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28, 2017
Interim Pastor
Memorial Day Sunday

May

“The Greatest Generation”*

Text: Psalm 139: 1-16, 23-24
Esther, Chapter 4:9-14
Philippians 4:4-9, 23

Psalm 139:1-16, 23-24

- ¹ You have searched me, LORD,
and you know me.
- ² You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.
- ³ You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways.
- ⁴ Before a word is on my tongue
you, LORD, know it completely.
- ⁵ You hem me in behind and before,
and you lay your hand upon me.
- ⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too lofty for me to attain.
- ⁷ Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
- ⁸ If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

- ⁹ If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
- ¹⁰ even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.
- ¹¹ If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me
and the light become night around me,”
- ¹² even the darkness will not be dark to you;
the night will shine like the day,
for darkness is as light to you.
- ¹³ For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother’s womb.

¹⁴ I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.

¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from you
when I was made in the secret place,
when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.

¹⁶ Your eyes saw my unformed body;
all the days ordained for me were written in your book
before one of them came to be.

²³ Search me, God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.

²⁴ See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.

Esther 4:9-14

⁹ Hathak went back and reported to Esther what Mordecai had said. ¹⁰ Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai, ¹¹ “All the king’s officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that they be put to death unless the king extends the gold scepter to them and spares their lives. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king.”

¹² When Esther’s words were reported to Mordecai, ¹³ he sent back this answer: “Do not think that because you are in the king’s house you alone of all the Jews will escape. ¹⁴ For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?”

Philippians 4:4-9, 23

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸ 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. ⁹ Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

²³ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.

Opening Prayer: Grant, Lord God, that the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts would alike be acceptable in Your Holy sight, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

He looked at his watch: just minutes to go. A hot sun stared down, glaring off his radio set. Even inside the aircraft, desert sand coated everything, including his well-groomed moustache.

A look outside: the wings of his plane sagged under the weight of 3 tons of bombs and rockets. A torpedo could even be added, but it would not be carried today. No, what extra weight the plane could carry would be used for more ammunition to feed its four heavy machine guns.

His thoughts turned to home. By now, the hills surrounding his native Glasgow—a city in Scotland--would be bursting with heather: little purple, white, and pink flowers. Cool west winds would be blowing in from the Irish Sea. The shipyards and ammunition factories would be running at full tilt, too—but there would be time for a pint of beer, maybe even a dance with some of the ladies.

Sergeant John Bryson closed his eyes. Just 24 years old, and, yet it seemed like a past life. He remembered growing up in the west end of the city—the first time he had seen an airplane doing aerobatics as a boy--the thrill it gave to him. From that moment, he had known his life's ambition; and so—as soon as he turned 18—there was the visit to Royal Air Force recruiting office. He was a product of the finest boys' school in the city, with a knack for electronics. He was posted to the south of England to complete his training as a radio operator, flying over the idyllic hills of Norfolk. Never in his life has he been so happy, so content.

And then Britain went to war. By December, 1939, John Bryson was flying over the Atlantic Ocean, guiding British convoys away from attacks by Nazi submarines. It was satisfying work with little personal danger; only rarely did he see the wreckage of war.

But, today, things were different: here, the killing was close-up, the danger very real: In a matter of minutes, John's plane--along with the others in 272 Squadron—would stop flying along the shores of Libya and head inland, dropping to a height of fifty feet over the coast road. Below them would run

the main supply line for the Nazi army. Here, the planes would split up in pairs, they would hunt for anything that moved: tanks, trucks, personnel carriers, soldiers on foot—anything associated with Nazism--and they would utterly annihilate it. To those on the flying end, John's plane was called the Bristol Beaufighter. To those on the receiving end it was called "Whistling Death".

But they were not invulnerable: Well aimed anti-aircraft fire could just as easily kill the hunter. They knew the penalty that could be exacted—they had seen it played out before: planes too damaged to pull out—aircrew too close to the ground to bail out.

The deafening roar of the twin engines now--and the start of the numbing vibration. Soon, John's plane was airborne, the squadron winging their way away from Egypt--just as soon they were over the Mediterranean Sea. In his radio compartment, Sergeant Bryson got on with his job.

His job.

That's what most veteran's tell us.
They'll tell us they were "just doing my job."

And what was their job?

A mixture of what they expected--and what they did not expect, did not desire...

Esther knew this sort of deal. All her life she had wanted to be noticed by a handsome man—to enjoy the trappings of good living. And the court of King Xerxes was just the place for it: Here was the epicenter of the greatest empire the world had yet known, the Persian Empire. And it mattered less that Esther was Jewish: no, what mattered more at the time—I suspect--was that she had what it took to be noticed: Her dazzling beauty. And soon, that beauty became the ticket to all she had expected: the riches—the pomp—the splendor....

And then there was the unexpected: The planned genocide of her race.

Not the scenario—mind you--that Esther's cousin, Mordecai, had imagined when he had slighted a royal official, but the damage had been done, and a plan for a mass killing of Jews in Persia had been drawn up, even approved by King Xerxes himself. Only he could reverse it. He would need to be approached. But who would dare do it? The penalty for entering into the king's presence without his invitation to do so—as we've remembered--was death.

Not part of the deal for Esther. No, in our passage for today, we see Esther as a very believable human being: *“I myself have not been summoned to come in to the king for thirty days.”* She knows the penalty—and—what is more--she knows the odds are slight. Here is not a time to stick one’s neck out, even if one was Queen--or is it?

“Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this....”

Mordecai reaches deep in what he says, in this passage from Chapter Four—indeed, we come to the decisive moment in Esther’s life.

The blue waters disappeared below them, and John Bryson’s plane hugged the golden sand. A glance forward into the cockpit: airspeed 250—275—now, nearly 300 miles per hour. A sudden turn, then the pilot’s warning: “Steady.” A flash of tracing ammunition outside the window—enemy fire reaching out at them. The moment when the plane seems to stand still, too--the recoil of the rockets, all eight of them, being loosed at once—and, then, everyone is thrown upward as the bombs also leave the plane. A bruising jerk sideways: Another turn by the pilot. Time for another go....

Now, even lower on the approach—and even faster—close to 325 miles per hour; John wonders how it is possible to get a fix on anything, but something is in the gunsight, and the machine guns roar to life—a sound they know well.

And then a sound they don’t know: Part of the skin of the plane vanishes—and then, the smell they dread: aviation fuel.

“Oh, bloody—get along, get along!”

John stands up. Out the window he can see what the pilot is cursing about: another plane from the squadron is in trouble, struggling for altitude, fire devouring a wing. But the pilot is good, he has leveled out—they might stand chance....

“Right, we’re going in with them.” A decision voiced so calmly that no one is afraid.

Somehow they land, leaking fuel and oil.

Somehow—under enemy fire-- John manages to reach the wounded in the other plane

Somehow they all their comrades in.

And, then, somehow, they manage to get airborne again.

It isn’t pretty but who cares: *Isn’t this what flying—what being an airman--is really all about?*

Not part of the deal.
They didn't have to stick their necks out.
But they did.

And so—over seventy years ago—in the sands of the Libyan Desert, there was a rescue mission made that didn't have to be made. And far earlier—in the days before Christ—a young Jewish girl appeared before King Xerxes, risking her life. In doing so—she saved her people. At first, it didn't appear to be part of the deal, *but—in the end—it was what being Queen was really about, too.*

Today—on this Veteran's Day Sunday—we remember men like John Bryson—and we also remember women like Esther. In both lives, we see the stuff of greatness—indeed, that is the description pinned upon the men and women who preserved our freedom against Fascism in World War Two. They have been called “The Greatest Generation.”

Our debt to them runs deep. As Tom Brokaw has written, “*they came of age during the Great Depression and the Second World War*”—but this was not all: “*they also went on to build modern America,*” he adds. They built the society which still blesses us today. We remain in their debt, as we are also in debt to all the men and women in uniform—down the years—who have served our nation in times of peace, and in times of war. All of them—in one way of another—have stuck their necks out—and they have done it for our sakes....

More about John. Not long after that rescue mission, his plane collided with a telegraph pole during a low-level attack. An entire wingtip went missing, and the plane became dangerously unstable. But John Bryson had a theory for everything: why not remove the other wingtip? Well, that is what he did—the plane on the desert floor, wielding a hammer, once more being shot at by the enemy, and—yes—once more—they got back safely. And then there was another time when the hydraulics were shot away and nothing could be done to lower the wheels of the plane. A crash landing in Egypt. The shriek of crumpled metal. The sweet smell, once again, of aviation fuel.

Now, you would think all this would have dampened John's love of flying, but you'd be wrong: In late 1943, John Bryson applied to the Royal Air Force to become a pilot. As he arrived in Canada for training, the loss rate in Bomber Command—the branch of the Royal Air Force John wished to join—stood at 20% killed in action—one in every five men.

It was not to be, though: John Bryson had “a theory for everything”—as his family says—and this applied to aerial maneuvers he made during his pilot training. He was washed out and sent back to England—still as radio man—but not before he had spent a night in a New York City nightclub, chatting with a big band leader he met there. That man was Duke Ellington.

He was posted to 21 Squadron, and to new aircraft, the De Havilland Mosquito—the so-called “wooden wonder” because most of the plane was made of furniture wood—but the missions he flew took no account of the plane’s delicate construction: once again, John Bryson found himself in low-level attacks, surrounded by murderous anti-aircraft fire. And yet, somehow—miraculously, even—he was not touched—not once in 32 missions.

By war’s end, Sergeant John Bryson had been decorated five times. He had also beat the odds: nearly 115, 000 British airman had died in the skies during the war. He knew he was lucky. He knew that life was worth savoring, every blessed moment of it, and so—like so many of his generation—John Bryson laid hold of new opportunities. He went into business—and he also married Mary Tomkin, his childhood sweetheart.

Mary died of cancer, five years later.

One of their young sons also died.

But John would risk—and would love—again. There was his beloved Joanna, and their family soon grew to five. He prospered as a whisky broker—what else was a Scotsman to do?—and, eventually, he formed his own whisky company because—again—John Bryson had “a theory for everything,” including a way to distill the so-called “water of life.”

He gave up the whisky business—at the tender age of 70—but he didn’t stop reading at least a book a week, tending to his flower garden, following the local soccer team, placing a bet at the local racetrack. Though wealthier than he had ever dreamed, John Bryson still kept things sensible like a good Scotsman: He never bet more than 15 cents on a race...

And then John Bryson astounded everyone: he opened a frame shop in the port city of Ayr, the town where I began days in ministry. What was really noteworthy, however, were the prices for the fine art on display: a fraction of their real worth, with many a painting—to be honest—simply given away to friends. The extravagance of old age? Perhaps. *But maybe more a sign of someone who had learned that it isn’t what you have, but what you give away, that really matters....*

When he wasn’t at the frame shop, John kept working around the family farm. He continued to register inventions with the Patent Office. He always made it a habit to mix his cereals each morning just to see what new thing he could create—surely an inquisitive mind...

In the city of Ayr, the farmers have a tradition: they climb the hills in mid-December and they climb them again in mid-June, all to watch the sun set on

the shortest—and the longest--day of the year. In June, they see the image you find on your bulletin cover—the sun setting over Ailsa Craig, an island shaped like a cupcake, sitting in the Irish Sea--then, the farmers go back and celebrate with their families and friends. John's children—the five of them—their families, the ten grandchildren—not to mention the great-grand children—do it to this day.

They do it now without him: John Bryson died just after Christmas, 2001.

It was my privilege to his memorial service. But as I've prepared these remarks—and even as I am sure that John would be delighted for me to tell you that he had rubbed shoulders with Duke Ellington—I'm sure he would never have wanted me to call him a “great” man. In speaking with his daughter, Anna, she said, “you know, Todd, he never lifted up his life—he felt he did what everyone else would have done.”

Thanks be to God for that.

For John Bryson.

For Esther.

For all the men and women—down the ages—who have lived lives of duty, honor, achievement, courage and sacrifice, in peace as well as war.

And, now, may these words of the Apostle Paul—lifted up at John's memorial service—continue to inspire us in our daily living:

*“Beloved, whatever is true,
whatever is honorable,
whatever is just,
whatever is pure,
whatever is pleasing,
whatever is commendable—
if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise:
Keep on doing these things...and the God of Peace will be with you.”*

Amen.

I am deeply indebted to Anna Drummond, of Monktonhead House, Ayrshire, for her kind permission to share about the life and times of her father, John Bryson.

* Title drawn from the book by Tom Brokaw.

