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Date: November 14, 2021
Sermon: "Oh, for a Cup of Water from Home!"
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: 2 Samuel 23:13-17

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Towards the beginning of harvest three of the thirty chiefs went down to join David at the cave of Adullam, while a band of Philistines was encamped in the valley of Rephaim. David was then in the stronghold; and the garrison of the Philistines was then at Bethlehem. David said longingly, 'O that someone would give me water to drink from the well of Bethlehem that is by the gate!' Then the three warriors broke through the camp of the Philistines, drew water from the well of Bethlehem that was by the gate, and brought it to David. But he would not drink of it; he poured it out to the LORD, for he said, 'The LORD forbid that I should do this. Can I drink the blood of the men who went at the risk of their lives?' Therefore he would not drink it. The three warriors did these things.

When I was a pastor New York City, I sometimes attended a special Monday morning clergy gathering in Harlem. Each Monday two or three of the great preachers of the city would preach the sermon they had preached the day before in their home churches—sort of like "The Great British Baking Show"—"showstopper" part. Or, "America's Got Talent" in the pulpit.

The truth is it was amazing, as the truly great legends of American preaching brought their best to their peers. Believe me, I never preached. I sat way in the back, too intimidated, too astounded to do anything but try to take it all in.

One preacher's trick was to find a Scripture lesson like ours today, an obscure one, and pluck out just one phrase and go to town with it, a 45-, 60-minute spellbinding sermon building to a crescendo, all based on a little phrase. Like today's story.

David was King of Israel; he'd had a huge career as a warrior and King. He was nearing the end of his life. His country was falling apart, division everywhere, enemies at the gate; the hated Philistines had even captured his old hometown of Bethlehem.

David and his most trusted soldiers are camped outside of Bethlehem, watching in defeat and humiliation. Suddenly, David is thirsty, and with a sigh, he says out loud, "Oh, that someone would get me a cup of water from the well at the gate in Bethlehem, a cup of water from home."

Well, gee whiz, who might that "someone" be? Of course, you know how it is. When kings shout or grumble or point, it's soldiers who get the brunt of it. So the Bible tells us three of King David's best soldiers get up, sneak past enemy soldiers, behind enemy lines, into occupied Bethlehem. They get to the well, fill up their pouches with that precious water, and carry it back safely to King David.

Now, those great old legendary New York City preachers I told you about, they'd take that one phrase, "Oh, a for cup of water from home" and find preaching gold, preaching at great length about home, about water, about longing, about nostalgia, about memory.

We are soon entering the season of Thanksgiving, a time of nostalgia, right? All of us filled with memories of home. We look forward to being in certain places, with certain people, eating certain foods.

This Thanksgiving our family is coming home from near and far, grandparents from Cyprus, daughter from Indiana, son home from Boston, granddaughter home from college, daughter home from India, sisters coming out from the City. And all with their favorite memories in tow. I want my wife's great biscuits. My daughter wants old-fashioned sweet potatoes with marshmallows. My sister is bringing Swedish meatballs. Everything will be served on my mother's best dishes. All as refreshing as that cup of water from home.

But our Bible story doesn't end with King David's yearning for a cup of water from home, and it doesn't end with King David's getting a cup of water from home. The part of the story that gets to me is how it does end. When David is given that precious water from home, the Bible says, "He refused to drink it; instead, he poured it on the ground."

He sort of verbally smacks himself on the forehead, exclaiming, "My God, what have I done? I've risked the lives of my men, my best soldiers, my trusted friends just to get me a cup of water from home!" He's horrified by his own misuse of his soldiers.

I picked this verse for Veterans Day Sunday because it is a window into the world of soldiers. Soldiers obey. Soldiers risk. Soldiers sacrifice. Soldiers do the heroic, by nature, by duty. We civilians, the rest of society, we admire our soldiers most of the time; we exploit them sometimes; we honor them, we ignore them

sometimes; we value them and we undervalue them. But in this one little interesting human story, we get quite a glimpse into soldiering.

King David, Israel's commander in chief, a veteran soldier himself, much decorated, a legend in his own time, and now he's up against it. His nation is ravaged by an enemy; he couldn't even protect his hometown of Bethlehem. And he gets that look in his eye, that look we all get when we think of the "good old days."

Look around your Thanksgiving table in a couple of weeks when folks start talking about old memories, old summer vacations, old music, books, movies, old times . . . back when everything was better. Even the water tasted better.

And hometown water is no small thing. Have you ever talked water with a New Yorker? Why are New York City bagels the best in the world? It's the water—everyone says that. Why is New York pizza unmatched? The water, New Yorkers boast. Why was Rheingold Beer so good? New York water! Excellence or nostalgia, equally powerful. So, yes, "Oh, for a cup of that old-time, spring-fed, pre-pollution, crystal clear 'water from home.'" And remember who's doing this yearning in the Bible story. That's the general talking, King David, commander in chief, and he wants *that* water from *that* well in *that* town. *Now*.

Part of this story is what's sometimes called "David's Mighty Men," 30 of them, the 30 greatest soldiers. These were the prized, Purple Heart, Congressional Medal of Honor heroes of ancient Israel, the Special Ops of yore. And like all the best soldiers of all times and places, David's Mighty Men jumped into action. Darting from tree to tree under the cover of darkness, crawling through the shrubbery, jumping from boulder to boulder, avoiding the moonlight, ignoring every risk, evading capture and certain death just to bring a cup of water from home to their treasured veteran, their battle-scarred old warhorse himself, King David. Their General Patton, their George Washington, their Dwight David Eisenhower. They wanted to honor his service.

Thursday was Veterans Day, and we have a tradition in our Church of gathering the kids from the Church to do a service project. This year they made care packages for soldiers serving around the world, and they made welcome bags for Afghan kids who suddenly find themselves here in Connecticut after losing everything in Afghanistan.

Do you know what our combined militaries are called, the Army, Navy, Marines, and Air Force? The "Armed Services." *Services*. They are there to *serve*. Lots of Police Departments have the motto, "To protect and to serve." To *serve*. The best of soldiers, the best of cops live to serve. It's the same root word in Greek from

which we get the idea of Deacons. Deacons come from "Diakonia," which means service.

A deacon, a cop, a soldier, any of us in the vein of Christian life. We are in service. So, to have our Church kids growing up using Veterans Day to do a service project to serve those who served in the services—that's very cool.

But I keep being drawn back to that final part of today's Bible story about King David's Mighty Men, risking it all for a cup of water. When the king gets the water, he's suddenly struck by the unnecessary risk of his soldiers. It was a selfish whim on his part to put his soldiers in harm's way, a perfect example of the old word, "vainglorious." The only "glory" was to his "vanity." David was ashamed and so he couldn't drink the water, he poured out on the ground. To us, that sounds like a waste of good water, even rude, ungrateful. But all through history in many religions, people pour precious liquid on the ground as an offering to God.

I think David was saying, "I'm not worthy of these soldiers. I'm not worthy of their sacrifice. Only God deserves such service." King David's late-arriving appreciation of his soldiers is a good lesson for us as citizens. What do we want our soldiers to do for us, and why?

There's another fascinating verse, again from the life of King David, 2 Samuel 11:1, "In the spring when kings go forth to war, David sent . . ." And it goes on from there. You see that? It's springtime, so it's wartime. War is a seasonal ritual, as regular as "April showers bring May flowers," as regular as planting and harvest. "Hey it's warm out, let's go forth to war." But notice the irony: "When kings go forth to war, King David sent . . ." In other words, David himself, his royal self, the king, supposedly "going forth." He doesn't actually "go forth." He just *sends* forth. He sends other people's sons, other townsfolk, other citizenry, other conscripts. The kings and emperors, presidents and prime ministers, dictators and politicians, they "send forth." Regular people "go forth."

Even in today's story, David says, "Oh, for a cup of water from home," and his trusty soldiers get up to get it for him. David doesn't say, "Oh, for a cup of water from home, I'm going to go get me some!" Then he crawls off through the underbrush, darting from tree to boulder, sneaking behind enemy lines for that water so precious. Nope! David doesn't do that.

Veterans Day is a good day, the right day to promise that we will be careful and wise before needing more veterans, before adding more wounded warriors, before creating more Gold Star Mothers. David was right to finally wonder . . . What sacrifice is worth it? What risk is worth it? What blood is worth it?

Growing up where I did as a kid, the civic heartbeat of our neighborhood was "Bloody Monument" at the entrance to Forest Park. Forest Park was our haven for everything. It's where we all learned to ride bikes or make go-carts or shoot off rockets or picnic as families. So we always walked by, saw, and respected "Bloody Monument," a lone soldier standing tall, battle weary. Our Johnny Tremain/Audie Murphy/"Red Badge of Courage" personified.

That's what soldiers do: they bleed, so "Bloody Monument" made sense to us. That's where our Christmas tree lighting took place, where our Memorial Day Parade ended. "Bloody Monument."

As an adult, I decided to go back there. You know, nostalgia, memory, "a cup of water from home." To my amazement, I discovered it's "*Buddy Monument*." B-U-D-D-Y, *Buddy*. It's a monument to the bond that binds soldiers who have lived and sacrificed and, yes, bled, for all the values and hopes we treasure. Buddy Monument. Their commitment to one another, their commitment to us.

Maybe civilization has matured enough. Maybe societies, nations have matured enough that we better appreciate the ultimate cost of war. I'm not talking about what war does to the national budget, but to people.

In the old days, we might begrudgingly admit to "shellshock," the lingering effects of war on a few sorry veterans. But our world has put us face to face with Agent Orange, homeless vets, post-traumatic stress disorder, addiction, soldier suicides. We know this now. When it's spring and "kings go forth to war," sending our brightest and best in search of the king's pleasure, it may seem noble and necessary, it may even *be* noble and necessary. But even King David finally remembered the cost.

Our Veterans Day pledge must be to earnestly honor all those veterans who gave so much of themselves for us *and* to pledge that we never take the call to sacrifice lightly, foolishly, selfishly.

Don't ever let thoughtlessness diminish the sacrifice of those who dare to serve.

Our final hymn today is "O God, Our Help in Ages Past," No. 67 I your Hymnal:

*O God, our help in ages past,
our hope for years to come,
our shelter from the stormy blast,
and our eternal home!*

*Under the shadow of thy throne
still may we dwell secure;
sufficient is thine arm alone,
and our defense is sure.*

*Before the hills in order stood,
or earth received her frame,
from everlasting thou art God,
to endless years the same.*

*A thousand ages, in thy sight,
are like an evening gone;
short as the watch that ends the night
before the rising sun.*

*Time, like an ever-rolling stream,
soon bears us all away;
we fly forgotten, as a dream
dies at the opening day.*

*O God, our help in ages past,
our hope for years to come,
be thou our guide while life shall last,
and our eternal home.*