys the truth that, whether in a circle of stones by the Jordan River at Gilgal, or a weeping grave in Ephrath, every age bears the need and responsibility and burden of remembering.

I only tell you of this with permission. Among the holding of this congregation is a family who lost a son. He was a Marine during the war that marked my generation - Vietnam. He was a pilot flying at night in an apparent mission of the very secret sort, and over the China Sea, on his way into Da Nang, his plane went down. Marge Weed and her family were irreversibly changed in that single moment. They never found Jeffrey, and in very personal ways, they still wonder.

Eight years ago, as the Connecticut Veteran's Memorial was dedicated, I was to give the opening prayer. I arrived early that day so that I could read the names of the many from all of the wars that have marked our country. All of the lives, all of the service, all of the courage. I got to the stone that said Vietnam, and Jeffrey Weed was not there. It struck

me dizzy. I called Marge and learned the story. "He was not found" they have no record.

Marge was worn out from having faced this before. She had been through all of the channels of recourse, but to no avail. I asked her if I could look into it. You'd think it would be easy to correct that. I was incensed! The bureaucratic fog was thick! But here's the amazing thing: we persisted and prevailed. It was, I believe, only by the grace of God. And now go and look: Jeff's name is the only one that is not in alphabetical order on that stone. Listed last, for sure, but not forgotten.

Not a sparrow falls, not a name is lost, not a life goes unnoticed in the heart of God. And what a good thing for a stone to remind us.

**Please: this weekend, take the time to remember.** It is so important! In Biblical terms, to remember is to "re" or again, and "member" join with. It's to bring back in heart, to be together again in the presence of joy and sadness, grief and gladness. And, whether your name happens to be Joshua, or Rachel, or Jeffrey, never to be forgotten.

And also remember this: the very power and capacity that human beings can do so, to remember and to join together in so tender a way, is a pure gift from God Almighty. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> [Wikipedia](#). "In Flanders Fields" is a war poem written during the First World War by Canadian physician and Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae. He was inspired to write it on May 3, 1915, after presiding over the funeral of friend and fellow soldier Alexis Helmer, who died in the Second Battle of Ypres. According to legend, fellow soldiers retrieved the poem after McCrae, initially unsatisfied with his work, discarded it. It is one of the most popular poems from the war. Its references to the red poppies that grew over the graves of fallen soldiers resulted in the remembrance poppy becoming one of the world's most recognized memorial symbols for soldiers who have died in conflict.

<sup>2</sup> Jerome Creach. [Interpretation: Joshua](#). John Knox Press, 2003, pp. 54-55.

**First Church of Christ Congregational**  
12 South Main Street, West Hartford, Connecticut 06107  
860-233-9605 [www.whfirstchurch.org](http://www.whfirstchurch.org)