

Preaching for the Remembrance Service of Orville and Eva Johnson
October 5, 2018

I suspect it is typical for anyone going through the various funeral rites for someone close to themselves, for instance, a parent or two, to hold on to at least a few particularly vivid memories from those days.

For the rites of committal for both of my parents, Orville “Doc” and Eva, one of these vivid memories is the same. They are buried, now side by side, in a cemetery in Lake Benton, Minnesota, on what is called Memorial Hill. Lake Benton is just seven miles from where I and my sister grew up, Tyler, Minnesota; it is where my Dad grew up, and, after moving away for a little while, eventually lived again and for a few years taught high school in the 1960s, and where he met my mother, his wife.

Lake Benton is also on what is known at least locally as “Buffalo Ridge” – a diagonal strip of land in southwestern Minnesota just a bit higher up in altitude than anything else around it, left there by receding glaciers many thousands of years ago. It is always a few degrees colder on Buffalo Ridge, and the wind, already an every day occurrence where I come from, is a few miles per hour stronger. And Memorial Hill, in Lake Benton, is surrounded on all sides by giant evergreen trees, many of which certainly date from the inception of the cemetery. Not only do my parents now rest there, but many of my father’s ancestors do too – one of them even donated the land which is now the Catholic portion of that cemetery.

Hearing the wind, on both days rushing at some 20-30 miles per hour through the branches of these tall and stately evergreen trees is a sound which will remain with me forever, and, whenever I might hear that sort of sound again, it will return me to those two particular days in March 2008, and September 2018.

Another of these particularly vivid memories is more relevant to our gathering here tonight. The music, scripture, and prayers selected for this service tonight are a bit of liturgical potpourri, drawn from the varied moments from the days of laying my mom and dad to rest. Tonight's Gospel passage is likely a familiar one to those who have been to Catholic funeral vigil services; it was the Gospel passage read at my Mom's vigil ten years ago.

The pastor of the the Catholic Church in Tyler, Minneosta, St. Dionysius, was Fr. Sam Perez at that time. Tyler is in the New Ulm diocese, which is a rural, mission diocese. Fr. Sam is from Guatemala originally, and was serving, and continues to this day to serve, in various parishes of the diocese. At the time of my mother's funeral, he had been speaking English for only three years. Given that fact, his command of the language, a difficult one for many who have reason to learn it as a second language, was extraordinary – but not perfect.

My mother died on March 17, which most of us know as St. Patrick's day. In 2008, March 17 also happened to be Monday of Holy Week, which meant I turned over the various devotions and liturgies of that most sacred time to trusted associates, and instead celebrated the Triduum back home in Minnesota.

The first glimpse of Fr. Sam's occasional lapses with his newly-learned language occurred on Good Friday, as he was voicing the words of Jesus in the proclamation of the Passion. Fr. Sam had, and presumably still has, a voice which is just a bit gruff and abrupt sounding, not unlike perhaps a military officer. Simon Peter, early in John's telling of the passion, had just cut off Malchus's ear, during Jesus's arrest. I'm not sure if Peter's *scabbard* had fallen off in all the ruckus, but Jesus, through Fr. Sam, calmly but sternly told Peter to "... put the sword into the *cupboard*, shall I not drink the cup the Father gave me?"

Due to the rites of Holy Week, the vigil service for mom wasn't until Easter Sunday night. Probably with very little time to prepare, Fr. Sam ably led us through a service not unlike tonight's. He arose to proclaim the Gospel, the same one as tonight, and in a similar calm-but-stern voice warned us: "Be prepared. Jesus told his disciples: '*Guard* your *lions* and light your lamps ...' " So, rather than readying ourselves by tying up our loose garments to give ourselves a bit more freedom of movement if necessary, we now had to figure out such things as if we in fact had any lions, where they might be presently, and what we might do to guard them from ... from whatever it is that might concern a lion. I remember thinking at that time, toward the end of my studies here at Aquinas Institute, "*Hey, aren't Christians supposed to be a bit wary of lions? Why are we now suddenly supposed to be guarding them?*"

Lions, though, are not relevant to the Christian experience only as fierce and hungry animals used in the persecutions of the early Church. There is much rich symbolism which we can explore. In Genesis, the patriarch Jacob ("Israel") gave that symbol to the Tribe of Judah when he referred to his son Judah as a *Gur Aryeh*, a "Young Lion" when blessing him.

St. John, in exile on Patmos, wrote: "And one of the elders said unto me, Weep not: behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has prevailed to open the book, and to loosen the seven seals thereof." This is widely regarded as a reference to Jesus among Christians. Matthew the Evangelist is typically symbolized by a winged lion, perhaps because of the inclusion in his Gospel of the genealogy of Jesus. C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* is probably the most famous modern depiction of Jesus as a lion.

St. Isidore of Seville explains a few of the attributes that make the lion a formidable animal:

"The lion is the king of all beasts, thus its name in Greek (leo) means 'king' in Latin... Their courage is seen in their front and tail; their endurance is in the head; and their strength is in the chest. If they are surrounded by hunters with spears, they look at the ground so as not to become frightened ... They sleep with their eyes open. When lions walk, they erase their tracks with their tail so hunters cannot follow them."

Thus, the lion is often used in art to represent strength, courage, majesty, and fortitude. Strength, courage, majesty, and fortitude. We'll come back to these attributes in a moment.

The poem "We Remember Them" by Sylvan Kamens & Rabbi Jack Riemer is often included in a musical setting by Elaine Broad at a service called *Yizkor*, a service of remembrance, at the end of Yom Kippur, the conclusion of the holiest days for our Jewish brothers and sisters. My father died some 28 hours or so last month before Yom Kippur began the following evening. So, because of my great responsibilities to four of the Yom Kippur services here in town at Congregation Shaare Emeth, I came back to St. Louis following my father's death to help many local Jews pray these solemn services. Side note: yes, if you're keeping track, this means my mother died during Holy Week and my father in the middle of the High Holy Days, almost as if to get the attention of the hardworking liturgical musician son of theirs.

But I digress. The poem, "We Remember Them" is a litany of the many, many times we are reminded of our loved ones, particularly our parents, who have passed away: *At the rising sun and at its going down; We remember them. At the blowing of the wind and in the chill of winter; We remember them.... At the rustling of the leaves and in the beauty of autumn; We remember them....* At its end, it shares with its listeners these words: *For as long as we live, they too will live, for they are now a part of us, as we remember them.*

48 hours after my Dad's death, my eyes welled up with tears as I conducted a group of eight singers from the St. Louis Chamber Chorus presenting these words in a lovely moment of musical reflection, pondering my Dad and all the lost loved ones of those gathered in prayer that afternoon.

Strength, courage, majesty, and fortitude: do these "lions" continue to live on as part of us, as we remember all of our lost loved ones? Do we, in fact, guard these lions by keeping watch over our precious memories, and does this in turn affect how we live our lives today, formed and shaped by those who have gone before us? In a few moments of silence now, let us take some time to discern: what are the "lions" given to each of us by our ancestors, by our ancestors in faith? How else is it that we can "guard" them, beyond our keeping memories?

At an hour we do not expect, the Son of Man will come. Will he find us "guarding our lions?"