

“That All Might be Blessed” – Stephanie Wing, 7.5.09

John Adams wrote in a letter to his wife Abigail, "The second day of July, 1776, will be the most memorable epoch in the history of America... It ought to be commemorated as the day of deliverance, by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires, and illuminations, from one end of this continent to the other, from this time forward forever more." He was right about just about everything - just a few days off on the date. July 2nd was the day that the Second Continental Congress voted to declare independence from Great Britain, but it was July 4th when the actual Declaration of Independence was adopted.

July 2nd could have been our day of celebration, as could have August 2nd, the day that the actual document was signed, as could have June 7th, the day the resolution to declare independence was first proposed. The fact is, the birth of our nation didn't happen in one day. It was a long process involving politics, diplomacy, and of course, war.

Our reading from 2 Samuel is also part of a story about a nation's birth. Though Saul was Israel's first king, Israel was still more like a loose confederation of the 12 tribes than a unified Kingdom. In this passage, we see the tribal leaders approach David and to acknowledge his authority and rule. They enter a covenant with David and with each other, and it is under David's reign that the tribes come

together, becoming one unified Kingdom of Israel. David established the capital city at Jerusalem, where his son Solomon eventually built the Temple, and the kingdom prospered under his 40-year rule. Borders were strengthened, enemies were subdued, and Israel became a powerful empire.

David's son Solomon continued to expand the Kingdom after David's death, but by the time Solomon died, the kingdom was experiencing some inner turmoil. Less than one hundred years after David united the Kingdom of Israel, it was divided again, into the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Both kingdoms were significantly weakened, and faced continued threats and attacks from outside forces. 200 years later, the Northern Kingdom was conquered by the Assyrian Empire. The Southern Kingdom survived only because the Assyrian Empire itself was conquered by the Babylonian Empire. Finally, in 586, four centuries after David's rule, the Southern Kingdom of Judah fell to the Babylonian Empire.

Our passage from Ezekiel takes place during the time of Babylonian exile. Israel had lost all political power, and the Israelites were scattered or enslaved. God says of the Israelites that they are a nation of rebels who have rebelled against God. They and their ancestors continued to transgress against God. God tells Ezekiel, "The descendants are impudent and stubborn. And I am sending you to them." What a task! Whether or not they will listen and hear what God is saying

through the prophet Ezekiel, God still sends Ezekiel to declare God's word to the people, stubborn as they are.

This task isn't unlike the one that we read about in the passage from Mark. After going to his hometown and receiving a less than warm welcome, Jesus sends the disciples in pairs to surrounding towns to preach a message of repentance. He tells them not to take anything with them - no food, no money, no clothes. They are reliant on the kindness and hospitality of strangers, and if they find any place that doesn't welcome them or hear their message, they are to shake the dust off their sandals as they leave.

Throughout history, God has sent messengers to call humans to repentance. The task isn't easy. The audience is usually a tough crowd to win over. But God continues to send the messengers and relay the message. The message is a call to repentance. It tells us that the way we live – individually, corporately, and politically – matters.

God had blessed Israel, but the Israelites turned against God. There was rampant injustice, and the most vulnerable people were the ones hurt worst. God had promised to bless Abraham's descendents, but also to bless all nations and all people through the blessing of Abraham. Blessing brings responsibility, and by the time of the Babylonian exile, Israel had displayed generations of failing to live up to that responsibility.

We sing songs like, "God Bless the USA" and "God Bless America," and if you look at our history, we can see that our nation has been abundantly blessed. Certainly we have had challenges along the way, but we enjoy prosperity and opportunities that most of the world's people can only begin to imagine. But God's blessings aren't just for our benefit.

Jesus reminds us in a parable that to whom much is given, much is expected. The blessing and prosperity that we enjoy as a nation requires us to work for the blessing and prosperity of all people. The commands given by God most often in the Old Testament are to care for widows and orphans, and to care for strangers and aliens living among the Israelites. Jesus says that whenever someone feeds the hungry, clothes the poor, and otherwise cares for the least of these, they are actually doing that for Jesus. God desires and requires our care for all of creation, especially the most vulnerable members. Having been so richly blessed, we are also charged with caring for and advocating on behalf of the least fortunate, those with the least power to help themselves.

Political powers come and go. Empires rise and fall. It isn't that God takes away his blessing from the people. Rather, it is the lack of faithfulness of the people, the rebellion against God's desire for creation, that causes an Empire to crumble. Unchecked greed and power grubbing has devastating consequences. Just last week, Bernie Madoff was sentenced to a prison term of 150 years for

investment fraud. It was the maximum sentence possible given the crimes to which he had pled guilty. The sentence was a clear statement against corruption and greed, and an acknowledgement of the victims and consequences of such behavior.

Right now the country is in the midst of the worst economic depression we have seen in 80 years. Some of you remember what it was like living through the Great Depression and its aftermath. We have all seen photographic images of bread lines and unemployment lines that stretch without an end in sight. Now unemployment is soaring, families across the country are losing their homes to foreclosure, and our already-stressed agencies of support and aid are facing budget cuts and fundraising shortfalls at a time when the demand for their services is higher than it has ever been.

Even in the midst of this deep recession, our country is still the richest nation in the world, controlling around 24% of the world's financial resources. Yet we have just 5% of the world's population. Even so, our poverty rate for children under the age of 18 is the highest in the industrialized world. If it is true that a body is only as strong as its weakest member, we are in very bad shape. Our nation is blessed. We have much to be thankful for, and much to be proud of, but we also have a lot of work yet to do.

Throughout human history, God has sent messengers to bring a call to repentance and faithfulness to all people. Repentance, in both Hebrew and Greek, means much more than admitting wrong-doing or apologizing. It means turning and returning to the path that God calls us to walk, to re-orient our lives back to God. Like Ezekiel, and like the disciples, we are also called to bring God's message to our context. Poverty, inequality, and injustice tear at the very fabric of our society. We must issue a call to turn back to God, to care for all of God's creation, and to share the blessings that God has given us with all people of all nations, to fulfill the promise of God to Abraham.

We are a country that loves to celebrate our Independence, and we too quickly ignore our interdependence. With the economy as shaken as it is now, we can see more easily how when one of us is hurting, we all hurt. What if, during our celebrations of Independence, we also celebrated our interdependence? What if we used this holiday as a reminder that God's desire is to bless all nations, and that we have responsibility in that department? On the day that we remember a declaration of self-evident truths that all people are created equal, and endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, we should examine the places in our society where inequalities still runs rampant, and where basic, God-given inalienable rights are denied.

God continues to send messengers and agents of change. And we are those messengers and agents. As we carry this message of repentance and re-orientation to God, as we work to further the kingdom of God here on earth, we will certainly be met by rebellious people, and perhaps find that, even in our hometown and among our kin, we meet disbelief. We are called to a difficult task, but to whom much is given, much is required. As we give thanks for our own Independence, freedoms, and the blessings that we have enjoyed, let us also work for the blessing of all nations. Let us remind ourselves and others of what God desires for us. And let us return to God by responding to God's call to us, to care for all people and all creation, that all may be blessed.