

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost  
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX  
Ezekiel 2:1-5

4 July 2021

This week we celebrate another anniversary of our independence. I have been thinking a great deal about our country lately. There is no doubt that America is one of a few super-powers still standing. In fact, many experts believe that we are the only true super-power left. We emerged out of the Second World War with a renewed sense of purpose that has made us a great nation. We lead the way in technology, entertainment, defense, and democracy. Additionally, it is very apparent that most Americans love this country. As former Illinois Governor (and presidential candidate) Adlai Stevenson put it, "When an American says that he loves his country, he means not only that he loves the New England hills, the prairies glistening in the sun, the wide and rising plains, the great mountains, and the sea. He means that he loves an inner air, an inner light in which freedom lives and in which a man can draw the breath of self-respect."

We are a nation blessed by God with wealth, physical beauty, and industrious and inventive people. Chief of all our blessings is the blessing of freedom. This is truly a country where men and women can freely draw the breath of the air of self-respect. This freedom is not cheap, free, or complete, however. It comes at a high price, and it has to be worked for, protected, and defended. It is also not complete yet because we cannot say that we have achieved perfect freedom. It is a work in progress. We still have enemies around the globe that resent our power and, perhaps rightly, some of the means we have used to achieve this power. There are some who wish us harm and who see us as the enemy to their ambitions and as an obstacle to their aspirations. There are also grave enemies within our nation that impede or limit the freedom of many: enemies like racism, political polarization, poverty, unemployment, and homelessness; not to mention political corruption, corporate abuses, and crime. These are just some of the many things that bind us and from which our nation must be liberated.

I do not believe, however, that our worst enemies are outside of America. I believe Abraham Lincoln was right about 160 years ago when he said, "America will never be destroyed from the outside. If we falter and lose our freedoms, it will be because we destroyed ourselves." The greatest threat to this nation is the extreme polarization we are facing. We are a divided nation, locked in an ideological struggle that has become more radicalized and more negative in its rhetoric over the last 50 years. In today's political climate it is not enough to disagree with someone, you must also question their motivations, doubt their decency, and destroy their character. Those who do not agree with us are automatically reduced to the level of enemies who must be destroyed by any means necessary. I believe that we are a divided nation because we have lost our identity as "One nation under God." But let me be clear that when I ask us to reclaim our identity as one nation under God, I don't mean just the Christian God or the Roman Catholic God,

or the Episcopal God, or the Hindu or Muslim God. There is only one God, creator of the world. We must be a nation under God, regardless of whatever name you use for God.

I believe that when a nation consciously and purposely walks away from God, that nation is asking for trouble. Let me illustrate this point by drawing a comparison between us and the nation of Israel during the time of the prophet Ezekiel, bearing in mind that there is a gap of a few thousand years, and that no comparison is ever totally fair. Today in the book Ezekiel God intones an incredibly sad lament over the state of affairs in Jerusalem right before the exile to Babylon. Unfortunately, the nation has forgotten about God's commandments. God tells the prophet how his people have become "a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have transgressed against me to this very day. The descendants are impudent and stubborn."

The once mighty nation is now besieged by internal and external threats and has failed to protect the poor, the orphaned, the widows, and the aliens among them. The blessings of God have been squandered and now the land is covered with the blood of victims, as foreign invaders attack their borders and internal enemies treat each other with great injustice. Many in the nation have abandoned God and now the people were suffering the consequences of injustice, exploitation, and violence. We know that within Ezekiel's lifetime, the nation lost its land, Temple, and institutions as Babylon forced them into exile and captivity for decades.

Ezekiel reminds us today that without God there is no morality. Central to our duty to God is our duty to each other, and without God there is no honest respect for human life, and no true justice. Without God there is no true mercy and compassion, and all we have is misguided and self-serving humanism. Without God all we have is selfish secularism, and "enlightened materialism." Israel forgot about obedience to God and God's law, and soon the nation paid the consequences for their disobedience.

My friends, there is more to life than the acquisition of goods. America has been a great country, not just because we are rich, and any of us can have two or three cars in our garage. America has been a great country because from the very beginning of our existence as a country we have been a sanctuary where people from all over the world can find God and pursue a relationship with him without fear of punishment and death. Systematic Theology professor Robert J. McCracken put it this way, "We on this continent should never forget that men first crossed the Atlantic not to find soil for their ploughs but to secure liberty for their souls." As much political and economic freedom as America has experienced over the last two hundred years, we are still spiritually captive. Over the last 50 years God has been pushed out of almost every area of our common life, deeper and deeper into our subjective and personal lives. Sadly, when we hear God's name in a public sphere, it is often used as a political ploy to garner sympathy with voters, but there is no real intent to obey God and follow his commands. I believe this has made America weaker rather than stronger. We are slowly becoming one nation under partisan politics, rather than one nation under the universal and creator God.

As we celebrate America's birthday today, let us celebrate our dependence on God. Let us reclaim our identity as "One Nation Under God." Not one nation under Wall Street, Hollywood, or Silicon Valley but one Nation under God. Not one Nation under Washington or Austin, although we must respect Washington and Austin, but one Nation under God. Not one Nation under our own rugged individualism and self-sufficiency, but one Nation under God and dependent on God. Not one polarized Nation under the sophisticated intellectualism of academia, but one united nation under God! Let us return God to Main Street and Market Street. Let us return God to our civil discourse and seek to honor him by taking care of our brothers and sisters who have no voice. We too have the poor, the orphan, the widow, and the alien. We now call them the homeless and the poor. We must care for them as an output of our faith in a common God. A nation is great not because of the size of its military, but because of the care it takes of its citizens. If we continue to push God out, we must look at ancient Israel's example, and we must be ready to deal with the consequences of our actions.

Let us Pray:  
(BCP Prayer 18, Pg. 820)

Almighty God, who hast given us this good land for our heritage: We humbly beseech thee that we may always prove ourselves a people mindful of thy favor and glad to do thy will. Bless our land with honorable industry, sound learning, and pure manners. Save us from violence, discord, and confusion; from pride and arrogance, and from every evil way. Defend our liberties, and fashion into one united people the multitudes brought hither out of many kindreds and tongues. Endue with the spirit of wisdom those to whom in thy Name we entrust the authority of government, that there may be justice and peace at home, and that, through obedience to thy law, we may show forth thy praise among the nations of the earth. In the time of prosperity, fill our hearts with thankfulness, and in the day of trouble, suffer not our trust in thee to fail; all which we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.