

[Readings: Zephaniah 3:14-18a; Isaiah 12:2-6; Luke 1:39-56]

Memorial Day, as Decoration Day gradually came to be known, originally honored only those lost while fighting in the Civil War. But during World War I, the United States found itself embroiled in another major conflict, and the holiday evolved to commemorate American military personnel who died in all wars.

For decades, Memorial Day continued to be observed on May 30, the date selected for the first Decoration Day. But in 1968, Congress passed the Uniform Monday Holiday Act, which established Memorial Day as the last Monday in May in order to create a three-day weekend for federal employees; the change went into effect in 1971. The same law also declared Memorial Day a federal holiday.

The 20th Century, and even into this century, brought with it wars, seemingly involving every generation, that would give new meaning to the words Supreme Sacrifice. Starting with the Spanish-American War in 1898, American blood was shed on foreign soil in WWI, WWII, Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War, and then Iraq and Afghanistan, not to mention other far-off places around the world.

Although history has been less than kind in judging the wisdom of our policy-makers in involving us in many of these conflicts, what is beyond dispute is that in every war to which we have sent our young men and women, they have performed with courage and patriotism in the belief that they were serving the best interests of our nation.

For those of us who have been spared the horrors of war, it is difficult, if not impossible, to appreciate the sacrifices that have been made on our behalf by those who served -- and died, or returned scarred -- while wearing the uniform.

Today, the Universal Church celebrates the Feast of the Visitation of St. Elizabeth by Mary, the soon-to-be Mother of Jesus Christ. In one sense, I feel the two observances of Memorial Day and the Visitation can speak to each other.

The popular expression regarding one who dies, is that "they have gone to meet their Maker." What happens to our war dead when their appointed time comes for them to "meet their Maker?"

Like that first moment when Elizabeth and Mary greet each other, the first reaction of our war dead might be surprise. The best interpretation I have seen of this moment of the Visitation in a painted picture shows them pointing to each other and laughing out loud. Here is a woman beyond child-bearing years and a young, unmarried woman both expecting a surprise child.

In much the same way, our war dead, in those first few moments of death, could be standing before someone at the Pearly Gates with stunned surprise, maybe even shock. "Am I dead? Am I in Heaven? Are you God?"

Once over the initial shock, Elizabeth and Mary enter the home of Elizabeth and Zechariah and start comparing notes. How did this happen? What happens from here? How is God's hand in all of this? And then Mary sings her beautiful hymn, the Magnificat: "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord."

The new arrival in Heaven asks the same questions: How did this happen? What happens from here? He or she is told, "There is no greater love than this, give up one's life for one's friends." And then they may be told some of the words we hear in today's First Reading from Zephaniah: "Shout for joy, be glad and exult, for the Lord has removed the judgement against you and has turned away your enemies. The Lord is in your midst. Fear not, be not discouraged. He will rejoice over you with gladness, and renew you in his love."

It is these, and all, brave Americans, who gave "the last full measure," whom we honor on Memorial Day. Without their heroic efforts, we would not be gathering here to remember and to pray for them.

And so we pray: Let us turn to you, Lord, in our grief and in our remembrance of the fallen. Guide us toward a harmonious existence as we honor those who were willing to give up their lives that we may enjoy responsible freedom. On this Memorial Day, we pray for peace and for those who gave all.

Eternal Rest grant unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them. May they rest in peace. Amen. May their souls and all the victims of war, violence and terrorism, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. AMEN!

Universal Prayer of the Faithful

Priest: Let us pray for our brothers and sisters as they go forth with courage and determination to face the forces of violence, weapons of destruction and hearts filled with hate.

Deacon or Reader:

For our President, Congress, Supreme Court and our political and military leaders that they may tirelessly seek peaceful settlements to international disputes; we pray to the Lord:

That the Lord may preserve the members of our Army, Navy, Marines, Coast Guard and Air Force from all harm; we pray to the Lord:

That even in war, we may keep clearly before us the defense of all human rights, especially the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; we pray to the Lord:

That the families, relatives and friends of our military members may be strengthened in this time of concern and anxiety; we pray to the Lord:

That the Lord may help families with men and women in the armed forces to cope with daily challenges in the absence of their loved ones; we pray to the Lord:

That our homeland will be preserved from violence and terrorism and that the nations of the world will seek to work together in harmony and peace; we pray to the Lord:

That the hearts of all men and women will be moved to pursue true peace and justice; we pray to the Lord:

That violence may be overcome by peace; that weapons of destruction may be transformed into tools of justice, and that hate may give way to true charity; we pray to the Lord:

That grateful for and inspired by those veterans who have given their lives for our country we may bravely face the challenges ahead, and for all who have died, including those we are remembering at this liturgy; we pray to the Lord:

For the special needs we mention in the silence of our hearts (pause), we pray to the Lord.

Priest: Lord God, Almighty Father,
creator of mankind and author of peace,
as we are ever mindful of the cost paid for the liberty we possess.
We ask you to bless the members of our armed forces.
Give them courage, hope and strength.
May they ever experience your firm support, gentle love and compassionate healing.
Be their power and protector, leading them from darkness to light.
Hear these and all of our prayers, through the intercession of Mary, the Mother of God,
and through Your Son Jesus Christ,

in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God forever and ever. Amen.