

I love talking to veterans. I always have. I love military history in general. Whether ancient Rome or WWII. And our veterans are a living, breathing piece of military history. So it makes sense that I enjoy talking to them, I suppose. Not every veteran wants to talk about his combat experiences. I get that. I don't push. But when a veteran is willing to open up and tell a good war story, well... they will have my full attention.

Sometimes those stories sound remarkably similar. Sometimes, they are completely different. The experiences of our veterans are varied. No two men are exactly alike, even if they served in the same theater. Every single one will give you a different perspective.

In fact, the only thing that is truly universal among veterans is the risk they took by joining the military at all. Even those who served in complete peacetime and never left our shores still served with the knowledge that they might be called upon to sacrifice their lives. It's the nature of the vocation.

Which is why tomorrow is not Veterans of Foreign Wars Day or Veterans who received a Purple Heart Day. It's simply Veterans Day. Because they all deserve our respect for taking that risk on our behalf.

Which I think is part of the reason why military language fills so much of the church's imagery. Oh, there are other reasons as well. St. Paul uses military language occasionally. The armor of God and so forth. There are quite a few parallels to be made between the army of Israel and the church. The book of Revelation certainly uses quite a few military images for its end times picture.

But really, I think we're so comfortable with the church militant in our hymns and symbols mainly because it makes a lot of sense. There are a lot of similarities between them. I mean, in many places around the world, simply being a Christian entails as much risk as being a soldier on the battlefield.

1 in 7 Christians worldwide faces high levels of persecution for their faith. Nearly 5,000 Christians were martyred last year. Nearly 15,000 Christian homes and churches were destroyed in religiously motivated attacks. China, which had been softening its stance on Christianity, has cracked down again. 10,000 churches were closed last year, and those that remain open must preach Communist propaganda and submit to surveillance or face closure and arrests.

But it's easy for us to ignore this. It's easy to forget that it ever happens. Because it doesn't involve us. Most of these deaths are on the other side of the planet, in some Middle Eastern, or African, or Asian country. Out of sight out of mind. And yet, what we read in scripture today is that even if we're not veterans of foreign missions or veterans who have faced violent martyrdom, we are all still veterans of the cross. We still face that same risk.

But the veterans of the cross don't look like the military veterans we're used to seeing. In fact, both our Old Testament and Gospel lessons feature veterans of the cross and they are actually two elderly women. Two elderly women who have a lot in common.

They were both widows who had lost their husbands at some point years before. And as many widows in their eras, they both lived in extreme poverty. The widow in 1 Kings had only the makings for two loaves of bread remaining in her kitchen, enough for herself and her son. The widow in Mark had only two copper coins remaining in her purse, each worth enough to buy one loaf of bread.

Two widows with two loaves of bread. And both are called by God to give up their last supper for the sake of His kingdom. Both are called to give up all that they have. And both do it willingly.

The risk we take as Christians is not always a gun to the head. Or a foreign prison. Or a violent mob. Sometimes the risk that we take is continuing to give every aspect of our lives to the Kingdom of God – money, time, possessions – even when we don't know where our next meal will come from.

Giving of our money, even when we don't know how we'll pay our heating bill this winter. Giving of our time, even when we're working 60 or 80 hours a week otherwise. Giving of our possessions, even when we wonder whether we need them more than the person who's getting them.

You see, Christian discipleship is a huge risk to take. And as Christians we fight a war every day. It's not a war against flesh and blood, but against the powers and principalities of this dark world and the spiritual realms. In other words, we fight a war against Satan.

And in the war against Satan, his greatest weapon against us is our fear. The same fear that widow in Zarephath felt as she gathered firewood outside the city. The fear of an unknown future. The fear of failing to provide for her son. The fear of suffering and death, not from persecution, but from hunger. From the ordinary needs of the flesh.

She was afraid. We know she was afraid because the very first words that Elijah speaks to her after she explains her situation are, "*Do not fear.*" And then he asks her to take a leap of faith, even though she is not an Israelite. Even though she doesn't worship the same God as Elijah. He says, "Do not fear... my god will take care of you. Because the God of Israel is the God of sinners who throw themselves on his mercy. He's the God of those who believe the word of his prophets. He's my God and if by faith you give me a morsel of bread, he'll be your God too."

This woman was afraid, but Elijah gave her a pathway out of her fear. She was fighting against fear, but Elijah gave her a weapon to fight her fear: faith. Faith in the God of Israel. Faith in the Word of God. To be a veteran of the cross is to spend every day of your lives fighting against fear. But it is also to be given weapons against fear.

Weapons given to us by our Lord. Who knew quite well our fight against fear. For he fought that same battle himself. He knelt down in the Garden of Gethsemane and sweat drops of blood, pleading in prayer, "*Father, if it be your will, take this cup from me.*" Father... I'm afraid. I'm afraid of the risk. I'm afraid of the pain. I'm afraid of death.

But even in his anguish, Christ did not allow himself to be overcome by fear. He faced the risk, he fulfilled His calling. He sacrificed himself so that we would never have to fear again. So that we could face the worst this world can throw at us. So that we could face our last supper itself and know that God will rescue us with the bread of life.

Not merely flour and oil that last for days on end and still leave us to die another day. But the true bread of life who came down from heaven and gave up all he had so that we could have life even when we don't conquer our fears. Who gave up all he had so that we could have a meal that gives life for all eternity.

We are the army of God. We are soldiers of the Lord. Fear is our enemy, but the kingdom is our reward. Nourished by His bread, purified by His water, we stand together as veterans of the cross. Made perfect not by how much we sacrificed for the Lord, but by how much He sacrificed for us. So that when the battle rages long and defeat seems near, we still find victory in the power of His blood.

His offering for us. An offering greater than two loaves of bread or two copper coins. An offering greater than the envelopes we put in the plate or the checks we write or the manhours we spend working for the kingdom. And yet also, an offering of nothing. For by offering that great gift on the cross, He made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant.

He made himself nothing, so that we could have everything. Not everything by the standards of the world. Not everything by the standards of a civilian. But everything by the standards of a soldier. He died that might have what every soldier wants: Peace. Peace on earth. Peace with God.

Peace that allows us to live like those two women did. For those two elderly women were veterans of the cross and they lived life fearlessly. You are a veteran of the cross. You are at peace with God. And you can live fearlessly too. Amen.