

Sermon for June 27, 2021: Rev. Dr. Rodney Kennedy

**God Bless America**  
**2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27**

In the Old Testament lesson, a story about David mixes politics with faith in God. Our system exists as a world of politics that is less than Christian. But hear the word of the Lord: "How the mighty have fallen in the midst of the battle!" There are two narratives about David: one told by the royal public relations department, and one told by the historians of Israel. David's press secretary must have released the story of David killing Goliath, but there's another version in Scripture as well. "Elhanan, the Bethlehemite, killed Goliath, the shaft of whose spear was like a weaver's beam." None of this makes the Bible untrue or unreliable. With David, some days we get Abraham Lincoln and some days we get Richard Nixon.

The older I get the more history means to me. Those who forget their history are doomed to repeat it. What we haven't learned yet, is that when we believe those who revise our nation's story for the benefit of one group, we threaten the heart of our nation. A people determined to change the past pretend they have a power greater than that of reality, a freedom from truth itself. This sense that history now lives on a shelf at the supermarket in a variety of packages and there's a special sale today where you get to pick the story you like is dangerous. History is not a consumer product to be packaged in red, white, and blue. History is not a feel-good story. Look, if you were thinking about marrying a man, wouldn't you want to know his story? Wouldn't you want to know if he's been married seven times before and that he is a serial abuser of his wives? That he had some of them executed. Wouldn't you want to know?

The editors of the Bible had a scrupulous honesty in recording history. Biblical writers preserved the old traditions but made profound changes in the understanding of the faith. They put the new right there with the old. This is what historians do for us – they hold our feet to the past – all of it, warts and all. They insist that we never forget. The old and the new together. After all, as the Bellamy Brothers sang: “Cause He's an old hippie and he don't know what to do / Should he hang on to the old / Should he grab on to the new.”

For example, in Leviticus 19, the old word says that one's fellow Israelite is the neighbor to be loved. Later in the same chapter, there's a new reading by a new generation of historians: “You shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.” Please note when you are trying so hard to hang on to old stuff, that God's direction is usually the expanding one, not the hanging on one. God is in the mind-blowing business. You don't have to get high on drugs to blow your mind, just be filled with the Holy Spirit and the mind-blowing will follow.

There's new stuff we need to embrace and there's old stuff we need to retain. The early church was ready to change as needed. They opened the door to let in the Gentiles. Today, churches are trying to close the doors to so many. The early church changed from circumcision to baptism as the entry experience into the people of God. That changed everything. Once you baptize someone, they are in the door and have the keys to the kingdom. It's too late to debate whether or not a woman or a gay should be ordained. They are baptized! The new changes everything. The Church kept the Old Testament and wrote a New Testament. That's conservative and liberal at the same time. The church dropped going to church on Saturday and moved it to the Lord's Day. Radical change. Church members look me in the eye and tell me they want to grow, and then they drag their feet and do everything they can to keep things as they are.

Don't get me wrong here! I love America. I am glad I was born in the USA (thank you Bruce)! But I want our nation to be beautiful in the eyes of God. Katherine Bates social gospel hymn is one of my favorites: "America the Beautiful." In the hymn Ms. Bates presents the physical beauty of America: "purple mountain majesties," "amber waves of grain," spacious skies." Her descriptions of the heart are darker, with scars and flaws. Here she prays for something deeper, more lasting than physical beauty: "crown thy good with brotherhood (and sisterhood)." "God mend thy every flaw, confirm thy soul in self-control, they liberty in law!" "May God thy gold refine till all success be nobleness and every gain divine!" "God shed his grace on thee / Till selfish gain no longer stain / The banner of the free!" "Thine alabaster cities gleam / Undimmed by human tears! / America! America!"

My entire premise originates in a common phrase used by American presidents: "God bless America." The words belong with "under God" in our Pledge of Allegiance, and "In God we trust" on our money" – phrases introduced in the 1950's by those who dreamed of a "Christian America." I'm tired of slogans; I want an investment of our minds in Scripture. I'm tired of slogans; I need a Savior whose name is Jesus.

**A nation that puts its faith in phrases and slogans has built a house on sand.**

**A nation that allows partisan politicians to rewrite history flirts with fascism.**

**A nation that supports an unholy alliance of greedy businessmen, corrupt politicians, and lapdog preachers exploits God for material gain.**

We just can't mix our faith with our nation. Being a good American can be a good thing, but it will not get you in the door of the kingdom of God. If I have to choose between God and America, then America is nothing to me. I am a citizen of another kingdom and I serve a higher Lord – his name is Jesus, not Joe.

Who was the first president of the United States to say "God bless America" in a speech? Richard Nixon dropped the phrase on April 30, 1973. When you are doing damage control for a scandal, it is only natural to appeal to God. Nixon said, "Tonight, I ask for your prayers to help me in everything I do throughout the days of my presidency. God bless America and God bless each and every one of you."

I have a big question for all of us? How much of being "God's people" do we really want? This is not a rhetorical question. Being God's people means sacrificial love and suffering for the world. We don't talk about it. If I hear one more preacher or politician tell me that Americans are "God's people" I will scream. The question is "Are we sure we want to be the people of God?" I know what the Bible says about being God's people. I know it says take up your cross and follow Jesus. I know it says to lay down our lives for others. I know it says God loves the whole world and all of its inhabitants, and I'm supposed to have that same love. I know what the Good Book says. I know that God's people are called to be suffering servants. I know that God's people are the ones who will be called fools for preaching the gospel, will be knocked down for being faithful, will be persecuted, will be ignored, and shunned. How much of this do you really want?

Allow me to show you the family album of God's people – portraits by Isaiah, before you answer. "My servant will bring forth justice to the nations." Justice work? Are we sure we want to be the people of God? "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." Salvation for everyone. That's evangelistic work. Are we sure we want to be the people of God? "I gave my back to those who struck me, and

my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting." Are we sure we want to be the people of God? "Appearance marred, scarred, and beyond acquainted with infirmity; and despised, and of no account. The people of God bear our infirmities and carry our diseases. Stop me when you have had enough. The people of God are wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; punished and bruised for the healing of the nations. On the people of God, the Lord has laid the iniquity of us all." Suffering work! Are we sure we want to be the people of God?

Perhaps we should have some conversations with the Jews about being God's people. Remember their story of bondage, slavery, exile, and being scattered across the earth. God heard their groaning down in Egypt land, their cries of pain. "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" O God, why have you forsaken us? Do you think you should revisit the sufferings of the Jews across the centuries, the vicious anti-Semitism that has haunted our world since the dawn of the second century? Do you want to think again about the Holocaust? If we are ready to be God's people, then we have to stop worshiping America and American politics and get serious about suffering, sacrificing, saving work. We have to center our hearts and minds on God and what God demands.

If we want God to bless us, God needs to be subject not object.

God needs to be the center of attention not a cosmic bellhop.

God needs to be worshiped and adored not used like a deck of marked casino cards.

God is not an afterthought; God is the originating thought. God is not an option; God is the necessity. God is not secondary; God is primary.

When God says, I will bless you so you can bless the world, all the clouds of suspicion and doubt shrink away. All that's left is for us to look to God and say, "What she said." "Be the blessing!" Get it? Praise God, bless one another, and do God's will.

Praise God! God liberates us for praise, for celebrating the glory of God who has made it possible. This is what God is after, no hidden agenda, nothing kept back. A harmonious universe is a universe of praise, worship, and peace.

Bless one another. When you bless the least of these, you are blessing God. Rather than asking for the blessing of God for our kind, our tribe, our group, our church, our nation we bless all of creation.

Do God's will. God gets glory when the God we praise on Sunday becomes the God whose will we do on Monday.

Let us bless the Lord!