

In November, 1942, four men met while attending Chaplain's School at Harvard University. At age 42, George Fox was the oldest. The youngest was 30-year old Clark Poling, and the other two, Alexander Goode and John Washington, were both 32.

Reverend Fox, from Vermont, enlisted in the Army the same day his 18-year old son Wyatt enlisted in the Marine Corps. During World War I, Fox - who was 17 years old then - had convinced the Army he was actually 18 and enlisted as a medical corps assistant. His courage on the battlefield earned him the Silver Star, the Croix de Guerre and the Purple Heart. When World War II broke out, he told his family "I've got to go. I know from experience what our boys are about to face. They need me."

Reverend Poling was from Ohio and pastoring in New York when World War II began. He determined to enter the Army, but not as a chaplain. He didn't want to hide behind the church, "in some safe office out of the firing line," he told his father.

But his father, Rev. Daniel Poling, 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 can't carry a gun." With new appreciation for the role of the Chaplains Corps, Clark Poling accepted a commission.

Alexander Goode's father was a clergyman too. While studying to follow in his father's footsteps, Alex had joined the National Guard. When war was declared, he wanted to become a chaplain. he chose to do so as a U.S. Army chaplain.

Mild-mannered John P. Washington left one with the impression that he was not the sort of man to go to war and become a hero. His love of music and beautiful voice belied the toughness inside. As one of 9 children in an Irish immigration family living in the toughest part of Newark, New Jersey, he had learned through sheer determination to hold his own in any fight. Like the others, he wanted to serve whenever his country needed him.

Upon meeting at the chaplains' school, the four men quickly became friends. What makes this more remarkable though was their backgrounds: Reverend Fox was a Methodist minister, Reverend Poling was a Dutch

Reformed minister, Father Washington was a Catholic priest and Goode was a Jewish rabbi.

After graduating from Harvard, the friends were assigned to posts in Europe. The four chaplains said goodbye to their families and reported to New York to board the transport that would take them overseas.

The Dorchester was an aging, luxury coastal liner that was no longer luxurious. Pressed into service as a transport ship, all noncritical amenities had been removed and cots were crammed into every available space. The intent was to get as many young fighting men as possible on each voyage.

When the soldiers boarded on January 23, 1943, the Dorchester was filled to capacity. In addition to the Merchant Marine crew and a few civilians, young soldiers filled every available space. There were 902 lives about to be cast to the mercy of the frigid North Atlantic.

As the Dorchester left New York for an Army base in Greenland, many dangers lay ahead. The sea itself was always dangerous, especially in an area known for ice flows and raging waters and gale-forced winds. The

greatest danger though was the ever-present threat of German submarines, which had been sinking Allied ships at the rate of 100 every month. The Dorchester was sailing through an area that had become known as "Torpedo Junction."

Most of the men who boarded for the trip were young, nervous soldiers going to see for the first time and suffered sea sickness. They were packed head to two below deck, a human sea of fear and uncertainty. Even if they survived the crossing, they didn't have much to look forward to - just being thrown into a war zone on foreign soil. They needed a strong shoulder to lean on in the darkness, to give them hope - and this was the four chaplains, Fox, Goode, Poling and Washington.

The crossing was filled with long hours of boredom and discomfort with everyone crammed together. Finally on February 2nd, the Dorchester had 150 miles to go to make it to Greenland. It would have been relief had not the news been tempered with reports from Coast Guard escorts showing sonar readings that indicated a U Boat was near.

The captain hoped to make it through the night to have air cover the next day to guide. The problem was surviving the night; so he ordered all to have their life jackets on just in case.

Outside the German U-boat caught sight of the passing ship and fired. The torpedo hit the ship dead on, and a second torpedo followed the first, instantly killing 100 men in the hull of the ship.

Power was knocked out by the explosion in the engine room, and darkness engulfed the men below deck as water rushed in. The ship tilted at an unnatural angle and began to sink. Wounded men cried out in pain, frightened survivors screamed in terror and all groped frantically in the darkness for exits they couldn't find.

In the darkness, four voices of calm began to speak words of comfort, seeking to bring order to panic and bedlam. Slowly, soldiers began to find their way to the deck of the ship, where they were confronted by the cold winds blowing down from the Arctic. One soldier, reeling from the cold, headed back towards his cabin.

One soldier, not having gloves, was handed a pair from Rabbi Goode as the rabbi knew if the soldier went back to his cabin to get his own pair, as he had wanted, he would never survive.

Elsewhere on the ship, Reverend Poling guided the frightened soldiers to the desk, their only hope of safety on the rapidly sinking transport. As he led the men, he spoke quietly but firmly, urging them not to give up.

Meanwhile Reverend Fox and Father Washington tended to the wounded and dying soldiers, Somehow, by their combined efforts, the chaplains succeeded in getting many of the soldiers out of the hold and onto the Dorchester's slippery deck.

In the chaos around them, lifeboats floated away before men could board them. Others capsized as panicked soldiers loaded the small craft beyond limit. The strength, calm and organization of the chaplains, so critical in the dark hull, were still urgently needed. So they again took charge and organized the life boat boarding, directed men to safety and left them with parting words of encouragement.

In a little more than 20 minutes, the Dorchester was nearly gone. Icy waves broke over the railing, men were tossed into the sea, many without life jackets. In the last moments of the transport's existence, the chaplains were too occupied opening lockers to pass out the life jackets to notice the threat to their own lives.

Now water was beginning to flow across the deck of the sinking Dorchester. Working against time, the chaplains continued to pass out the 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. And then something amazing happened, something those who were there would never forget. All four chaplains began taking their own life jackets off and putting them on the men around them.

Then time ran out. The chaplains had done all they could for those who would survive, and nothing more could be done for the others...including themselves.

Those who had been fortunate enough to reach lifeboats struggled to distance themselves from the sinking ship, to avoid being pulled down by the chasm created as the transport slipped under the surface. Then, amid the sounds of fear and pain that permeated the cold dark night, they heard the strong voices of the chaplains, leading prayers.

Looking back, the men in the lifeboats could see the slanting deck of the Dorchester, its demise almost complete. Four figures were clearly visible as they stood braced against the railings, praying singing and giving strength to others by their final valiant declaration of faith. Reverend Fox, Rabbi Goode, Reverend Poling and Father Washington linked their arms together and leaned into each other for support.

Then, only 27 minutes after the first torpedo struck, the last trace of the Dorchester disappeared beneath the cold waters of the North Atlantic, taking with it many men, including the four chaplains, who found strength together focusing on a complete love for God and neighbor.

Most all of us use the word “love” quite a bit. But for the Christian, it’s meant to have a lot of meaning behind it, meaning we are called to love



God entirely, and also called to have that same deep love for our neighbor - to will their good. The question before us this week is how deeply do we do that? Do we love God with our whole heart, mind and soul? Do we love our families, our friends, even the stranger? Or do we love what God and others can do for us?

The first reading this week is a troubling one. God has made a covenant with Abraham, promising him his descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the skies. Isaac is the fulfillment of that, born when Abraham and Sara are quite elderly; a miracle child. And now God asks of Abraham to offer him as a sacrifice. The story proceeds to Abraham about to offer the sacrifice before the angel stops it; and while the ending is somewhat happy, who would not read this and think this is a a deeply troubling story. What is God up to here? The deeper meaning is the question do we love God, or do we love the benefits that come to us from God? God is love entirely; and we see this in the offering of the Son, Jesus, who ultimately is sacrificed for us all. God of course does not want harm to come to anyone, but God does want us to love Him. And how hard can this be at times, for life is hard, there are valleys, and sometimes God can seem very distant. Job for instance, the whole book is of Job's suffering; and again God

allowing it to occur, but Job also passes the test trusting in God - the Lord gives and the Lord takes away he says, then saying blessed be the name of the Lord. John of the Cross spoke of the "dark night of the spirit" which is not depression, but looks at what happens in the dark times of our lives when things are not going good. Do we still love God and trust? That's sometimes hard to do. We want to stay on the mountain like Peter James and John. We want to avoid suffering, the taking up of the Cross. Peter is with us on that one; saying after his confession of faith this whole suffering business Lord this can't happen to you. And then getting a preview of sorts of what heaven will be like. But Jesus then takes them back down the mountain; and while they become leaders and the Church begins to grow, there is deep suffering; being imprisoned and then martyred. They trusted that God was with them, and knew they had a job to do. Jesus is the ultimate example of this; He had the freedom to walk away, for He was also divine. But in the Garden, He says those words - not my will but your will be done. He feels abandonment, rejection, confusion, fear; but through this all there is that trust. So for you and me, we will face those moments of confusion and frustration or even anger - but hopefully we know that through it all, God is with us, but we have to trust in Him. The four chaplains could have likely ridden out the war and not been on that

transport ship. But they discerned that's where God was calling them to be. And because of that, they lost their lives - but no torpedo could sink their souls.

Lastly, like the four chaplains, we have a job to do - to bring hope to others. Peter, James and John want to stay where they are; but they go down the mountain and the first thing that they will do is help someone in need.

Instinctively we usually think of our own well-being first. Sacrifice does not come easy. But as we sacrifice, we find there are rewards too. You give of your time and do something for the greater good for the parish or community; you help your family to be provided for, your children to be happy; you sacrifice pleasures for things like study at school. It doesn't mean we don't enjoy life and take time for the things we like to do, but sacrifice does so much for ourselves and others. It also means we open up our eyes to who our brothers and sisters are; note the chaplains were all of different faiths. But they did not ask the terrified men that night what religion they were, look at their race, or rank, or anything else. How often in our lives we can put an asterisk next to love; but how do we love those who wrong us, those who are different from us in terms of faith or politics, or those we just might not like. Can we see others through the eyes of God as

those chaplains did that night? Those chaplains lost their lives that day but gave such hope to young men who were terrified. They brought God's love to the others, and we can too when we make that choice to go down the mountain with our Lord.

Most all of us would say we love God which is why we are here tonight. And His love for us is do incredibly deep and unconditional and that will never change. When we feel like those men on the Dorchester in life, sinking as the waters close in, God is there to rescue us. But this is a love that requires a response - to trust in God that He is with us, and a challenge to love in the way that God loves us. As we come up to meet our Lord at this alter, we know that His food helps us to climb the mountain of life that leads to the Kingdom of God. May we truly love God entirely, not just loving what He can do for us, and use that love to go down the mountain and give this world hope.