

"A Holy Nation, God's Own People" 2016
1 Peter 2:9-17

When I lived in the Washington DC area, every July 4th the Beach Boys would do a concert on the Mall between the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial. It was a grand celebration often in excess of a million people, and always a wonderful and very patriotic experience. There was a huge crowd, a mix of locals, tourists & internationals, and it was great fun to meet and talk with strangers, especially foreign visitors trying to make sense of it all. One year I happened to meet a young exchange student from Sweden, and as we talked and got better acquainted, she complained that America seems to glorify violence and bloodshed, and that only Americans would make a holiday of declaring war against Britain. I was a bit taken back and offended, but then I realized that she didn't understand our country or our patriotic fervor, and in particular, she misunderstood The Declaration of Independence. As it happened, we were walking near the Jefferson Memorial, so I took her inside, pointed and asked her to read the first panel where the preamble of The Declaration of Independence is engraved on the white marble in tall gold letters:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal, that they have certain unalienable rights, that among these rights are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, and that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed."

I explained to her that these words were not written as a declaration of violence and war against England, but were intended to express the beliefs and longings, a vision of how a people wanted to live under God. This is the context and moral system of our nation, what we believe, which has made us who and what we are, "certain unalienable Rights, endowed by their Creator."

These are the ideals of our nation, the values that bind us together, which are derived from our shared belief and trust that we are Created by a God who cares about how we live, how we treat our neighbors and how we do justice. These values that we hold most dear, **equality, justice and liberty** are in fact all ideals that are drawn from God's truth, and their authority derived from our shared belief in God. They are an idealistic hope, and represent a hunger and a longing, a belief and conviction that something better was possible, even though that vision had not yet ever been seen anywhere in the world or at any time in human history. At the time Jefferson wrote, all governments were mostly ruled by despots, monarchs with power and control, inherited as nobles at birth with no sense of equality or any rights of the powerless. Even within Jefferson's Virginia itself, there was little evidence of equality among the people, as slavery would still continue for another eighty years.

Jefferson's powerful and idealistic words of vision and hope, that patriotic dream has still not yet been fully realized, and even today continues to challenge us as we consider, what does it mean to be a people of God, a holy nation? What does it mean **to live in accord** with God's will and intentions?, to live in true community as compassionate neighbors, to put, "all men are created equal" into actual practice? From the very beginning, our theological understanding and relationship with God has had a lot to do with our sense of American citizenship and with our patriotic love and responsibility to country. That is say, how we relate to both our country and to our God, is based upon the idea, that God creates us all equal, that by the grace-work of God, we are all equally loved and cherished by the Lord our God. I believe that perspective is expressed in,

1 Peter 2:9-10, 16

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you **out of darkness into his marvelous light**. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. This text describes what it means to be a godly nation. "a chosen race, a holy nation, God's own people, As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil."

BUT to be chosen does not mean somehow more loved or better than other people. Rather, to be chosen, is to be called & equipped to serve God's purpose. Called does not mean favored as in spared life's difficulties, but in response to the grace and blessings of God, entrusted and equipped to reflect that light to the world... that is our calling, as we read in,

Matthew 5:16

"... let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

To be God's chosen people, does not mean that we are or should feel superior in any way, but as individuals and as a nation we are challenged to reflect God's love and compassion toward all others. As Christians, we serve our national interests by letting our lives shine, by reflecting God's love and goodness before the world. God isn't calling Christians to a political world domination, but simply to live in the world as who we are, reflecting to whom we belong... which means to reflect God's love and grace toward all others, as evidence of God's call from darkness to light. Obviously, in a time of state persecution, when Peter was written, the church/state concerns of those earliest Christians, were quite different than ours as Christians in America. Those early Christians gave very little thought to the sort of empire the Romans ought to be, but focused on how to survive, how to live faithfully under Emperor Nero, in their powerless situation. The Christians involved with the founding of this nation, thought their situation to be comparable or analogous to the Israelites moving into the Promised Land, following God's will in forming the nation Israel. All through the Old Testament, especially in Deuteronomy, God instructs the people of Israel, in how they are to live as a people of God, a godly nation. Moses outlines the sort of place they are to be, and how their own experience as slaves back in Egypt, was to inform and guide their community life and values. It meant that they were not to exploit or abuse the poor & powerless, for they were to remember what injustice feels like and not to do to others in their land as had been done to them. And why not? Because all are loved and cherished by God their Creator, and how tragic if the formerly oppressed, become the oppressor. So the measure of the nation's prosperity and righteousness before God, was in the preservation and sanctity of all people, and in recognizing the worth and infinite value of all persons as being equally precious before God.

The operative assumption of both Israel and our nation's founders was that having been blessed so abundantly by God, they were called and entrusted from darkness to light, to be and to live as God's own people, a holy nation. In his second inaugural address of 1805, Thomas Jefferson wrote against abandoning that perspective. His words are inscribed on the ceiling at the Jefferson Memorial:

"God gave us life and liberty. Can the liberties of a nation be secure when we have removed a conviction that these liberties are the gift of God? I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, and his justice cannot sleep forever."

Nation after nation, empire after empire has fallen, and this American experiment in Democracy could fail too. Our nation could pass into the dustbin of history, if we are complacent and do not treasure who and what we are. The Fourth of July presents us with the patriot's dilemma: to not so idealize our country as to make it a false idol, unable to hear challenge or calls to do better. AND not to so obsess with its flaws and deficiencies as to not see the good and noble, or try to do better.

The important consideration for the 4th of July is not to celebrate our battles and wars, or political movements but to consider our hope and dreams, **our vision: as a nation that was built upon the dream and ideal, that we could live together in truth as a community, where all are equally created and loved by God.** Christian are not called to withdraw or blindly reject the world, but because God values and loves all the people of Creation, we are called to connect to look out for one another, to be true community a compassionate people of God, a godly nation, for only then will we ever be free. Jesus came into our messy world, and he lived among sinners. Jesus calls us to follow him as his holy people serving him in our messy world, as a royal priesthood. In a world which says that we are all nobodies who don't matter, **God disagrees** for God calls us his own, and we are somebodies who matter, and so we are called and

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equipped to live in victory & hope. In the long run, nations and politics are comparatively unimportant, but as Christians we can do some good, pray for revival... and know for sure that what Jesus has accomplished matters so much more than anything we'll ever do. We are blessed that the Lord's Table, where all are always welcome, serves to remind us and enact that glorious and gracious love. We gather at his table for Jesus to feed us spiritually, to be strengthened and empowered to go back out, to serve in a corrupt world, one that is tainted by sin, **yet a world filled with the people, whom God dearly loves.**