

Sermon: "What we remember." Text: Ezekiel 37:1-14 7& Luke 2:27-38 November 11, 2018

Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa ON Rev. Steve Clifton

On this morning, on this date, 100 years ago, a young Canadian infantryman was with his squad in Belgium. His name was Claude.

Claude grew up in rural eastern Ontario, and his family farmed land that was mainly rock, soil stretched thin over the Canadian Shield. Their life was hard. They raised some skinny cows, grew meager crops, cut lumber...When war was declared he was eager to join. A uniform. 3 square meals a day. Adventure in a foreign land. And he would be home by Christmas. He enlisted in 1914 and as he was just 15 years old he lied about his age to get into the army.

When he arrived in England, his birth date was discovered. A fifteen year old could not be sent into combat on the Western Front. So he was sent north, to Scotland. He served as a tree cutter and lumberman. Logs and lumber were needed to make battlements and to shore up trenches. In 1917 Claude turned 18, and he was transferred to the infantry. He was sent into battle and as the war neared its end, he was in Belgium.

On this morning 100 years ago Claude and his squad were tasked with securing a barn in the Belgian countryside. They found it was occupied by German machine gunners. On this morning 100 years ago, just hours before the Armistice would be declared, Claude and his companion threw grenades into the barn and killed the German soldiers inside.

It was more than 7 decades after this event when Claude shared this memory with me. As he approached another Remembrance Day he remembered November 11 1918. The events of that morning in Belgium weighed on him still.

Over the summer, I listened to the podcast *Serial*. I was 4 years late in getting to this NPR radio documentary that was a really big thing when it was first released. The podcast revisits a crime and a possible wrongful conviction and asks people to remember a particular afternoon 15 years ago. And one of the things the documentary makes clear is that we don't remember. If asked what we were doing at a particular time on a Friday afternoon 15 years ago, we would not remember, and what we might think we remember would be pretty unreliable, probably not accurate at all.

Serial makes clear that much of our past we don't remember. But then there are things we never forget. Remember the weather on your wedding day? I remember that it was a cloudy day but that as we got to the front of the church, the sun came out. Really. We have pictures.

Do you remember the birth of your children? Or where you were on 9/11?

Some memories stick. Some events are seared into our memories.

This fall we witnessed the testimony of Christine Blasey Ford in the Brett Kavanaugh Senate hearings, as she spoke of events that occurred decades before. While most memories fade, a traumatic event like an assault may be retained in our memories with significant clarity, even after years have passed.

Veterans of war may hold memories that they cannot forget – memories like Claude's recollection of the morning of the Armistice. Many of those memories are not shared, or are spoken of rarely.

In a recent CBC interview Rob Martin, a veteran of Afghanistan, spoke of the struggles that some veterans have with PTSD. He spoke of suppressing memory, and of pushing down the emotions that the memories bring, which leads to the suppression of all emotions, which leaves some veterans feeling empty, lifeless, disconnected from life. The suppression of painful memory for some veterans can take a toll as their minds and their bodies struggle to carry the unspoken trauma of war.

On this Remembrance Day it is not just the fallen that we remember: it is also those whose lives were never the same again – soldiers, sailors and airmen, and their families and friends. Remembrance Day is a chance to share in the silence of those affected by war, to try to listen, to try to understand even if we ourselves do not remember war.

On this Remembrance Day 2018 it will be 100 years since the end of the First World War: at the 11th hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month of 1918 the Armistice was declared ending the Great War.

We remember... those who have died, those who have served... and we might remember those who still carry the wounds of conflict within. We can remember that 1/3 of Afghan veterans report difficulty in adjusting back to civilian life, that Afghan vets report high rates of PTSD, in part due to the high number of tours that Canadian combatants served in that recent war. We can note that five per cent of homeless people here in Ottawa are identified as veterans.

And might we remember too this day those who were noncombatant casualties of conflict. In Canada these have been very few but globally in the 20th Century it is estimated that 37million combatants died in war, and that war led to a further 27 million collateral civilian deaths, and that in the last century 41 million civilians were killed by deliberate action: genocide in one form or another. And is Canada is a nation of immigrants there are those among us from faraway places who were noncombatants and who still carry memories of war,

I was sharing a service at a senior's home not long ago and invited people to reflect on what they had to be thankful for...After the service an elderly woman, with a bright English accent shared a story with me.

In 1940, she was a school girl living in the English city of Coventry. The German Luftwaffe was bombing her city; Coventry, an industrial metal working city, would be completely destroyed in

November of 1940. She was then 8 years old and she and her 6 year old sister were sent to rural Leicestershire to keep them safe from the bombing.

One morning as they left the bomb shelter where they had spent the night to head to school, they could see German bombers passing overhead, returning from a bombing raid on an English city. The 2 girls were making their way across the fields toward school when she saw one of the German planes dip and turn, now diving quickly in their direction. She ran, pulling her sister along with her, as the German plane opened fire on them. They were terrified but escaped the machine gun bullets. And now all these years later, when she thinks about being thankful, she remembers that morning and is thankful for all the years she has lived since that day.

To remember. It's good to recall that Scripture often speaks of how God remembers. As we remember today, God too remembers. If ever, God forbid, we forget those who have sacrificed for our freedom, for peace for justice, those who hold memories of war, God will not forget. God, scripture says, remembers God's own mercy, promises, steadfast love, and faithfulness. God remembers... and those things of God are with us now as we remember.