

1900-1924: Our Kings and Queens
Esther 4:5-17
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***“O, Generations!”* SSS**

INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

If you've ever visited Mt. Rushmore, you know there are 4 Presidents: Washington, Jefferson, Roosevelt and Lincoln. What you may not know is that these 4 presidents represent the 4 generations, lasting approximately 20-21 years each, which recycle approximately every 80-90 years. Thomas Jefferson represents the civic generation of the G.I.'s; Teddy Roosevelt the adaptive generation of the Silent/Korean generation; Abraham Lincoln the idealistic Boomer generation, and George Washington the reactive Gen-X/13'er generation. I will explain these adjectives as we go. The point is: all 4 generations are represented in the renowned sculpture.

To help us get a handle on the span of generations we will be covering over these next few weeks, I have made a chart based upon historians and economists William Strauss and Neil Howe's *Generations: A History of America's Future: 1584-2069*, cited in nearly every book about American generations. Here is the chart I'm referring to. We will return to it or something similar each week, so you can have greater clarity as we go. In a few moments I will share with you why I chose this direction for our summer sermon series. But let me highlight

very briefly this chart: As a guide read across each column for your particular generation. Notice also the repetition of 2 generations: the Millennial and Post-9/11, who are like the G.I.'s and Silents respectively.

<i>Generation Name</i>	<i>Birth Years</i>	<i>Generation Type</i>	<i>Character</i>	<i>Biblical Character</i>	<i>Sample Figure</i>	<i>Example of Prior Generation</i>
WWII G.I./ Builders	1900-1924	Civic	Hero	David & Esther	John F. Kennedy	<i>Republican</i> Jefferson
Silent	1925-1942	Adaptive	Artist	Jethro and Solomon	Martin Luther King, Jr.	<i>Compromiser</i> John Quincy Adams
Boomer	1943-1960	Idealist	Prophet	Moses	Bill Gates	<i>Transcendental</i> Lincoln
GenX/13er	1961-1981	Reactive	Nomad	Gideon	Tom Cruise	<i>Lost</i> Harry S. Truman
Millennial	1982-2001	Civic	Hero	Joshua	Miley Cyrus	<i>Glorious</i> Cotton Mather
Post-9/11	2001-?	Adaptive	Artist	Reconciler in 2 Cor. 5:17	??	<i>Progressive</i> Teddy Roosevelt

Of course, we cannot assume every person in every generation fits neatly into their own age cohort. I know I personally possess aspects of all four, but especially the Boomer, my own birth generation and the Silent. Yet, there are uncanny similarities within each generation and, most surprising of all, with similar generations 8 decades or 4 generations before our own!

So where to begin? The best place is with the G.I. WWII, Builders, born between 1900-1924. But first, let's meet one person from the Bible who would have easily fit into the G.I. generation: Queen Esther.

SCRIPTURE: Esther 4:8-17: MUSICAL RESPONSE

Consider the case of Lloyd Kilmer, the native Minnesotan-turned Omahan and G.I.: Never had a bike growing up. During the Depression his father lost the farm and in humiliation applied to the WPA, the Works Project Administration, and the Franklin Roosevelt New Deal government relief program for helping the unemployed put food on their family's table. That episode left a deep impression on young Lloyd who vowed: "I never want to experience that sort of thing for my wife and family. I was driven toward never letting that happen." Lloyd Kilmer was the first in his family to graduate from high school, an achievement of considerable pride.

When the war broke out, he was a bellhop at a hotel in Rochester, Minnesota, home of the Mayo Clinic. Lloyd became a combat pilot. He piloted the work-horse bomber of WWII: a B-24, when on his 16th mission his plane was shot down and he had to crash-land it in a potato field in Holland, surrounded by Nazis. That was June 29, 1944, 23 days after D-Day.

For 10 months Kilmer was in a German prison camp, where he lost 60 pounds, dropping him below 100. While at a POW church service on April 29, 1945, the chaplain paused over the sound of small-arms fire. Not long

after that an American tank rolled through the German barbed wire. Lloyd Kilmer's ordeal was over. To celebrate the American rescuers went to a nearby church steeple where the Nazi swastika was prominently displayed on a flag. Kilmer says the men of Stalag 7 fell silent as the swastika was lowered and an American flag was raised in its place. It became a defining moment in his life. From then on, this later G.I. Bill funded graduate of Creighton University, "God-and-country patriot," strict disciplinarian, and driven businessman; this scoutmaster for the local Boy Scout Troop, active church member, and former clerk and controller for Douglas County, would be described by his sons as "the quintessential G.I."¹

Meet the G.I., slash WWII, slash Builder Generation, called by former NBC News anchor Tom Brokaw "The Greatest Generation." The G.I. Generation is the first in a series of 6 generations we will meet over these 5 Sundays in the first section of this summer sermon series: "*O Generations.*" In the weeks to come we will meet the G.I.'s successors: the Silents (born 1925-1942), the Boomers (born 1943-1960), the 13er/Gen-Xers (born 1961-1981), the Millennials (1982-2001?), and America's newest generation yet unnamed I am calling, for lack of a better term, the Post 9/11 Generation.

Of course, you may ask why focus on these generations? There are many reasons: chief among them the fact that in 2007 we discerned God calling us to become a Multi-Generational Congregation.

Yet, in all this time, we have never asked an obvious question: Who are these generations? As a result of this series, I hope we will become better acquainted with the character, the strengths, and the weaknesses of each of them.

I also hope that by discovering the character of these generations, we can overcome the rampant age-ism to which we Americans have been prone. We Boomers, for instance, used to say, “You can’t trust anyone over 30.” Today we say, “You can’t trust anyone under 30.” As young adults we Boomers argued with G.I.’s over Vietnam. As middle aged adults we Boomers have struggled to understand GenX’ers, and they us. By discovering the character and events which forged each generation, we will come to appreciate one another more and become a Multi-Generational church, while also discovering how we can become an Intergenerational Church where we recognize Christ’s welcome of all ages at His table.

In the meantime, I hope we will also discover that each of our generations has multiple predecessors whose values and behaviors are eerily similar to ours. To wit: the now teen-young adult Millennial Generation (1982-2001) shows the strong civic-tendencies of the elderly G.I. generation and the Republican generation of Jefferson and Madison before that. This is no accident. As we will see America recycles 4 generations every 80 years or so.

There have been previous G.I.-like, Silent-like, Boomer-like and Gen-X-like generations! Maybe Ecclesiastes is right: “*There is nothing [entirely] new under the sun.*” (Ecc. 1:9)

It is fitting we begin this generational journey with the heroic G.I.’s. It was during the G.I.’s childhood when Mother’s Day became an official holiday in 1908 and Father’s Day in 1910.

But why call the G.I.’s “heroes?” Quite simply: The G.I.’s won World War II, often later referred to unthinkingly by most Americans as “The War,” to the dismay of the Korean and Vietnam generations.

Moments ago I read a verse from Esther in which her uncle Mordecai says, “*Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.*” Mordecai was challenging Queen Esther to approach her husband King Xerxes on his throne, at the risk of her life, unannounced in order to prevent a holocaust against the Jews. So, the WWII generation, like Esther before Xerxes and young David before the giant Goliath, was born for such a time—World War II. Without their sacrifice, set into motion with the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, when they were 18-31 years old, western civilization as we know it might never have survived.

Though, G.I. heroism began well before World War II. When Charles Lindbergh flew the first solo transatlantic flight from New York to Paris in 1927, he became the first ever to receive the designation “all-American hero.”² Lindbergh also exhibited one of the key character traits of his generation when he titled his

autobiography “WE!” The WWII generation is often called “The WE Generation” because of its community spirit and commitment to teamwork. This is the generation that gave us mile-after-mile of carbon copy suburban homes made famous in the song “Little Boxes.”³ Later generations regard conformity as a sin; but G.I.’s view conformity as a virtue. Their very name “G.I.” means “government issue.” Long before Tom Brokaw called G.I.’s “The Greatest Generation,” General George Marshall called this generation “the best damned kids in the world.”

A more left-brained, linear, rational generation never lived. G.I.’s became America’s great scientist and engineers. Two-thirds of all American Nobel prize winners in science come from the G.I. generation. They were America’s first astronauts with “the right stuff” and landed the first man on the moon when challenged by the Russians’ Sputnik earth-orbiting satellite. They did everything big, much like their predecessors, the similarly civic-minded heroes of the American Revolution: Tom Jefferson who doubled the size of the United States in the Louisiana Purchase, and James Madison who tried to annex Canada in the War of 1812.⁴ This is the generation who built the Eisenhower Interstate Highway System. This is the generation that built or added wings to many present-day churches.

If asked to fill in the blank: “God is___” this generation would answer “God is Almighty.”⁵ This is a generation who generally looks at life through the lens of power and what power can do to solve problems. This

may be why no generation in American history held onto the Oval Office longer than the G.I.'s: from 1961-1993. The only other generation to come close was the Republican Generation of Jefferson who held onto the presidency for 24 years. The G.I. generation has also shown the confidence, if not the hubris evident in Kennedy's inaugural address of January 1961:

Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans, born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace.

This generation accepted Kennedy's challenge: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." The Builders were willing to "bear any burden, pay any price," for the sake of America.

Despite the G.I.'s monumental achievements, "can-do" spirit, and optimism while coming of age during the Depression and WWII, despite the fact later generations willingly paid G.I.'s scout-like heroism back with generous entitlement programs like Social Security and Medicare, the elder G.I.'s have experienced great frustration that younger generations have not called upon them for counsel and advice. If later Americans wanted to know how to fix or build something, they turned to the Builders, the G.I.'s. But for spiritual and emotional direction, the Stoic G.I.'s are largely ignored.

Lately we've heard how many Americans today are "SBNR: Spiritual But Not Religious." The irony is that as much as Builders have served as the financial, institutional, organizational backbone of churches all their lives, they have been RBNS: Religious But Not Spiritual. In nearly 4 decades of ministry I do not recall ever finding a male Builder/G.I. who was comfortable sharing his thoughts or feelings in a church spiritual-life group.

And yet, it's hard to imagine a group who will be more missed in the years to come in our churches and in our society than the WWII/G.I. Generation. Their early lives were not easy: they came of age during the Depression and World War II. Many of their peers died in Europe and the Pacific, though for a cause that united the nation. They understood the importance of commitment, community, and courage when these virtues were required to hold the world together in the face of unspeakable evil. They *were* a Band of Brothers and Sisters: the King Davids and Queen Esthers of our time, who never have quite understood the narcissism and radical individualism of later generations. They were born for such a time as World War II and the modern age. For the freedom we enjoy and often take for granted, we all owe the G.I. generation a huge debt of thanks. For this let the people say, "Amen!"

¹Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation*, NY: Random House, 1998, pp. 61-68.

² Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Generations: A History of America's Future, 1584-2069*, NY: Quill Press, 1991, p.261. This is the seminal work from which this sermon series sprang.

³Based upon a song mocking the conformity of the Builder Generation titled “Little Boxes.”

⁴Generations of Faith, p. 103

⁵Ibid.