Podcast #35: Lessons from the American Revolution

At the end of last summer, my husband and I and a couple of our children visited Valley Forge. It's beautiful in the summer–one of the most beautiful places I've ever visited. There were only a few people there...so it's the kind of place where you can ponder and feel. In such a peaceful, lush green setting, it was difficult to picture in my mind's eye that frigid, bitter winter of 1777 and the starving, ragged soldiers huddled in their huts.

This month as we take a look at the American Revolution, I've suggested that you compare it to another revolution taking place in France. They, too, were fighting for their liberty, but what a different outcome it had. Lafayette, who fought so gallantly and bravely here, wanted to do the same for his countrymen as he had done in America. It's in the heart of the people that the differences between the two Revolutions can be so clearly seen. The mobs behind the Reign of Terror are in sharp contrast to the scenes I am about to paint to you. We are reminded by the fox in The Little Prince–by the way, a good read for our France topic–'Only the heart sees rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye." The difference between the American and the French Revolution lies in the hearts of the countrymen. Not that all of our hearts were the same.

As a child, I pictured the Americans united in a cause, all self-sacrificing patriots. It's been eye-opening to discover that only about a third supported the cause of independence. A third remained loyal to the British crown and a third were fence sitters. Far from being united to a cause, the colonies were jealous, petty, bickered with each other. While merchants, farmers and simple folk left their homes and gave their lives for freedom, their neighbors weren't opposed to making themselves rich by supplying the British with food, shelter and supplies. The unprotected wives back home were often more fearful of the robbers among them taking advantage of the situation than of the British. It was dangerous times.

Many of our generals had fought in the British army not many years before. They were fighting friends. Back home in Britain, the king couldn't raise enough troops because they refused to fight their

family and friends in the colonies, so he had to hire the Hessian soldiers from Germany to do the deed. And the odds of an untrained, woefully undersupplied ragtag army of common folk defeating the most powerful army in the world are staggering.

The key players are so young: at the time of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Lafayette was just 18 years old. Alexander Hamilton, 21, James Madison, 25. Henry Knox, 25. John Paul Jones, 28. Nathaneal Greene, 33. Thomas Jefferson, 33. Betsy Ross was 24.

All these thoughts went through my mind as I walked around Valley Forge. And I realize more every day, the victory wasn't won out on the battlefields any more than our fight for freedom today can be won in war or even in the halls of Congress. It was truly won in the hearts of the few. And that part of the story is rarely told. As a witness to the Revolution observed:

"You see, these history writers go about hunting up every incident relating to the war, now, and after a while they'll know more about it–or say they do–than the men who were actors in it. . . These historians may not know as much of the real spirit of the people at that period, but that they should be better acquainted with the mass of facts relating to battles and to political affairs is perfectly natural." The old man . . mumbled . . . that nobody could know the real state of things who was not living among them at the time.

So, come take a walk around Valley Forge with me and listen to the players who took part so we can hear the untold story. Let's first walk to the huts.

"It was a terrible season. It's hard to give a faint idea of it in words; but you may imagine a party of men, with ragged clothes and no shoes, huddled around a fire in a log hut–the snow about two feet deep on the ground, and the wind driving fierce and bitter through the chinks of the rude hovel. Many of the men had their feet frost-bitten, and there were no remedies to be had . . . . The sentinels suffered terrible, and looked more like ghosts than men, as they paced up and down the lines of huts.

"General Washington . . . saw how the men were situated, and, I really believe, his heart bled for them. ...Washington's head-quarters was near the camp, and he often came over to see the poor fellows, and to try to soothe and comfort them; and I tell you, the men loved that man as if he had been their father, and would rather have died with him than have lived in luxury with the red-coat general.

"I recollect a scene I beheld in the next hut to the one in which I messed. An old friend, named Josiah Jones, was dying. He was lying on a scant straw bed, with nothing but rags to cover him. He had been sick for several days, but wouldn't go under the doctor's hands, as he always said it was like going into battle, certain of being killed. One day, when we had no notion of anything of the kind, Josiah called out to us, as we sat talking near his bed, that he was dying, and wanted us to pray for him. We were all anxious to do anything for the man, for we loved him as a brother; but as for praying, we didn't exactly know how to go about it. To get clear of the service, I ran to obtain the poor fellow a drink of water to moisten his parched lips.

"While the rest were standing about, not knowing what to do, some one heard the voice of General Washington in the next hut, where he was comforting some poor wretches who had their feet almost frozen off. Directly, he came to our door, and one of the men went and told him the state of things. Now, you see, a commander-in-chief might have been justified as being angry that the regulations for the sick had been disobeyed, and have turned away; but he was a nobler sort of man than could to that. He entered the hut, and went up to poor Josiah, and asked him how he was. Josiah told him that he felt as if he was dying, and wanted some one to pray for him. Washington saw that a doctor could do the man no good, and he knelt on the ground by him and prayed. We all knelt down, too; we couldn't help it. An old comrade was dying, away from his home and friends, and there was our general kneeling by him, with his face turned towards heaven, looking, I thought, like an angel's. Well, he prayed for Heaven to have mercy on the dying man's soul; to pardon his sins; and to take him to Himself; and then he prayed for us all. Before the prayer was concluded, Josiah's spirit had fled, and his body was cold and stiff. Washington felt the brow of the poor fellow, and, seeing that his life was out, gave the men

directions . . and then left to visit the other parts of the camp."

He continued:

"General Washington was the main pillar of the Revolution. As a general, he was vigilant and skillful; but if he not been anything more, we might have been defeated and crushed by the enemy. He had the love and confidence of the men, on account of his character as a man, and that enabled him to remain firm and full of hope when his countrymen saw nothing but a gloomy prospect."

Now let's go into General Washington's headquarters, on loan to him by a Quaker, Isaac Potts. It's not very big and is unique as a historical site because, rather than a recreation, the actual home still stands. When you go inside and hold the stair railing going upstairs, it's the same wood Washington held. The stones are the very stones that made up the walls. I stood in his quarters where I pictured this scene as described by a soldier:

"Meantime General Washington was doing everything in his power to alleviate our distresses. The light in that man's quarters was often seen burning all night long. I've seen it. We've all seen it. He was writing letters, hundreds of them, to governors, to Congress, to men of influence everywhere, begging and imploring their assistance. Precious little he got of it. And the time, too, was coming right along when the army (if such a lot of ragamuffins can be called one) ought to take the field again. And we were expected to win battles! I've no patience when I think of it. No man alive, but Washington, could have held that hungry, ragged, and dispirited crowd together. God bless him!"

In a woods nearby, we now turn to a scene entered in the Pennsylvania Historical Record, told by Isaac Potts himself:

"I was a Tory once for I never believed that America could proceed against Great Britain whose fleets and armies covered the land and ocean. But something very extraordinary converted me to the good faith.

“Do you see that woods, and that plain?” I was about a quarter of a mile from the place we were riding. “There,” said he, “laid the army of Washington. It was a most distressing time of the war, and all were giving up the ship but that one good man. In that woods,” pointing to a close in view, “I heard a plaintive sound, as of a man at prayer. I tied my horse to a sapling and went quietly into the woods and to my astonishment I saw the great George Washington on his knees alone, with his sword on one side and his cocked hat on the other. He was at Prayer to the God of the Armies, beseeching to interpose with his Divine aid, as it was ye Crisis and the cause of the country, of humanity, and of the world.

“Such a prayer I never heard from the lips of man. I left him alone praying. I went home and told my wife, “I saw a sight and heard today what I never saw or heard before’, and just related to her what I had seen and heard and observed. We never thought a man could be a soldier and a Christian, but if there is one in the world, it is Washington. We thought it was the cause of God, and America could prevail.”

In the God of battles trust!

Although I was not standing on the battlefield described in the next scene, I could picture what it looked like, standing on the meadows and fields of Valley Forge:

Just before the battle of Germantown “All day long, on the tenth of September, 1777, both armies were in the vicinity of each other, ... At length, as the day closed, both armies encamped within sight of each other, anxiously awaiting the morrow, to decide the fate of the devoted city . . .

“The sun was just sinking behind the dark hills of the west, gilding the fading heavens with an autumnal brightness, and shedding a lurid glare upon the already drooping and discolored foliage of the surrounding forests. It was an hour of solemn calm. The cool evening breeze stole softly through the air . . .and the national standard flapped lazily from the tall flag-staff on its banks.

“In the American camp, interspersed between groups of tens and

stacks of arms, might be seen little knots of weary soldiers seated on the ground, resting from the fatigues of the day, and talking in a low but animated tone of the coming contest.

The bugle sounded... "Obedient to the signal, the greater part of the soldiers assembled in front of the marquee of the commander, near the center of the encampment.

"All was hushed in expectation: soon the tall form of Washington, wrapped in his military cloak and attended by a large body of officers, was seen advancing in their midst. All present respectfully saluted them, to which they bowed courteously, and then took their seats upon camp-stools set for them by a servant. The venerable Joab Prout, chaplain of the Pennsylvania line, then stood upon the stump of a tree, and commanded silence–for it was the hour of prayer.

"Here was a scene of moral grandeur unsurpassed by anything in the annals of war. There, on that still, cool evening, when the sky was darkening into night, were assembled some eight thousand men; very many of whom would never look upon the glorious sunset again. From the humble cottages in the quiet valley of Connecticut–from the statelier mansions of the sunny South–at the call of liberty, they had rushed to the tented field; and now, on the eve of battle, as brethren in heart and deed, had met together to implore the God of battles to smile upon their noble cause.

"Oh! It was a thrilling and an august sight! The mild and dignified Washington looked around him with proud emotion, and turned enquiringly to the fair young stranger, Lafayette, beside him, as if to ask, 'Can such men as these be vanquished?'

"The bold and fearless Wayne was there; the undaunted Pulaski, and the whole-hearted Kosciusko; and they bowed their heads in reverence to Him in whose presence they were worshipping.

"Never beneath the vaulted dome of the stately temple–never from the lips of the eloquent divine–was seen such a congregation, or was heard such a discourse, as on that September evening, from that humble old man, with his grey locks streaming in the wind. . .

"They may conquer us on the morrow! Might and wrong may prevail, and we may be driven from this field–but the hour of God's own vengeance will surely come! . . . in the hour of battle, when all around is darkness, lit by the lurid cannon glare and the piercing musket flash-when the wounded strew the ground, and the dead litter your path–then remember, soldiers, that God is with you. The eternal God fights for you–

"....You have taken the sword, but not in the spirit of wrong and ravage. You have taken the sword for your homes, your wives, for your little ones. You have taken the sword for truth, for justice and right, and to you the promise is, Be of good cheer, for your foes have taken the sword in defiance of all that man holds dear..."

The last ray of lingering light had departed, and they were left in darkness. A parting prayer was proposed, and immediately every head was uncovered and bowed in reverence, while, with outstretched hands, that sincere old man in the homespun garb thus addressed the throne of grace.

Those who survived the battle of the next day never forgot the spirit they felt that still, autumn night. After a hard fight, the battle was lost. But one of the old soldiers reminisced, "It was all for the best. We shouldn't have known our enemies nor ourselves without losing that battle. The harder the struggle for liberty, the more we enjoy it when won . . . The freedom dearest bought is highest prized, and Americans have learned the value of that inestimable gem."

Let's make one more stop, to a simple, humble home.

"My father was in the army during the whole eight years of the Revolutionary War, at first as a common soldier, afterwards as an officer. My mother had the sole charge of us four little ones.

"Our house was a poor one, and far from neighbors. I have a keen remembrance of the terrible cold of some of those winters. The snow lay so deep and long, that it was difficult to cut or draw fuel from the woods, or get our corn to the mill, when we had any.

"My mother was the possessor of a coffee mill. In that she ground

wheat, and made coarse bread, which we ate, and were thankful. It was not always we could be allowed as much, even of this, as our keen appetites craved.

"Many is the time that we have gone to bed, with only a drink of water for our supper, in which a little molasses had been mingled. We patiently received it, for we knew our mother did as well for us as she could; and we hoped to have something better in the morning.

"She was never heard to repine; and young as we were, we tried to make her loving spirit and heavenly trust, our example.

"When my father was permitted to come home, his stay was short, and he had not much to leave us, for the pay of those who achieved our liberties was slight, and irregularly given. Yet when he went, my mother ever bade him farewell with a cheerful face, and told him not to be anxious about his children, for she would watch over them night and day, and God would take care of the families of those who went forth to defend the righteous cause of their country.

"Sometimes we wondered that she did not mention the cold weather, or our short meals, or her hard work, that we little ones might be clothed, and fed, and taught. But she would not weaken his hands, or sadden his heart, for she said a soldier's life was harder than all.

"We saw that she never complained, but always kept in her heart a sweet hope, like a well of water. Every night ere we slept, and every morning when we arose, we lifted our little hands for God's blessing on our absent father, and our endangered country.

"How deeply the prayers from such solitary homes and faithful hearts were mingled with the infant liberties of our dear native land, we may not know until we enter where we see no more 'through a glass darkly, but face to face.'"

I don't know about you, but what I take away from these scenes is the reassurance that a few people, relying upon God in faith, can change the course of a nation; and that while modern society may say the private virtue of our leaders is of no consequence or matter

to us, I can see how one leader of virtue can move a cause forward against unspeakable odds. These words of General Washington apply to us today as much as they did when he spoke them over 200 years ago:

"...the time is near at hand, which will determine whether Americans are to be freemen. The fate of unknown millions will depend, under God, on the courage and conduct of this army"–which I will add you and I are part of– " Let us rely on the goodness of our cause, and the aid of the Supreme Being, in whose hands victory is, to animate and encourage us to great and noble actions."

And now I'll close with the final stanza of a poem written by John Pierpont, called Warren's Address. Joseph Warren fought as a volunteer at Bunker Hill. He was the last to leave the field and as a British officer called to him to surrender, a ball struck him in the forehead, killing him instantly.

In the God of battles trust!
Die we may,–and die we must;--
But, O, where can dust to dust
Be consigned so well,
As where Heaven its dews shall shed
On the martyred patriot's bed,
And the rocks shall raise their head,
Of his deeds to tell!