

[Readings: Isaiah 32:15-18; Psalm 122; Philippians 4:6-9; Matt. 5:1-12]

During these past ten weeks of pandemic, quarantine and Stay Home, Stay Safe, I have watched a lot of movies in the evenings on my basic cable. Two war movies that are among the better made films, and which I saw again in recent days are “Saving Private Ryan,” which came out in 1998, and Hacksaw Ridge, which came out in 2016.

Saving Private Ryan is a 1998 American epic war film directed by Steven Spielberg and written by Robert Rodat. Set during the Invasion of Normandy in World War II, the film is known for its graphic portrayal of war and for the intensity of its opening 27 minutes, which includes a depiction of the Omaha Beach assault during the Normandy landings. The film follows United States Army Rangers Captain John H. Miller and his squad as they search for a paratrooper, Private First Class James Francis Ryan, the last surviving brother of three servicemen killed in action. It faithfully portrays the words in the Gospel of John: “There is no greater love than for one to give up their life for another.”

Hacksaw Ridge is a 2016 biographical war drama film directed by Mel Gibson and written by Andrew Knight and Robert Schenkkan, based on the 2004 documentary *The Conscientious Objector*. The film focuses on the World War II experiences of Desmond Doss, an American pacifist combat medic who, as a Seventh-day Adventist Christian, refused to carry or use a weapon or firearm of any kind. Doss became the first conscientious objector to be awarded the Medal of Honor, for service above and beyond the call of duty during the Battle of Okinawa.

Both movies are good films to view and to reflect upon on this Memorial Day. Saving Private Ryan became a catalyst for hundreds of thousands of war veterans who had bottled up inside themselves the horrifying memories of watching and experiencing war trauma in the front lines of combat. For the first time in decades, war veterans were able to form support groups and seek professional counseling. One counsellor said, “You are never healed from this trauma, but you learn to live with it in healthier ways.”

Hacksaw Ridge showed how even a conscientious objector to war and violence could prove himself noble, courageous and risk his own life to save others. He pulled dozens of men to safety by dragging their bodies to the edge of a plateau, tying ropes around their torsos and slowly lowering them to the ground troops and to safety. But his hell did not end at the Battle of Okinawa. Desmond Doss suffered decades of PTSD, affecting his wife and children.

Memorial Day began as “Decoration Day.” One tradition suggests that this tradition began with freed slaves decorating the graves of Union soldiers who fought and died during the Civil War. Another version suggests that the widows of deceased military and military veterans would visit the graves of their loved ones and decorate them with flowers. Our current tradition involves parades, prayers, playing American flags on the graves of our military dead and deceased veterans. And gathering in church on this day to remember the One Who gave up His life so that WE might have Eternal Life.

The readings for today’s Memorial Day Mass speak of the vision and the perfect paradise of true justice and lasting peace. Today’s holiday reminds us that freedom isn’t free and that peace comes at a terribly high price. We also remember during this time of pandemic, those domestic heroes: first responders, medical personnel, relatives and friends who have succumbed to the COVID-19 virus, and we pray for those who mourn their loss.

We face the challenge of being people of the Beatitudes, heard in today’s Gospel, and we take comfort in the words of St. Paul in his Letter to the Philippians: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable -- if anything is excellent or praiseworthy -- think about such things. And the God of peace will be with you.” AMEN!