

Rest for the Weary, Food for the Hungry

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Zechariah 9:9-12

9:9 Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

9:10 He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.

9:11 As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit.

9:12 Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope; today I declare that I will restore to you double.

Matthew 11:28-30

11:28 "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

11:29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

11:30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

I.

A week ago, a friend who is also a pastor posed to us the question: how will you address patriotism this weekend in church? My initial reaction was to say to myself—I'm going to avoid the subject! And then I took a good look at the scripture passages suggested for today for preaching around the world.

The passage from Zechariah spoke to a suffering people, promising a day when a new kind of ruler would come, bringing peace to the nations rather than exile and captivity and war. And Matthew's gospel called all who suffered under heavy burdens to come to Christ, to take on a different yoke, a new burden—promising rest for the weary, and a feast for those shut out from the table. Now some pastors will tell you these are purely spiritual messages. But everything we read in the New Testament says to us that the message is about a new kind of kingdom, a new commonwealth, the healing of the earth as much as heaven. God has a word for the nations still!

Two hundred thirty eight years and two days ago, a group of delegates from thirteen colonies signed off on a document, the Declaration of Independence. It was destined to become historic and iconic. The day we mark as the birthday of our nation was the day when they ratified a small committee's effort to put into words the reason for shaking off the chains of colonialism. Even in its opening, this Declaration reflected division and pain. Thomas Jefferson, himself a slave-owner, wanted the document to condemn the practice of the slave trade. That passage was

expurgated by the gathered delegates, to please the delegations of two colonies--. And yet the document that came forth, despite being written by and for privileged men, has become a rallying cry through the intervening centuries. It has offered hope for the cause not merely of easy or self-congratulating nationalism, but also for human rights, for the right to just and representative government, for the inalienable humanity of every individual.

Now Christianity is a world religion, not a national credo; and the Declaration those men signed that day is a national treasure, but not holy writ. Every follower of Jesus in any land is in the most profound sense a dual citizen. Our first loyalty is not to any national body, but rather to a living God whose standards for justice, and whose deep grounding in love for the “least of these” relativizes and limits any temptation to national or regional supremacy. Our Lord is not Caesar but Christ, the one we know as God’s Guide among us in human flesh. Because we serve Christ first, we dare not remain silent on national holidays or difficult issues of the day. And it is also why we do not simply wave the flag or parrot easy jingoism. We are Christ’s first, before the party of choice or even the nation we love.

II.

So how do we as people of faith deal with Independence Day? We acknowledge and give thanks for the national moments of truth and justice—for moments like the profound recognition of the human right to freedom and self determination in a lovely if flawed document. At the same time we also confess the moments in which convenient half-truth has won out and justice been sacrificed for profit, the rights of one vulnerable individual or weaker parties been compromised for the interests of the wealthy and institutions with accumulated power.

When it comes to the fourth of July, the Church of Jesus Christ in the USA may proudly acknowledge a Declaration of Independence that has offered a template for insistence on the rights of the oppressed ever since; we in the same breath confess a broken history when a republic turned empire has in the name of democracy often run roughshod over the most vulnerable, and on occasion in the name of freedom overthrown the governments of others. Pride mixes with honesty and tears, and if we are worth anything, the desire to do better.

We give thanks for a history which at its best has proclaimed with Jewish poet Emma Lazarus, a New Yorker who in 1883, to help raise money to construct the base of the Statue of Liberty, penned these words:

*Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name Mother of Exiles.
From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,*

*The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*

And yet with honesty and regret we acknowledge the strangers turned from the door, the policies that have made some homeless and others tyrants. Ours is a mixed and contradictory legacy, in this nation. One of great hope, and one of often unintentional wrong.

III.

We remain, to quote Zechariah, “prisoners of hope.” We remain captives of a conviction both biblical and humanist: that all people, every individual, is born, and remains in heart and soul, free. We remain convinced that tyranny will not have the last word and that government without consent of the people is no government at all. We remain convinced that you and I and all the rest have the same basic needs, the same basic dreams and the same basic right to meet the needs and pursue the dreams. And this conviction is born for some of us ultimately not of patriotism but faith.

You and I follow a Christ who came to set free the prisoner; to welcome the exile; to offer recovery of sight to the blind and healing to the afflicted and oppressed. And that Christ is, yes, deeply concerned for our hearts; but also for our bodies! That messiah longs for the redemption of our souls; but also for the redemption of our nations; for the liberation of all peoples, be they ever so invisible or small. We are prisoners of hope, committed to the agenda of rest for the weary and a feast for the hungry. Our hope is persistent, tenacious, and it will not go away. We find it in the words of the final verse of the old hymn by James Russell Lowell—a hymn that Martin Luther King Jr. loved—

*Tho' the cause of evil prosper,
Yet the truth alone is strong;
Tho' her portion be the scaffold,
And upon the throne be wrong;
Yet that scaffold sways the future,
And, behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow,
Keeping watch above [God's] own.*

As members of this church, both Baptist and United Church of Christ, we could take refuge in a proud history of commitment to causes seeking to correct the course of a nation; our ancestors in faith since the 1700's fought for the rights of women; for universal suffrage—that is the right to vote. They struggled in the cause of temperance and abolition; for civil rights and against war. They knew that what they called “Christian citizenship” involved a yoke of duty and a burden of truthfulness even when it was unpopular or dangerous.

However the achievements of our American religious ancestors are not as important as what inspired them. For those early 18th and 19th century North American religious reformers turned to the New Testament for their covenant and to the risen Christ they knew personally for their example and guide.

There are those who will tell us that patriotism involves speaking no ill of one's native land. I say to you that love of God and love of nation alike dictate that we speak not only lovingly and proudly but also confessionally and honestly about who we are, about what our ancestors have done, -- speaking with pride and appreciation, speaking with faithful honesty, humility and readiness to correct the wrongs of the past and hold ourselves—'we the people'-- accountable to a judge higher than the supreme court, a sovereign more powerful than a president, a messiah more compassionate than any legislature.

God is, in the words of that excellent UCC publicity campaign, "God is still speaking." And to paraphrase John's gospel, the word made flesh still dwells among us. Christ's love remains the measure of our programs; God's justice remains the measure of our courts; and the liberating Spirit that filled our savior is yet setting humans free—around the world and in this lovely struggling city.

Come to me all you that are weary, says Christ. But he is not calling us to nap. He is promising to carry the weight with us, and lift us with hope that transforms the dead weight of duty into invitation, and a joy that flies.