

“How to Save a Life”

1 Timothy 6:11-13a

2 Samuel 23:13-17

Matthew 16:24-26

Elijah Parish Lovejoy was an ancestor of mine. Born in 1802, he was a Presbyterian minister, a journalist, and an abolitionist. In 1832, he set up a church in St. Louis, then a slave state, and worked as the editor of the *St. Louis Observer*. He wrote editorials on the evils of slavery, challenging fellow Americans to condemn and remove this evil from their midst. He was attacked, threatened – even his family was terrorized. Three times, anti-abolitionists discovered and destroyed his printing press. Friends and enemies alike warned him against carrying on. They told him not to speak out.

In 1837, he moved with his family to the town of Alton in Illinois, a free state. He started a newspaper called the *Alton Observer* so that he could keep on writing, keep on reporting, keep working to change hearts and minds. On the 61st anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Lovejoy wrote a fiery editorial in the face of the celebration all around him. He wrote: "What bitter mockery is this. We assemble to thank God for our own freedom, and to eat and drink with joy and gladness of heart, while our feet are on the necks of nearly three million of our fellow men. Not all our shouts of self-congratulation can drown their groans. Even that very flag of freedom that waves over their heads is formed from materials cultivated by slaves, on a soil moistened with their blood." His writing got more and more impassioned and he refused to be silenced in his Christian mission to the oppressed, the vulnerable. He broke no law and yet the threats of violence increased. He protested his innocence and his right to free speech and freedom of the press. On November 2, 1837, he made this appeal to the city of Alton:

“I do, therefore, as an American citizen, and Christian patriot, and in the name of Liberty, and Law, and Religion, solemnly protest against all these attempts... to frown down the liberty of the press, and forbid the free expression of opinion. Under a deep sense of my obligations to my country, the church, and my G-d, I declare it to be my fixed purpose to submit to no such dictation. And I am prepared to abide the consequences. I have appealed to the constitution and laws of my country; if they fail to protect me, I appeal to G-d, and with Him I cheerfully rest my cause.

“Fellow-citizens, they told me that if I returned to the city, from my late absence, you would surely lay violent hands upon me, and many of my friends besought me not to come. I disregarded their advice, because I plainly saw, or thought I saw, that the Lord would have me come. And up to this moment that conviction of duty has continued to strengthen, until now I have not a shadow of doubt that I did right. I have appeared openly among you, in your streets and market-places, and now I openly and publicly throw myself into your hands. I can die at my post, but I cannot desert it.”

On November 7, 1837, a mere five days after this speech, the warehouse where he kept his printing press was attacked by a pro-slavery mob. Lovejoy had some supporters with him, trying to defend the press, but they were overcome. Lovejoy was shot five times and died on the spot. Several others died and were wounded. The mob carried the press to the window, threw it out to the riverbank, and cast the broken pieces into the Mississippi River. The case went to trial, but no one was convicted. After all, the jury foreman had been a member of the mob that was wounded in the attack and the presiding judge had spoken as a witness to the events. Is it any wonder that no one was guilty? Lovejoy was buried in an unmarked grave. Even his own newspaper did not report his death because those who opposed slavery feared the rise in

violence. At the age of 34, Elijah Parish Lovejoy took up his cross and followed Christ, even to his death. He wrote for truth, he wrote for justice, he wrote that all might be free. “I can die at my post, but I cannot desert it.”

This past Friday, we recognized Veterans Day, each in our own way. In some ways, it’s a day that divides us – civilians and soldiers; people awash in military culture and those totally outside it; Americans weighed down with loss and others for whom it’s all abstract. For all enlistees and officers, military service begins with an oath. This oath does not offer exceptions for presidents from the wrong party, for officers who make me do things I don’t want to do (within reason); the oath commits the soldier to go where they would not otherwise go, trusting that they are being sent out for good in this world and for the people back home.

Even knowing that every human heart is corruptible, soldiers commit themselves to working towards that greater good, trusting that those in power will honor that responsibility. For this ideal, they lay everything on the line. Whether one tour or a lifetime commitment, they sacrifice years of their lives, the comforts of home, relationships with spouses, partners, and loved ones, once in a lifetime milestones and everyday moments with kids. They sacrifice safety, security, even sometimes life itself to try to be a force for good.

Our story from David’s life this morning has long been a puzzle to me. It’s part of a series of stories near the end of what the Bible records about David. But it’s in a special subsection – sort of an anthology of heroes, a retrospective of daring feats from the life and times of David as a great commander. It seems like these stories come from pretty early in David’s career, but we have no idea exactly when in his life this would have happened. The Philistines had been attacking the Israelites since the time of the judges and they had skirmishes off and on until the Assyrians came conquering in 732 BC. Their wars don’t appear to be a constant

onslaught – more of a seasonal spate of attacks when the weather was good enough to support troop movements or when one side or the other got irritated. In any case, the Philistines had smiths and the Israelites didn't. So, like the Caananites, they had a tactical advantage over the Israelites. The Philistines' culture and technology were advanced beyond the Israelites and they also outnumbered them in most battles. In one of the earliest fights in 1 Samuel, they stole the ark of the covenant, only to be plagued by, well, a plague until they gave it back to Israel. The bad blood went back a long way.

And David built his reputation largely through great feats of victory over the Philistines. While Saul had some victories and some defeats (especially when he broke G-d's trust), David was ever victorious and ever more beloved. Across the land, even in towns that were loyal to Saul's kingship, David was respected as a great soldier and commander who held G-d's favor. Saul kept sending him off to battle, thinking surely one of the Philistines would cut him down, but David always re-emerged.

So, once upon a time, there was a battle at the beginning of the harvest time. It was hot, dry weather and David and his men were garrisoned at the stronghold of Adullam. The Philistines were in Bethlehem. Bethlehem was David's hometown. Sure, he had been a shepherd, travelling with the flocks around the countryside, but Bethlehem was home. And it was filled with a powerful enemy who wanted to expand their territory and control. Perhaps weary from the strain of battle, David sighed, "Oh, if only someone would fetch me a drink of water from the well of Bethlehem!" Whatever water they had in storage tanks wasn't clear or cool; it did not satisfy. After a long fight, David couldn't help but think of the well – the living water that flowed by home, his favorite one. I can't imagine that he ever expected anyone to do anything about it. But three of his great chiefs went to fetch it for him. Understand, this wasn't a matter of just, ya

know, heading to the store for some fancy, glass bottle mineral water. These three soldiers had to break through enemy lines, go 12 miles, and then get water from a city with an enemy unit stationed there. Did they fight their way through? Did they do it all in stealth mode? We'll never know, but they got the water and offered it to the commander that they respected and would follow even to the ends of the earth.

And I can just picture David when they present it to him – the thoughts that must have gone through his head! These three soldiers risked their lives: not for victory, not to advance the cause of their army, really not even out of religious fervor. They risked their lives to bring an ease and a comfort to their commander. In a way, that moment, that gesture throws into sharp relief everything that they are sacrificing, everything that they are risking to be there, to fight with David. It might seem like David was being wasteful or disregarding what they were offering him, but by offering that same gift to G-d, David is pointing to the One who is worthy of such devotion, the one for whom they are all willing to risk their lives.

Sometimes we just accept the risks, sacrifices, and bitter losses that happen on our behalf...or we think only of our own sacrifices and discount what others have given that came before us or after us. But if we ever take a moment to realize what has gone into this moment just in the life of our nation...the pilgrims who risked total uncertainty to come to a new land, every native American who fell by the sword or disease, the people of faith who dared to read scripture for themselves despite the cost, the countless slaves whose lives amounted to torture, those who risked life and reputation to stand against slavery and reshape this nation. Or even in our modern era, how much thought do we give to the firefighters on call? The police on patrol? The garbage collectors and the janitors and the teachers working their fingers to the bone in positions that are rarely celebrated. Because others work, often thankless jobs, we can be here now. We have an

opportunity to honor what others have given by doing something real and beautiful with our lives. We can take pause and remember this and pour out our lives as a libation, a living offering, to the Lord.

Jesus tells us that if we want to follow him, we have to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him. The cross was the Roman empire's way of punishing all who did not fall into line; it was their way of executing those who dared to stand against the empire's own interest for control, wealth, and domination. The cross was meant to be public shaming of people who had other ideas about how to live and work and worship.

Jesus tells us, take up your cross – be a person who puts empire to shame. Know that Christ gave it all so that whatever we sacrifice when we truly follow him is blessed. Elijah Parish Lovejoy believed he received a light of truth from G-d to stand against slavery and to speak with the freedom that G-d gave him. He believed that fighting for the best of what our nation stands for is not the sole domain of a soldier – it is something that belongs to each citizen, for all of us to weigh in our hearts what wisdom and power and truth that G-d has given to all of us.

When we take up the cross, like David we honor those who have sacrificed in our service and like Elijah Parish Lovejoy we know that a life that is pleasing to G-d ultimately outshines any displeasure that we may experience or cause those who have not yet seen the light. Honor these sacrifices and Christ's once and for all death on the cross by loving and serving with your whole being. The way that we save our lives is by learning to trust, discern, and act out Christ's higher calling for our lives. Let us fight the good fight along with all other believers, remembering the bonds of love that we share with one another in Christ. As people of faith, we can echo Lovejoy: we can die at our posts, but we cannot desert them. Amen.