

God Bless America

Psalm 33:12-22
July 3, 2022

First Presbyterian Church
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As we celebrate Independence Day tomorrow, it's interesting to look back on the foundation of this country we love. Did you know that toward the end of the American Revolution and our fight for independence as a nation, Gen. George Washington had a decision to make. Some of his army officers complained that Congress was not living up to its promises. So they hatched a plot to march out of the nation's capital, leaving Congress to negotiate a peace settlement with no army to back it up. They also planned to make George Washington a king and place him on the American throne.

Washington would have none of it. With no mincing of words, he crushed any such notions, saying, "If you have any regard for yourself or posterity, or respect for me, banish these thoughts from your mind and never communicate as from yourself or anyone else a sentiment of the like nature."

He was also alleged to have said, "I did not fight George the Third in order to become George the First." Now that's the American spirit – a spirit worthy of our nation's praise and celebration, fireworks and all! But just where does that spirit come from?

Looking at our Old Testament lesson for today, we can plainly see that such a faithful, selfless national spirit comes from God. As we read in Psalms, "Happy is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people whom he has chosen as his heritage."

It's important to know that the word "nation" in the Old Testament doesn't refer to nations as we think of them. It's not as much about national borders as it is about people, people who possess a common kinship, common social structure and common core beliefs. In that sense, the word nation becomes less divisive and more unifying, as people from across the globe are invited to share common kinship as children of God, common social structures as places of worship and mutual support, and common beliefs as people of the Book, people who trace our spiritual ancestry to Abraham and Sarah.

As the Psalmist says, "The Lord looks down from heaven; he sees all humankind. From where he sits enthroned he watches all the inhabitants of the earth – he who fashions the hearts of them all, and observes all their deeds." So really, what makes us special as the United States of America is not the borders we protect, -as important as that is- but rather the values we embody and share with like-minded nations, nations or peoples whose hearts are fashioned after God's own heart and whose deeds are pleasing in God's eyes.

To further make the point that it's not about national borders, the Psalm says, "A king is not saved by his great army; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength. The war horse is a vain hope for victory, and by its great might, it cannot save."

No, our salvation as a people and our future as a nation depends upon us embracing the values and principles that form the foundation of this nation, which includes the selflessness that George Washington showed in refusing the crown to preserve our democracy.

Washington knew that the only hope for America was a representative form of government – a sharing of power – a government that Abraham Lincoln would later call "government of the people, by the people, and for the people."

A generation earlier, on July 4, 1776, the Constitution of the United States of America was adopted, including the second paragraph by Thomas Jefferson that says, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men (all people) are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

How's that going for you these days – the pursuit of Life, Liberty and Happiness? And even more important, how's it going for us as a nation, as churches, as communities, as families. I don't think there's anyone anywhere not concerned about life, liberty and happiness, either for themselves or for others.

Take for instance the visitor from Holland chatting with his American friend. He jokingly explained the red, white and blue in the Netherlands flag, saying, "Our flag symbolizes our taxes. We get red when we talk about them, white when we get our tax bill and blue after we pay them." "That's the same with us," said the American. "Only we also see stars." Yes, I don't think there's anyone anywhere not concerned that the pursuit of life, liberty and happiness is getting harder and harder these days. And yet, that's what we're supposed to be working toward, for all people. That's what we celebrate this holiday weekend.

In order for us to enjoy the blessings of life, liberty and true happiness, we have to look to God and not lawmakers as our salvation. And we have to elect lawmakers who truly embody and share the faithful, selfless national spirit upon which America was founded. "Truly the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him (or respect him)," says the Psalmist, "on those who hope in his steadfast love, to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine."

Our future as a nation is in pledging our allegiance to God not lawmakers, placing our hope in his steadfast love and not the divisive politics of our day. It is God who will deliver us from death – spiritual, national and yes even physical.

It is God who will keep us alive in times of famine, as this nation faces so much hunger, people hungering for that which should be plentiful, things like affordable gasoline and groceries, adequate housing, and the opportunity for self-advancement, what might be termed the pursuit of happiness.

We as a nation are starving for these and so many other basic necessities. And that's just not right. It's not what God envisions for us. God sees this nation, this people we call America, as a land of plenty that is selflessly shared with all. That is what we celebrate this weekend. That is who are, as those in this country who know what it means to be American – not the boundaries we defend but rather the blessings we share.

America truly is a country worth celebrating, and I join you in doing that this weekend, as together we join the Palmist in shouting out, "Our soul waits for the Lord; he is our help and shield. Our heart is glad in him, because we trust in his holy name. Let your steadfast love, O Lord, be upon us, even as we hope in you."

Amen. And may God bless America and all she stands for.

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of deliverance, throughout the centuries you have known your people's needs and extended your arm to save us.

When people were sick, you sent your Son to heal. When the crowd on the hillside was hungry, you multiplied a small meal of five loaves and two fish to feed thousands.

When your disciples looked for a sign of your power, you shared it with them in the grace of abundance. Centuries later, we still need your mercy, Holy One.

We pray for those who long for your healing touch.

We pray for those who hunger for peace and justice, those needing a sign of your gracious blessing.

Renewing God, we know that you change lives. We know that you turn mourning into dancing, that you change cries of despair into songs of joy.

Hear our prayers, O Lord, and be gracious once again, that we may join the songs of saints in every time and place who have prayed the Lord's Prayer together, as we do now in song, singing:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.