Jeremiah 1:4-10

4 Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, 5 "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." 6 Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." 7 But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, "I am only a boy"; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. 8 Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord." 9 Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth. 10 See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."


4:21 Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

22 All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" 23 He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'"

24 And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. 25 But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and
there was a severe famine over all the land; 26 yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. 27 There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.

28 When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. 29 They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. 30 But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

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Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and the Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

A week ago Friday I spent time with Barb Holderby. She was surrounded by about 200 family members, friends, and sailors in formation at the chapel on Fort Myer as they gathered to worship and commend her husband, Chaplain Byron Holderby, to God. Chaplain Holderby served as chief of chaplains for the US Navy from 1998 through 2000. And in a previous tour, he served as command chaplain here at the US Naval Academy. We all gathered in what was called a Celebration of the Resurrection of Chaplain Byron Holderby. We are all part of that community of faith, whether physically present with Barb and her loved ones, to uphold one another in our journey of resurrection faith.

As was noted in the introduction welcoming me to the St Andrew’s Chapel here at the US Naval Academy, my ties to military chaplaincy are long and deep. I am honored to stand among others who carry forward the heritage of selfless service. The ranks of our US military chaplaincy include true heroes of faith – including four Army chaplains who modeled courage, faith, and service to God while at Sea. I want to tell you their true story.
70 years ago today, February 3rd 1943, was an important night on the seas in WWII. And the story began months before, between May and July 1942. Four men:

George Fox, Clark Poling, Alexander Goode, and John Washington entered the U.S. Army chaplaincy.

Reverend George Fox, approaching 50 years old, returned to military service in the Army from Vermont. He rejoined the same day his 18-year-old son, Wyatt, enlisted in the Marine Corps. Years earlier, during World War I, at the time actually aged 17, Fox convinced Army recruiters he was 18 and enlisted as a medical corps assistant. His courage on the battlefield earned him the Silver Star, the Croix de Guerre from France, and the Purple Heart in that war. He was back in uniform – as a chaplain.

When World War II broke out, Fox – now a Methodist minister – said, "I've got to go. I know from experience what our boys are about to face. They need me." He didn't rejoin the Army to heal wounds of the body as he had during the earlier war. Reverend Fox joined the Chaplains Corps to heal wounds of the soul.

Second, Reverend Clark V. Poling was a native of Ohio and as a young minister, pastor of a Dutch Reformed congregation in New York. When World War II threatened world freedom, Reverend Poling determined to enter the Army, but not as a Chaplain. "I'm not going to hide behind the church in some safe office out of the firing line," he told his father when he informed him of plans to serve his country.

Poling’s father knew something of war, having served as a Chaplain himself during World War I. He told his son, "Don't you know that chaplains have the highest mortality rate of all? As a chaplain you'll have the best chance in the world to be killed. You just can't carry a gun to kill anyone yourself." With new appreciation for the role of the Chaplains Corps, the young Reverend Clark Poling accepted a commission and followed in his father's footsteps. Actually, chaplains were second in the rate at which they were killed in combat based on their rather small overall numbers – first in casualty rate was the infantry.
Third, like Clark Poling, Alexander Goode, too, followed the steps of his own father in ministry. Rabbi Alexander Goode’s first years of service were in Marion, Indiana; then he moved on to a synagogue in York, Pennsylvania. While previously studying at a rabbinical school and preparing to minister to the needs of others, "Alex" had joined the National Guard. When war was declared, he wanted more than ever to serve the spiritual needs of those who went in harm's way to defend freedom and human dignity. In 1942 Rabbi Goode transferred from the Guard to active duty as a U.S. Army Chaplain.

Fourth, one look at the bespeckled, mild-mannered Father John P. Washington would leave one with the impression that he was not the sort of man to go to war or become a hero. However, his love of music and beautiful voice belied the toughness inside. One of nine children in an Irish immigrant family living in the roughest part of Newark, New Jersey, John Washington learned through sheer determination to hold his own in any fight. By the time he was a teenager he was the leader of the South Twelfth Street Gang in Newark. Then God called him to ministry, returning him to those Newark streets to organize sports teams, play ball with young boys who needed a strong friend to look up to, and inspire others with his beautiful hymns of praise and thanksgiving.

Upon meeting at the Chaplains' school, these four men quickly became friends.

Around Christmas, 1942 these four chaplains were mustered to board a troop replacement ship in New York bound across the Atlantic in the winter of early 1943. Aboard the US Army Transport Dorchester, the chaplains leaned on each other for strength, even as they tried daily to offer strength to others.

With so many men crammed into so small a space aboard the ship, all needed the ray of hope spiritual encouragement could provide. Differences ceased to be important. All of the soldiers aboard the Dorchester shared the same level of misery and fear, whether Protestant, Catholic, or Jew. The title "Rabbi", "Father", or "Pastor" was of little consequence when someone needed and wanted a chaplain. A prayer from Rabbi Goode could give strength to the Catholic soldier as quickly as a hymn from the beautiful voice of Father Washington could warm the heart of a Protestant. The Jewish soldier facing an uncertain future on foreign shores could draw
on the strength of a Protestant to help him face tomorrow. When turning to a spiritual guide who offers the hand of hope, we simply thank God for the helping hand offered.

Like a fair amount of military life, the Atlantic crossing was filled with long hours of boredom and spikes of terror. The chilly Arctic winds and cold ocean spray coated the Dorchester's deck with ice. Below, the soldiers' quarters were hot from too many bodies, crammed into too small a place, for too many days in a row. Finally, on February 2nd, the Dorchester approached within 150 miles of Greenland, a crucial waypoint.

Drawing near land would have generated a great sense of relief among the young soldiers crowded in the ship's berths. However, this good news was tempered by other news of grave concern. One of the Dorchester's three Coast Guard escort cutters received sonar readings during the day indicating the presence of an enemy submarine in an area known as “Torpedo Junction.” Boredom and terror.

The Dorchester's captain listened to the news with great concern. The human lives in his care had been at sea for ten days, and he was finally nearing safety. If he could make it through the night, air cover would arrive with daybreak to guide his ship to port. The problem – surviving the night. Aware of the potential for attack, he instructed soldiers to sleep in their clothes and life jackets....just in case.

Below deck however, it was hot and sweaty. Many men, calculating tomorrow would dawn without incident, slept in their underwear. The life jackets were hot and bulky; many men set them aside as an unnecessary inconvenience.

Outside it was another cold, windy night as the midnight watch signaled the passing of February 2nd and the beginning of a new day, February 3rd 1943. In the distance a metal periscope broke the surface of the stormy seas. At the end of that arm, a German U-Boat (submarine) captain monitored the slowly-passing troop transport. Shortly before one in the morning he gave the command to fire: one torpedo, two torpedo.

Quiet moments passed as silent death buzzed toward the men of the Dorchester. The early morning darkness was frightfully shattered by the flash of a blinding explosion and the roar of massive destruction. The first torpedo "hit" was dead on, tossing men from their cots with the force of its
explosion. The second followed the first. Instantly, 100 were killed of more than 900 onboard the ship.

All power on the ship was knocked out by the explosion. Darkness engulfed the frightened men below deck as water rushed through gaping wounds in the *Dorchester's* hull. The ship tilted at an unnatural angle, sinking rapidly. Piles of clothes, equipment, and life jackets were pitched into the darkness where no one would ever find them. Wounded men cried out in pain, frightened survivors screamed in terror. All groped frantically in darkness for exits they could find only by feel. In this chaos, four voices of calm spoke words of comfort, seeking to bring order to panic, focus to the bedlam.

Slowly soldiers began to find their way to the deck of the ship, many still in their underwear where they confronted icy winds blowing down from the arctic. One survivor reported, Petty Officer John J. Mahoney, reeling from the cold, headed back along a passageway towards his berth. "Where are you going?" a voice of calm in the sea of distress asked.

"To get my gloves," Mahoney replied.

"Here, take these," said Rabbi Goode as he handed a pair of gloves to the young petty officer who would never have survived the trip to his cabin and then back to a life boat.

"I can't take those gloves," Mahoney replied.

"Never mind," the Rabbi responded. "I have two pairs." Mahoney slipped the gloves over his hands, never stopping to ponder until later when he reached safety, there was no way Rabbi Goode would have been carrying a spare set of gloves. As that thought finally dawned on him he came to a new understanding of what was transpiring in the mind of the fearless Chaplain. Somehow, Rabbi Goode already recognized that he would not need these gloves, and we would likely not leave the *Dorchester* alive.

Before boarding the *Dorchester* back in January, Reverend Poling had asked his father to pray for him, "*Not for my safe return, that wouldn't be fair. Just pray that I shall do my duty...never be a coward...and have the strength, courage and understanding of men. Just pray that I shall be adequate.*" He probably never dreamed that his prayer request would be answered so fully. As he guided the frightened soldiers to their only hope of
safety from the rapidly sinking transport, he spoke calm words of encouragement, urging them not to give up.

Likewise Reverend Fox and Father Washington stood out for their inner strength and courage. Wounded and dying soldiers were ushered into eternity to the sounds of comforting words from these men of God more intent on the needs of others, than in their own safety and survival. Somehow, by their valiant efforts, the chaplains succeeded in getting many soldiers out of the hold and onto the Dorchester’s slippery deck.

In the chaos around them, life boats floated away before men could board them. Others capsized as panic overturned reason and soldiers loaded the small crafts beyond limits. The strength, calm, and organization of the four chaplains link for those who managed to escape the dark hull. Now, out on deck, their mission continued.

They organized the effort, directed men to safety, and sent them off with parting words of encouragement. In little more than twenty minutes, the Dorchester was almost gone. Icy waves broke over the railing, tossing men into the sea, many of them without life jackets. In the last moments of the transport’s existence, the Chaplains were too occupied opening lockers to pass out life jackets to note the threat to their own lives.

In less than half an hour after the first torpedo strike, water flowed across the deck of the Dorchester. Working against time the Chaplains continued to pass out life vests from the lockers as the soldiers pressed forward in a ragged line. And then....the lockers were all empty...the life jackets gone. Those still pressing in line began to realize they were doomed, there was no hope.

Then something amazing happened, something those who were there would never forget. All Four Chaplains took off their own life jackets....and put them on the next four men in line trying to escape the sinking ship.

Together they sacrificed their last shred of hope for survival, to insure at least a chance for the survival of other men.... most of them total strangers.

Amid the screams of pain and horror permeating the cold dark night, they heard the strong voices of the Chaplains. "Shma Yisroel Adonai" the Lord our God is One. (Elo henu Adonai Echod.)" And, "Our Father, which art in Heaven, Hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done."
Looking back from the lifeboats, survivors saw the slanting deck of the *Dorchester*. Braced against the railings were the Four Chaplains . . . . . . praying . . . singing, giving strength to others by their final valiant declaration of faith. Their arms were linked together as they braced against the railing and leaned into each other for support – Reverend Fox, Rabbi Goode, Reverend Poling, and Father Washington. Said one of the survivors, "It was the finest thing I have ever seen this side of heaven."

Lt. Gen. Brehon B. Somervell, Commanding General of the Army Service Forces, presented the Distinguished Service Cross and Purple Heart to the next of kin posthumously, December 19, 1944 in a ceremony at the post chapel at Fort Myer, Virginia.

A one-time only posthumous Special Medal for Heroism was authorized by Congress and awarded by the President Eisenhower on January 18, 1961. Congress attempted to confer the Medal of Honor but was blocked by the stringent requirements that required heroism performed under fire. The special medal was intended to have the same weight and importance as the Medal of Honor.

Were these men called to greatness? Or, was their courage the result of the humble and enduring strength of character that was not greatness, but love for God and love for neighbor?

Did God have a purpose in their lives, or was the purpose of God made real through their action in “the calm and courage” necessary in that moment to “save lives?”

Ultimately, of course, the undoing of every evil – still afflicting the world as warfare, illness, mental wounds, or destruction at sea – ultimately the undoing of evil is the power of God revealed in the self-emptying sacrifice of Jesus.

The four chaplains express the power of faith in selfless service. In Christ, it was entrusting his life and his death into the hands of God, that finally defeated the power of evil. Ultimately, Jesus proceeds in absolute trust that not even the evil of injustice nor the shadow of death will separate Him for the perfect will and intention of His Father. In faith, even death is swallowed up not by the sea but by Easter life.

In His journey, in His all-too-brief ministry, His crossing the Sea of Galilee to preserve the disciples, His rebuking every danger, disease, and, at the
end, by His death on the cross, Jesus guides us to everlasting life and hope.

Perhaps, knowing what we know as post-resurrection followers, we can recognize that even in the midst of the fiercest storms of life, the one who is Lord of all nature and binder of Satan is present, ready to speak a word over us and the world, with peace and power and healing in his command.