

“Remembrance”
Ecclesiastes 3:1-8
November 11, 2018

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
between the crosses, row on row,
that mark our place;
and in the sky the larks, still bravely singing,
fly scarce heard amid the guns below.

So wrote John McRae from the Western Front in Belgium, 1915, where he served as a member of the Canadian Field Artillery. He died in 1918 in France due to pneumonia he contracted while commanding a military hospital near the trenches. But his words have become immortal, part of the heritage we celebrate collectively today, on the 11th day, of the 11th month, when at the 11th hour, the guns finally fell silent.

Unfortunately, the guns did not lie silent forever. The Great War, the War to End All Wars, has been followed by conflicts even more terrible, and more enduring, than what ended a century ago today. There seem to be precious few, if any at all, who remember that Great War. After all, how many of us will mark today, known in Europe as “Remembrance Day,” as a special day on our personal calendars?

Yet November is to be a time of remembrance, not just for us as Canadians like John MacRae, or as Americans, or Brits, or the French and Belgians, but as Christians and as children of the Almighty. The month begins on November 1 with All Saints’ Day, a day when we are to honor all those who have died before us in the faith. It moves on to today, to what is now called Veterans’ Day, when we are to remember and honor all those who served in defense of our land. And it ends with Thanksgiving, the day we are to remember the Pilgrims and their long journey and sacrifices in search of a land where they could worship God freely.

Indeed, the season itself calls us to remember, for November is the month of the final in-gathering of the harvest. The last pumpkin and squash are brought in, the fields are turned over, the final flowers bloom before a killer frost, the last leaves fall from the trees. The sun sets earlier, the darkness arrives ever sooner, the last warmth of summer fades away. As we gather in the last of the harvest, making our yards and homes ready for winter, picking that last bloom: we remember the warmth and promise of summer, even as we are haunted by the dark outlines of bare tree limbs against leaden clouds, and the final bits of burnt orange are backgrounded by gray skies.

We gather ourselves in as well, entering our homes and closing the doors and shutters against the winter. It is a time when we search closets and chests for familiar decorations, placemats,

and napkins - a time when we search through recipe books and card files for time-honored recipes made and served each year, once again, with loving care. And so we remember when that treasured ornament was given; we laugh because we have dared keep as our table's centerpiece that moth-eaten squirrel from our childhood. We remember; and the memories may give us joy - but if we are honest with ourselves, some of those memories may hurt more than just a little.

So this can be a bittersweet time. When families gather together, it can be a time when we mourn an empty seat at the dinner table. What a remembrance, to realize that there IS a time to be born, AND a time to die. And as none other than Astrid Tury put it to me the other day, "In autumn, nature teaches us how to die in a beautiful way." Indeed, for everything there IS a season.

A generation or two back we had a firmer grasp, I suspect, on that reality of death and dying than we do these days. When we were intimately tied to the land with its cycles and upheavals, we understood the phrase "there is a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted." But do we truly understand it now?

"For everything there is a season," we intone - yet our youth hurry to grow up, while the rest of us fight the signs of old age. I, for one, cannot help but feel that there is a certain serenity that can only be found in accepting the cycles of life. To everything there IS a season.

Before the birth of modern medicine, we understood that our hold on life was indeed fragile. And we accepted the natural cycles of birth and death, even as the former caused us to rejoice, and the latter made us mourn.

I suspect we have started to lose some of that sense today. As our hold on life has become stronger through chemistry and surgery and all the wonders that physicians have wrought, it is our tolerance of death that has become more fragile. We fight the cycles of life and death with every means available to us. As medical miracles are performed, we begin to think that we can even cheat death itself. Death has no longer become a part of the cycle of life, but an unwanted intruder. If we spend enough money, say enough prayers, visit enough doctors and hospitals, will death really stay away?

And so we don't, by and large, talk about death to our loved ones, we rarely plan or prepare for it adequately. Or, if we do, it's almost as if we are doing so under protest. We don't give ourselves the time for acceptance, and for healing, in the face of the inevitable. And so we feel all too often torn from our moorings, our faith feels undermined, our hope seems to fade, when we are visited by the inevitable.

But life continues, the cycles roll on, the seasons change. And just as we cannot control the length of the seasons, so too we cannot control the time for mourning, when its time comes, as it surely must.

Yet we know that eventually, in most cases, after the time of mourning, there IS a time to dance. The time varies for each individual. It's not that we forget what we were sad about. But our time for remembering should not prevent us from moving on, from continuing in the dance of life. There is a time to wrap up what is painful in the tissues of joy. There is a time to learn to accept that which for so long seemed unacceptable. And every once in a while, when the November of our lives sets in once again, we can unpack the memories of love, of warmth, of forgiveness, of laughter - bittersweet though such memories may be.

For love is not forgotten. A person does not have to be famous to be remembered. This church and OUR memories stand as a testimony to those who have gone before. And even when we are not here, physically, in this place, we can carry within ourselves the remembrance of things past. As we in-gather this November, whether with family and friends in an old setting, or with faces missing from a familiar table, or with new friends in a new place - whatever our personal story, may we call to remembrance that there is a time for every season: a time for endings, a time for beginnings, and a time to answer God's call, made not only to us, but to all persons in every generation, to remain faithful to His Word.

All that, my friends, is part of what defines us as Christians. For we are a people who tell stories, and through those stories, we remember. We tell stories of long ago, and have enshrined those stories in what we call our scriptures. We tell stories of heroes, of those who stumbled, of the well-intentioned, of those who fell short. We tell stories of our town, our country, our community of faith. We tell stories of sacrifice, of love, of concern, of indecision. We remember times of crisis, times of despair, times of testing, times of love divine, all loves excelling. And what makes us Christians is that within OUR stories of remembrance, we can discern the hand of God at work.

So let us work with the hand of God, and not at cross-purposes with Him, as we write new stories with the remaining seasons that have been allotted to us, so that in future times, as succeeding generations look back during THEIR Novembers, they can regard us with thanksgiving, knowing that we have lived in faithfulness, having remembered the age-old promises of God. Let us pray.