



A SONG OF HOPEFULNESS FOR VETERANS & MEMBERS OF THE ARMED FORCES
Friar Michael Lasky, OFM Conv.

On a Sunday morning in September, I attended Mass at the United States Naval Academy Chapel in Annapolis, Maryland. After the closing prayer the chaplain spoke of September being *Suicide Prevention Month*. In his remarks he mentioned how Chaplain Major General Steven A. Schaick, US Air Force, had recently called on his chaplain colleagues to “join him in a time of prayer due to a nearly fifty percent increase in the number of Total Force suicides among Airmen that year. The goal of this collective, global, focused prayer is to defeat the spiritual dimension of hopelessness in our airmen and replace it with hopefulness.” The chaplain then led us in a prayer for all those who might be contemplating suicide, especially those in the armed forces and veterans.

This prayer brought to my mind the statue of the young Saint Francis, which sits on the front lawn of the upper basilica in Assisi. Francis sits heavily upon a horse who shares his deep depression. Within the church there is a fresco of young Francis having a *Dream of Arms*, seeing battle gear decorating a wall. Francis misinterpreted this dream, which was intended to help him look deeper within and see that, for him a life of continued fighting would only lead to an inner hopelessness.

The Lord’s voice came again to Francis and asked him to return home, toward a life of hopefulness, although Francis did not yet know what that would entail. It is impossible for us to determine if Francis would have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but we do know that he was profoundly changed because of his taking up arms and having been imprisoned for a year.

Throughout his life, one of the places Francis often sought out were caves atop mountains. There he could pray and speak with the Lord, ever deepening his commitment to penance and seeking forgiveness for his sins. This reminds me of how a large percentage of American veterans end up seeking the solace of solitude deep in the woods and mountains.

I know one veteran who lives off the grid in Appalachia and can recite poetry from J.R.R Tolkien and other classics on the spot. Once on his front porch he recited, for me, the poem from The Hobbit entitled *The Road Goes Ever On* and On.

*Roads go ever ever on
Under cloud and under star,
Yet feet that wandering have gone
Turn at last to home afar.
Eyes that fire and sword have seen
And horror in the halls of stone
Look at last on meadows green
And trees and hills they long have known.*

The mountains have blessed him with a home and healing. Listening to his reciting Tolkien’s poetry, I was reminded of St. Francis who would eventually write his own poetry and sing his canticle in praise of a God who led his feet into the way of peace.

*Praised be You, my Lord,
through those who give pardon for Your love,
and bear infirmity and tribulation.
Blessed are those who endure in peace for by
You, Most High, shall they be crowned.*



In a 2018 interview with Nancy Wiechec, of *St. Anthony Messenger*, Franciscan Friar Conrad Targonski spoke of his service as a chaplain for the US Marine Corps for 22 years, having participated in Operation Iraqi Freedom. In his serving the soldiers on the front lines in the battles of Fallujah, he understands Francis' "dazed look" as he sits on his horse on the front lawn of the basilica in Assisi. "That's how I looked when I got back from Iraq, he says. When I came back my superior asked me what I wanted to do next. I said that I wanted to be a greeter at Walmart – I wasn't kidding. I wanted to do something to process this whole idea of war and see people as people once again".

One of Francis' early hashtags came about in his recollecting how initially he was not seeking accompaniment, but that #TheLordGaveMeBrothers. It was in the context of brotherhood and friendship that Francis made his journey of recovery, from the solitude of caves atop mountains to singing songs of hope in the populated valleys, Francis was always with his brothers. Such accompaniment is key to countering hopelessness and replacing it with hopefulness in members of the military, veterans, and their families today.

After the chaplain led us in prayer during *Suicide Prevention Month*, the congregation stood to sing a song that is sung at the end of every Mass at the academy, the "Navy Hymn" - *Eternal Father, Strong to Save*. Although we only sang a couple of verses, printed on the inside cover of the hymnal, I wondered about the rest of the song. Later that day, a quick internet search revealed not only more verses to the song but also verses that had been added down through the years. The one that caught my attention was from 1969/70, when Galen H. Mayer wrote a verse that was later adapted by James D. Shannon:

*Creator, Father, who first breathed
In us the life that we received,
By power of thy breath restore
The ill, and men with wounds of war.
Bless those who give their healing care,
That life and laughter all may share.*

I find it interesting that it was also in the 1970s when the world began to move away from describing the effects of war as shell shock or battle fatigue. In that decade, for the first time, the phrase post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was coined and used as a diagnosis. We have come far since then, coming to the realization that in justice it is our responsibility to pray for and accompany those in the armed forces, to welcome home veterans, and walk with those experiencing PTSD. To members of the military, veterans, and their families, may Saint Francis pray for us all to discover how, #TheLordGivesUsBrothers&Sisters, "That life and laughter all may share".