# *Looking for Refuge*

Peter JB Carman, Binkley Baptist Church, Chapel Hill NC
May 29, 2011
Acts 17:22-31  John 14:15-21

## *I. Remembering*

As we gather on Memorial Day weekend, many of us have hearts full of memories, and some mixed feelings. Some preachers may choose to bypass altogether what they regard as a national, and indeed secular, memorial. Others may choose to whip up patriotic fervor and bask in the reflected light of a nation's heroes.

Someplace between the Scylla of indifference and the Charybdis of flag-waving, I want to begin today from a personal angle. I come at this American holiday with a different viewpoint than many. I need you to know a little of who I am, in order to understand.

As the child and grandchild of people from the Netherlands, my Dutch grandparents instilled early profound gratitude for the sacrifices of those the family regarded as their liberators: British and American soldiers, many of whom died, for example in Arnhem, to set them free. My Opa told his American grandson how much his people owed those young soldiers, who had been willing to die not only for their own land, but for his as well. My grandfather might be unhappy, if he thought that I had missed an opportunity to share his Dutch gratitude with any group of Americans, now that he is dead and cannot speak to you about such things. So from the heart of Peter Cornelius Wichers to any American he could find: Thank you.

Yet I am not only the grandson of European survivors of that awful war, but also the son. There has been another side to my experience, however secondhand, of the Second World War. I grew up in my mother's house: a woman who as a girl had lived through bombings and starvation, SS running through the garden, having to leave home on a few moments' notice and go into hiding, knowing that if caught, she and her family would be killed.

In my house we were instilled with a healthy fear of war. No war movies were allowed. Even TV shows with loud explosive noises had to be turned down.... I grew up knowing, as intimately as a child knows his mother, about the *cost* of war not only for soldiers but also for children. I grew up in a house where we were taught to hate, to hate *war* that is... although as I grew older we were not all agreed on what to do about it.

On Memorial Sunday 1987, now an adult, I heard my senior colleague in First Baptist Church of Pittsfield give one of his finest sermons. Dale Lock was a veteran of the Second World War who had taken part in the final push across Germany, and had witnessed the liberation of concentration camps. He rarely spoke about that experience, claimed to have forgotten it. But that day he confessed to his own powerful conviction: the finest memorial, the only memorial truly worthy of the slain, is for us to work together for a lasting and just world peace.

I return often to that sermon to ask myself what is a fitting memorial to the war dead. While the world peace Dale dreamt of continues to escape us, at the very least, we can continue to be about the business of creating safe spaces, sanctuaries, places of refuge. One fitting memorial to the dead is sanctuary for the living: a place for survivors to start over and heal; for all of us to get about the business of creating that new world of justice and peace.

## *II. Looking for Refuge*

In recent years, like many of you I have been part of congregations receiving many in need of refuge. In this church you have received children, women and men from many lands. Not all have borne the name *refugee* but most understand well what it means to have to look for refuge from hatred, mistrust and the devastation of armed conflict. Indeed some of you here today are the survivors of war, as children or as youth or adults. Some of you know in your own bodies and souls the frightful cost of war, and know personally the loss of friends and family. Some you lost were soldiers, many more simply those caught in the crossfire.

As people of faith we honor the war-dead both of this land and of many others, volunteers and draftees, military heroes and little children killed in the crossfire and hail of death. What kind of a memorial shall we build them *all*? What kind of shrine to their sacrifice?

Our scripture passage this day does not address directly the issues of memorials of war. However Paul's speech to the leaders of Athens does speak to the issue of *shrines*, and what is an appropriate shrine to the God in whom we believe.

We Americans are well acquainted with the tendency to idolize heroes and to make a deity of nation. Paul's words may provoke us to ask questions about just what the heroes and gods are that our prevailing culture worships, and what it means to start over as people who want to keep faith with a different less well-known deity. Says Paul to those sophisticated Athenians:

> *For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, who is Sovereign of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is God served by human hands, as though God needed anything, since it is God who gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor God made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for God and find God--though indeed God is not far from each one of us. For 'In God we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are God's offspring.'*

A fitting shrine to such a God—what would it look like? God doesn't live in shrines made of bricks and mortar, steel and gold and wooden beams, says Paul! The shrine that God lives in is of God's own construction—human bodies, human hearts, human minds. Something more catches us in what Paul says: "From one ancestor God made all nations…" Wouldn't a fitting shrine to such a Creator look like a community where the children of every nation would be a welcome and honored part? It would be a safe place dedicated to bringing together the separated and estranged, even former enemies, to make a fresh start! It might even be a holy space to begin conversation among those of different religious traditions. It would be a sacred place to live, and move and have being. It would be a sanctuary where our children learn to treat every human as a child of God.

*III. The Only Real Refuge*

It is natural to want to find security, a safe space, in the worship of heroes and in the creation of temples and fortresses. Much of the world is dedicated to such enterprises. It is also natural to want to find safety and a sense of hope in our love of nation. A sense of civic pride and a love of country can be good things, especially if we love enough to be truthful and insist on changing course when it is right to. And yet ultimately as those who have learned our faith at the hand of Christ, these are not the places we turn for refuge, for strength, for sanctuary, for hope.

*This is my song, O God of all the nations*….so begins the hymn we will sing at the close of worship today, an anthem to the One who makes the fields and the forests, the sky and the children of all this good earth. We are convinced that in the end there is but one true source of security: the One whose love we learn in such a real way from Christ, love that binds us together, love that binds us to the Holy, love that will see us through even the valley of the shadow of death. Love that is the source of genuine community, real hope.

There come days when days when all the construction enterprises, all the efforts to create even wonderful communities of hope are brought to naught by circumstance, by strife, by war. On those days we must trust for our ultimate security not to any structure built by human hands, but rather in the one from whom each of us comes and to whom we must all return. On such days we look for sustenance from sheer Love. When we are most aware that we are too small to stand, it is also time to remember that we have been named beloved by One who is above us, beneath us, all around us. In the end each life is but a brief flickering candle on a windy evening—and yet the light we draw comes from a powerful source; and we live our witness lighting one another's candles, even as Hope seems about to be extinguished.

Here is where we place our hope: the Love of One for whom we reach tentatively, the unknown God for whom we grope, and yet who turns out be closer than our own hearts! And because of this love we dare to hope too that we can be part of a community of children of every nation who reach for that love, however tentatively and brokenly, together, groping for a new humanity, a new peace. *"O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home…."*