

Fort Henry Guard Club of Canada Drumhead Ceremony 2023

This is the message delivered by Rev. Mike Putnam, FHG 1813, at the Drumhead Ceremony, which took place at Fort Henry on the morning of Sunday, August 6, 2023 as part of the 85th Reunion.



“Holy Remembering”

“Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn; look to Abraham your father, and to Sarah, who gave you birth. When I called him he was only one man, and I blessed him and made him many.”

This morning God’s word has implored us to remember. To remember what? To remember our ancestors. To remember where we came from. To remember our history.

The context of this passage from Isaiah is Isaiah is speaking to a people in exile. They’re living somewhere else. They’re no longer in the land that God had given them, but they are living under a foreign king in Babylon. And for the most part they’re doing just fine.

Because Babylonian living isn’t so bad, it turns out. Life is comfortable there. Working for King Nebuchadnezzar has certain benefits. Some are even becoming wealthy. They’re getting kind of used to life far from God and God’s ways.

But none the less, God wants his people to remember. To remember what? To remember their history, to remember where they came from, to remember what God has done for God's people in the past.

Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann says it is so important that we remember for two reasons. First, "We live in a society that remembers almost nothing, and our children are mostly committed to a careless amnesia. But if we don't remember then we imagine that this life is a thinly-present-tense construct.

The other reason, he says, is that "If we forget, then we imagine that life was only a lucky break, a stumbling accident."

Fort Henry National Historic Site is a place dedicated to remembering. We remember a particular history – the story of the defence of the Kingston region at the confluence of three strategically important waterways.

But we also remember, particularly on days like these, a history of remembering remembering. We remember how we remembered.

We remember those who dedicated their university and college summers to bringing to life this slice of our nation's history.

We remember names like Ronald L. Way, who conceived the idea of a military Guard to bring these old stones to life. But we also remember many other names. We remember those who worked so diligently to sustain and improve the interpretive presence here year after year.

I grew up in Fort Henry Guard family. My dad was a cadet as a teenager and was later in the squad and earned the rank of Sergeant Instructor of Musketry in the early 1970's. My uncle was an ensign in the late 60's. My wife and I met here, in the Drums, in the late 1990's.

Growing up, the names of those who were in the Guard with my dad were household names. Stories were often told. He proudly displayed photos in his study, his brass cannon sat atop his desk.

But my dad's time here at Fort Henry was not about great selfies and nifty awards. It was about being part of something that seemed to matter, something that was bigger than himself.

And that's what caught my attention. I wanted to be part of that too. I wanted to be one of those faces in this big red machine marching across the parade square. I wanted to give tours, stand sentry, and talk to the public about history. I wanted to pull the lanyard on that massive gun with a team of seven other strong young people ready to heave it back into position.

Reaching for excellence, pushing past physical boundaries, keeping the standards high, the Guard has always stood for something more than just a nostalgic remembering of the “olden days.”

The Guard has stood as a memorial – a living memorial to those who served, to those who gave everything, to those who, for better or worse, did what they thought was best for the good of the whole.

The Guard is where I learned what it means to belong to something that was so much bigger than myself. Which is a priceless life lesson. It’s an essential part of following Jesus, actually. Jesus says, “Take up your cross and follow me.”

He doesn’t say “make yourself the hero of your own story,” or “Make sure you get the accolades you deserve.” He says, “Take up your cross and follow...”. To be a Christian is to practice self-forgetfulness for the sake of the whole.

How many hours did many of us spend on this parade square learning to disappear – to not stand out – to look more and more like the person next to you. “Last one, Putnam!” shouted the Drum Major. There’s nothing worse than being the last one – the goal was to disappear.

The goal was to be in perfect unity. Just as the goal of a Christian is for people to see less and less of you and more and more of Christ in your everyday living. But that doesn’t come naturally or easily.

Through the most challenging training, slowly and surely, at times painfully, we learned to not be unique individuals on our own quest for self-actualization, but to operate as part of the whole, for the good of the whole.

And the results were stunning, exquisite, they were a memorial to help the world remember that things aren’t so “thinly present tense.”

So, this morning we gather to remember those who once marched upon this square, who contributed to the story being told here. Many of these names will be unfamiliar to us, others may have been old friends.

But we gather today to remember. Because we share a common story. We share a common experience.

It’s not uncommon for me to run into a former Fort Henry Guard who served in a very different time, but we can instantly strike up a conversation that moves into stories and laughter. Why? Because we once lost ourselves in this incredible vocation of remembering. And in losing ourselves, in a sense, we found ourselves.

But Isaiah doesn't leave us simply remembering. He has another prophetic move to offer us this morning.

He moves from remembering to restoration. He goes on to say, "The Lord will surely comfort Zion and will look with compassion on all her ruins; he will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the Lord. Joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the sound of singing."

See, this is why remembering is so important. This is the culmination of our acts of remembering. We remember so that we may live faithfully in the midst of exile. Sustaining the old old story that finds its fulfillment in the complete restoration, renewal and redemption of all things affects how we live today.

And so, we have come to remember. This is a solemn time. It is a sad time. It's a time, when perhaps we're faced with our own mortality. These names we are about to read were once young men and women who lived out their most vigorous days here on the parade square at Fort Henry.

But our duty is not simply to remember, but to remember in the context of the great and sweeping story that God is telling.

And today is a good day to remind ourselves of the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In God we find comfort and compassion. But even more so, we find our ultimate hope.

All of this remembering is important. Not simply because reminiscing is nice, but because when we remember the past, we discover a God who was present, who sustained us, a God who protected us, a God who calls us to be part of something bigger than ourselves.

And when at last, life's days ebb to a close, we discover that because of God, all that seems lost is not lost at all. What seems gone is just awaiting resurrection.

Because in our remembering we know what God has done in the past, we know that death was once defeated fully and finally, and we know that in Christ all will be made new again, and the story we've been telling has a glorious and wonderful ending through him.

So today is a good day to remember. And when we do, the motto of the Fort Henry Guard rings true. Et Nos Meremur— We Also serve!

Thanks be to God, Amen.