Throughout the Bible we are reminded to remember. There are references to monuments, to memorial feasts, and to stories, all of which are meant to reinforce the sacred memory of the people of God. God wants us to tell the story of what he has done for us so that we will not forget all God’s mercies.

Thus is this story from the fourth chapter of the book of Joshua\(^1\), telling the story of the Israelites’ long-awaited entry into the promised land\(^2\). After forty years of wilderness wandering the people of God finally reached their destination. Even when confronted with the swollen Jordan River blocking their way into the land, they did not stop.

As the priests who were carrying the sacred box known as the ark of the covenant\(^3\) put their feet into the river, the water ceased flowing and the people crossed over on dry ground, just as their ancestors had done in the Red Sea when they escaped the Egyptians.

When the river crossing was finished, their leader Joshua had a simple monument built to commemorate this wondrous event, a monument which served to remind them that all that they are and all that they have is in the hands of God. It was God who brought them safe to this point.

Throughout the Bible we are told to remember. Remember, God says, that God called Abraham in his old age and promised him many children.
Remember that our spiritual ancestors were in slavery in Egypt, and were freed by the divine power of God. Remember, God says, that God brought this weak nation Israel to greatness. Remember, God says, remember the commands of the Lord. The Psalmist had it right when he wrote, “Remember the wonders he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he pronounced.” (Psalm 105:5)

What happens when we don’t remember God’s blessings? We fall into thanklessness. If we forget our heritage and who it is who gives us our blessings, we soon will take for granted all that we have and all that we are. It will then be very easy for us to believe that we can make it on our own, without God. Pride then will take over and blind us to the wisdom and power of God, and we will lose our way. It is crucial that we remember!4

But at the same time, we must be careful with our remembering. It would be so easy for us to live in the past, remembering “good old days” that may not have been quite as good as we recall them. Remembering the past grounds us in our history, but we must live our lives and serve our God in the present.

Memorial Day, of course, has everything to do with remembering. And though it is a secular holiday, it is good that we all remember those who sacrificed their lives through the various wars of our nation so that our freedom would be secure.

And while we are remembering, let us also renew our commitment to world peace and do all that we can to build community among the people of the world. We all are currently witnessing great divisions among the people of our nation and while none of us individually can heal those divisions, we can work together for peace and “to build up the kingdom of God on our street corner, in our neighborhood, [and] in our community.”5 The quest for peace is never-ending.

In 1934, American poet Lloyd Stone, then only 22 years old, pondered the matter of war and peace and wrote a hymn he entitled “This is My Song”,

also known as “A Song of Peace”:

This is my song, O God of all the nations,
A song of peace for lands afar and mine;
This is my home, the country where my heart is;
Here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine:
But other hearts in other lands are beating
With hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.

My country’s skies are bluer than the ocean,
And sunlight beams on cloverleaf and pine;
But other lands have sunlight too, and clover,
And skies are everywhere as blue as mine:
O hear my song, thou God of all the nations,
A song of peace for their land and for mine.

May truth and freedom come to every nation;
May peace abound where strife has raged so long;
That each may seek to love and build together,
A world united, righting every wrong;
A world united in its love for freedom,
Proclaiming peace together in one song.

Before we begin the Two Bell Ceremony, I would like to read again a very moving story. It is told by U. S. Army Captain John Rasmussen. Here is his story . . .

It was raining “cats and dogs” and I was late for physical training. Traffic was backed up at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, and was moving way too slowly. I was probably going to be late [for formation] and I was growing more and more impatient.

The pace slowed almost to a standstill as I passed Memorial Grove, the site built to honor the soldiers who died in an airplane crash in Newfoundland.
on December 12, 1985, the worst redeployment accident in the history of the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault).

Because it was close to Memorial Day, a small American flag had been placed in the ground next to each soldier’s memorial plaque.

My concern at the time, however, was getting past the bottleneck, getting out of the rain and getting to my physical training formation on time.

All of a sudden, infuriatingly, just as the traffic was getting started again, the car in front of me stopped. A soldier, a private of course, jumped out in the pouring rain and ran over toward the memorial grove.

I couldn’t believe it! This knucklehead was holding up everyone for who knows what kind of prank. Horns were honking. I wanted to give him a good dressing-down for making me late to formation.

This private was getting soaked to the skin. His BDU [battle dress uniform; i.e., fatigues] was plastered to his body. I watched as he ran up to one of the memorial plaques, picked up the small American flag that had fallen to the ground in the wind and the rain, and set it upright again.

Then, slowly, this private came to attention, saluted, ran back to his car, and drove off.

I’ll never forget that incident. That soldier, whose name I will never know, taught me more about duty, honor, and respect than a hundred books or a thousand lectures. That simple salute -- that single act of honoring his fallen brother and his flag -- encapsulated all the Army values in one gesture for me. It said, “I will never forget. I will keep the faith. I will finish the mission. I am an American soldier.”
Captain Rasmussen concludes, “And on this Memorial Day, I will remember all those who paid the ultimate price for my freedom, and [I will remember] one private, soaked to the skin, who honored them.”

Tomorrow I pray you will make it to one of the Memorial Day observances to honor those who have fallen. If you cannot be there in person, please pause at 3 pm tomorrow and take a moment for silent remembrance.

Two Bell Ceremony

[Organist begins “Eternal Father” very softly.]

In days past, two bells (Ring twice) marked the end of the routine of the day aboard a ship. It was time for “tattoo”⁹, and soon, “taps” would sound throughout the ship. As we commemorate this ancient tradition, we pause to honor those who gave their lives in service to our country.

The toll of the ship’s bell reminds us of the reverence we owe to our departed sailors, marines, coast guardsmen, soldiers, and airmen . . . (Ring twice)

To those who guard the honor of our nation, upon the sea, in the air, and on foreign soil . . . (Ring twice)

Let this bell be a reminder of the faith they confide in us . . . (Ring twice)

Let us who gather here not forget our own obligations . . . (Ring twice)
And in silence, breathe a prayer for our fallen patriots . . . (Ring twice)

[Taps]
After a pause, begin “Eternal Father” for the final hymn.
river (Exodus 23:31).

3. The ark of the covenant was a special sacred box used to carry the original tablets upon which the ten commandments were inscribed. It was about four feet long, two and a half feet wide, and two and a half feet deep. See the article, “Ark of the Covenant”, by M. Pierce Matheney, Jr., in Holman Bible Dictionary, edited by Trent C. Butler, http://www.studylight.org/dictionaries/hbd/view.cgi?n=452, copyright 1991.


8. Published by Army Link News on May 22, 2002, and adapted for use here.