

Proper 9B; July 4, 2021  
St John's  
Deacon Tim

## INI

Today is Independence Day in the national calendar. It is also the 6th Sunday after Pentecost in the church's calendar. This conjunction of a major national holiday with a Sunday brings into focus the sometimes fraught relationship of church and state.

Some churches take the occasion to celebrate the country. A megachurch in Dallas is hosting a Freedom Festival, with patriotic songs, celebration of our military history and promotion of conservative family values. These nationalist, patriotic and religious celebrations are common enough that some people refer to the United States as a Christian nation, or assume that Americans are God's chosen people.

We read in our first lesson about God's truly chosen people, with the selection of David, by God, to be King over Israel and, later, the united kingdom of Israel and Judah.

David was not a perfect king. As a young man, he had taken down Goliath, the champion of the Philistines, with a small, smooth stone thrown from his slingshot. Though he was small and weak compared to the giant Goliath, he prevailed and won the war that King Saul's army could not win.

Mostly David ruled well, as a wise and thoughtful King, one chosen by the Lord. But also as king, he sinned with his neighbor's wife, Bathsheba, and had her husband Uriah killed. If God was with David in that time, it was as judge of his behavior. Indeed, we read of the prophet Nathan, confronting David, bringing his repentance. In our tradition, we read Psalm 51 as David's lament for his sins

It begins:

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your

loving-kindness; \*

in your great compassion blot out my offenses.

When we sing God Bless America or other prayers that God would bless our country, the saga of David reminds us that God's blessing is paired with God's judgment. We should also be mindful that we are not the only country asking for and receiving God's blessings. America is not God's

chosen people and as a nation we do not have a special place in God's eyes.

In the Lutheran hymnal, as in most hymnals, there is a section toward the back for national songs. I think the editors of ELW wanted to make a point in their collection of national songs, by listing as the first a hymn known as. This is my song, O God of all the nations. The first verse reads

This is my song, Oh God of all the nations,  
A song of peace for lands afar and mine.  
This is my home, the country where my heart is;  
Here are my hopes, my dreams, my sacred shrine.  
But other hearts in other lands are beating,  
With hopes and dreams as true and high as mine

The hymn continues in that vein, My country's skies are bluer than the ocean ...and skies everywhere [are] as blue as mine ... that our God is not the God of America, or of any particular people or nation.

With that understanding of our God, and of our nation, we are compelled to consider a counter-cultural way of approaching national holidays and patriotic celebrations. We do not hold a Freedom festival that celebrates the country and our military. Now I am glad that I live in the United States and happy to celebrate our accomplishments. But I will not conflate faith and patriotism. To me, love of country and love of God are not the same and are in fact sometimes in conflict.

I see the role of the church as more like that of the prophet Nathan than the leaders of the tribes of Israel who crowned King David. Like David, our country has had its Goliath moments and its Bathsheba moments -- times when good and righteousness have prevailed and times we have gotten lost in pride and greed.

At our best, in our Goliath moments, we work to expand the power of people throughout our country by protecting voting rights and strengthening health care, among other things. In our Bathsheba moments, we do the opposite, restricting rights and reducing health care or elevating individual wealth and power over the good of the community, or being the bully

among nations. In those times we need to listen to Nathan and pray Psalm 51 together.

If the role of the church is to take a political stance, to bring about more Goliath moments, isn't the church getting involved in politics? And isn't that forbidden by the First Amendment, the "wall of separation" between church and state? Yes, and no. Yes, it is politics, and no, it's not forbidden by the First Amendment. Let's take these one at a time.

Politics is not evil and certainly not off-limits for people of faith. The root word for politics refers to the affairs of the city -- the issues and concerns of daily life in a civil society. As a church, we do not advocate for particular candidates for office -- that's from an IRS rule, not the Bill of Rights. But we do advocate on issues - voting rights, hunger, health care, equity for all people - and against wrong-doing by the state on our behalf -- our Bathsheba moments.

We pray and discern and act to bring health and healing, even if what we do can be seen as having political consequences. We encourage everyone who can to get the vaccine for Coronavirus, even if vaccination has been

politicised and subject to all kinds of rumors and propaganda. I read with sadness of pastors in Virginia and Tennessee who are hesitant to encourage their parishioners to be vaccinated because they might be seen as stepping into politics and causing controversy.

Like Nathan and contemporary prophets, we are called to speak out on issues where Christian teaching is clear.

The Bill of Rights, specifically the First Amendment, constrains the government, not the church. It reads that Congress shall pass no law respecting the establishment of religion or limiting the free exercise of religion. That language does not restrict what we can do as churches and as individual Christians. The term, “wall of separation,” often used to describe the separation of church and state, is not from law or the constitution, but from a letter written by Thomas Jefferson. As a church and as Christians we are free to criticise the country and to be active in politics.

That also means we must acknowledge & repent when the church has supported the country in its Bathsheba moments -- consider the doctrine of discovery and the Indian schools -- .as a church, we ran residential schools

that were designed to strip indigenous children of their culture, by requiring that they speak English instead of the native languages, by forcing western-style clothing and removing them from their homes. Some of these schools were run by the Epsicopal Church -- and we must repent. Part of that repentance is acknowledging whose land we occupy. We worship this morning on the traditional lands of the Ojibwa, Odawa and Potawatami nations.

And we celebrate Goliath moments, when the church and the nation are at their best - bringing equality of rights to LGBTQ people, to people of color, the poor and the powerless, when we use the power of the state for justice and equity.

We do not wrap ourselves in the flag or become one with the state. We are like David and Goliath: we will overcome through our weakness, not through power. Just as Jesus sent the disciples out two by two, without

money or even an extra jacket, we go into the world to proclaim justice and root out injustice, with only the power given us by God.

+++

Sources

<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/messyspirituality/2021/06/why-jesus-and-nationalism-cant-co-exist/>

<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/goliath-moments-proper-9-b-2012/>

ELW, Hymn 887

<https://www.politico.com/news/2021/07/03/southern-pastors-vaccines-497898>