

Celebrate- Independence or Dependence Deuteronomy 8: 1, 6-20;  
Hebrews 11: 8-16

On this July 3- tomorrow being the Fourth of July- it is a time when our thoughts are drawn to celebration. Fourth of July has been a time to celebrate and if possible, set aside some of the negativity which seems to easily overwhelm our daily lives. Families and friends gather, communities such as Gary, SD celebrate their 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary, fireworks light up the evening skies, plus it means a long weekend to enjoy the middle of Summer.

There is a challenge found in preparing a message for worship services such as today. The “spirituality” in national holidays is often a competing, not complimentary spirituality to that which is important in the life of the church. The pride and unity that is affirmed and reinforced through national holidays is not an aspect of, but potentially at odds with, “the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” as found in Ephesians 4: 3. We must guard against the risk of believing that America is the only place on earth protected and directed by God from the beginning. While it is true America was settled by people such as the Puritans, seeking religious freedom, it was for their own religious practices, not necessarily the freedom of all others. In truth, there were many settlers who came to America for ambitious motives and freedoms other than religious. The only way the Church can get things right on this Fourth of July is to glorify the God of all nations, giving America no special place. Further we must affirm again that we are “aliens and exiles’ in every nation yet as God’s people we are called to be a “holy nation” and commissioned to, “proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” While we celebrate Independence Day, it is also important to keep our focus of dependence on the Holy God who created all of this and makes it possible for all of us to enjoy and benefit from it.

While it is quite appropriate to recognize and show our appreciation for the multitude of freedoms we enjoy in the United States- freedoms that many around the world do not have- there is a caution necessary that we hear in the words expressed by Moses in our Old Testament scripture from Deuteronomy. Clearly listening to those words- we can find them ringing as true today for our United

States as they did to the Israelites eons ago. Moses warns the Israelite people to not forget God as they move into more prosperous times. In spite of the hardship they experienced wandering in the wilderness for forty years, God had protected them and guided them into a new land as had been promised to their ancestors. Moses says in verses 6- 9, “For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity.....” and on and on. Moses then closes by warning, “But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today.”

Brent Walker has said, “July Fourth is an opportunity for churches to celebrate religious liberty, but it is not a time for holding a patriotic pep rally. A healthy sense of patriotism is good, but we are Christians first and Americans second.” While we celebrate a certain amount of “independence” and liberty, our focus still must critically remain “dependent” on a gracious God.

July 4 is recognized and celebrated as the date back in 1776, a remnant of folks broke away from the tyranny of England under King George to form our country’s independence. They developed and wrote a Declaration of Independence (copy on back table). It is very clear our Founding Fathers were careful to remember God. The second paragraph begins with these words: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men 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.” Also, the closing words of the Declaration state, “With a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence (God), we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortune and our sacred Honor.”

The video interlude earlier also reminded us of the continuing faith in God by many of our Country’s leader in the years that followed. We also read in the New Testament from Hebrews about the faith of Abraham- that from one person- generations and generations were born “as many as the stars of the heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.” They desired a better country, that is, a heavenly one.

It seems critical that we remember this declaration of dependence on God especially in times of turmoil in our country today. It seems we are surrounded by efforts not only to ignore but even to eliminate any acknowledgment of the deep and abiding faith that our Founding Fathers had in a God who gave this world its birth. “We are citizens of two kingdoms,” Brent Walker said. “We are to respect our governmental institutions and pray for our governmental leaders, but that must always be secondary to our commitment to and love for God.”

These United States which we celebrate this weekend has changed considerably since the Declaration of Independence was written in 1776. We need to read no further than the opening words of that Declaration, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL...” to realize changes that have been made and continue to be “much work yet to be done.” While the word “men” was accurate and deliberate in 1776, it was changed nearly 150 years later when the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment was ratified in 1920- giving women the right to vote. A multitude of efforts have attempted to make the phrase, “created equal” a true reality for all Americans and unfortunately there is still “much work yet to be done.” If our belief is truly in a God who created all things and “saw they were good” we are also given the obligation to work with our prayers and our hands to help assure the value and equality of all of God’s creation.

The reality for us as humans is that it is easy to see and celebrate the blessings we enjoy as “American Citizens.” It is also easy to forget those who struggle to enjoy even some of the same. In the midst of our Independence celebration, may we also celebrate the joy of a God on whom we can celebrate Dependence and commit ourselves to sharing joy with others.

It is my prayer that our closing song this morning- in the format of a video- helps us leave today carrying with us a clarity of the many, true and lasting blessings we have been given. Primary of that being a “dependence” on a God that was present at the beginning of time.

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