

July 1, 2018

“*God Bless America*”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Deuteronomy 8:11-14, 19-20

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As a Fourth of July tribute today, we started by singing together *God Bless America*. And rather than just singing it as a song, I think we need to lift it up as a prayer. Asking God to continue to bless our great country and make it the United States of America. Because, to be honest, I’m anxious. And I’m guessing you are too. All we need do is just look around... at all the anger, the hatred, the incivility, and I have to wonder if we have taken for granted this gift, this miracle of a nation in which we live and thrive and call our "home, sweet home."

In fact, this summer, our sermon series will be on the miracles of God. Now miracles are events or accomplishments brought about or inspired by God. And when you reflect on the history of our country – all the difficulties and sacrifices and obstacles that had to be overcome - from the Pilgrims to the Founding Fathers, to the Civil War and beyond, don't you think it had to be a miracle that our nation was even established in the first place. And that God, and their faith in God, had a lot to do with it! In fact, the great patriot Samuel Adams said on the day he signed the Declaration of Independence, “We have this day restored the (true) Sovereign, to whom alone men ought to be obedient. He reigns in heaven and... may His Kingdom come.” And that Kingdom is so aptly described in those famous words of the Declaration of Independence: “*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.*” Yes, this country and our liberties are truly a miracle in the history of humankind, and that's why the song, *God Bless America*, evokes such emotion in us.

Because if we really think about it, we know we have been blessed. Why? Well look at the vision our ancestors had for America. We were founded on solid Judeo-Christian principles and beliefs. Cornerstones like justice for all, charity toward our neighbors, opportunities and freedoms to insure a better future, and faith in Almighty God. We established a democratic government of the people, for the people and by the people, all for the common good of one another. We developed a public system of education so our citizens would be literate. We abolished slavery, and to this day good people are still striving to insure equality for all. We allowed thousands of immigrants from foreign nations to come and enjoy our freedoms and they have made our country stronger and better as a result. I think we were blessed because we made that universal dream of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness available to

all people of every race, creed and color. And we did it by building a country where godly standards were the expected standards for living. Where religion was not mocked. Where prayer was heard by our young people in schools. Where the Sabbath was kept as a day for going to church and pausing to renew body and soul. We were a nation striving to be worthy to ask God's blessings upon us. However, here, now, in the 21st century, much of that has changed. Don't you think?

Which begs the question, why should God continue to bless America? Why should God continue to bless America? Let me share something interesting with you. Sixteen hundred years ago, St. Augustine wrote a treatise to help explain the demise of the Roman Empire. The treatise was called The City of God. And those that lived in the City of God had a passion for God and followed God's commandments. They exhibited humility and charity and compassion, and they showed contempt for self. And in return they received God's goodness and blessings. However, Augustine also described a second city, an earthly city, which many have called the City of Man. And this city was inhabited by individuals whose love of self and things of this earth reached the point where they showed contempt for God. And doesn't that sounds like what's happening today? You know, we heard the warning in scripture, "Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God." And yet, more and more we seem to want to separate ourselves from God. I firmly believe that so much of the anger, the hatred, the incivility, we see around us today are symptoms of a large problem. That problem being that in the "pursuit of happiness," people are pursuing and worshipping false gods – things like, self, celebrities, politicians, money, prestige, power, glamour, etc. And yet, look at those who have these things and yet still lead very unhappy and unfulfilled lives. In just the past few weeks, we've seen two high profile suicides – fashion designer Kate Spade and executive chef and television personality, Anthony Bordain. People we would have thought "had everything going for them." But from what I've researched, they had everything, that is, except God. You see, when we turn away from God, we easily go down the wrong path and separate ourselves from God, which ultimately leads to, as St. Augustine said, contempt for God. And we need to ask ourselves, isn't contempt the right word to use when we legislate God out of our lives? Isn't it contempt when we glorify and esteem those celebrities and politicians rather than honor honest leaders, concerned educators, and normal hard working women and men? Isn't it contempt when our own self-interest and greed wins out over the common good and welfare of others? And if we show God and his people only contempt, do we really believe God will pour out his blessings on America? Remember what the Lord told Moses in today's reading, "If you do forget the Lord your God and follow other gods to serve and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely

perish.” Remember, there have been many other world powers and empires that have crumbled before us. So we, as Christians living in America, need to stand strong, to be bold in our faith, so we can insure that we are a country worthy to ask God’s blessings upon us.

The poet, Kahlil Gibran, once wrote these words, “My friends, pity the nation whose statesman is a fox, whose philosopher is a juggler, and whose art is the art of patching and mimicking. Pity the nation that welcomes its new ruler with trumpetings and farewells him with hootings, only to welcome another with trumpetings again. Pity the nation divided into fragments, each fragment deeming itself a nation. Pity the nation that is full of beliefs and empty of religion.”

Yes, we need to unite together as Christians, as Americans, to keep God alive and active in the United States. How? Well, I like the way Rev. Peter Gomes sums up our situation. He says, "Recovering the lost vision for America may mean rediscovering God's vision for us as a people. A people that can create a society of equity, and of peace and of love. We are neither righteous Israel, nor decadent Rome. We are, however, a needy nation. As needy of God and one another, as we have ever been. Perhaps our realization of this will make us less arrogant, less certain of our absolute convictions, less willing to conform, but more desirous to be transformed. The Bible stories are the accounts of a faithless people, and a faithful God, who seek constantly to renew their relationship each with the other. Perhaps it's time we should read that story for the first time, again." Yes, perhaps it's time we read that story again.

So the next time you hear the phrase, “God Bless America,” don't take it for granted that he will. Instead use it as a challenge to strive harder as an individual, as part of a community, as part of God’s church, to create that society of equity and of peace and of love. And then, and only then, can we sing with both delight and assurance, “God bless America, our home, our home, sweet home.”