

## **“Remember What God Has Done”**

Deuteronomy 8:11-20 First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest Rev. Clinton G. Roberts

July 3, 2022

As this beautiful holiday weekend continues to unfold, I hope you’ve made time to be with family and friends, to look outside and listen; to gaze up at the sky and the stars above you; to look forward to a picnic or a parade, and to celebrate the Fourth with gladness. But most of all, I pray that you’re drinking from the deep well of living water that flows from the aquifer God, and that this morning, you’ve come here or joined us online to praise and honor and give thanks to God for all our many blessings.

America has many flaws, but you and I are blessed this morning to live in a nation of both prosperity and peace—especially when a large part of humanity lives with neither. Like our passage from Deuteronomy envisions, we all live in pretty fine houses by the world’s standards; our land is rich in produce; and our wealth has multiplied more than most. These are good and gracious reasons to return our thanks to God on the 244<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, and to remain grateful that this Republic has a Constitution to protect our liberties and direct our life together toward a vision of “liberty and justice for all.” We have a long way to go in achieving that, but given we might be living in nations less fortunate than our own, we have a lot to celebrate and give thanks for.

But as we approach this particular Fourth of July, we cannot avoid the events and realities that, one way or another, are impacting all of us in both body and spirit.

- This pandemic has taken a huge toll with the loss of over a million of our fellow-Americans; our economy is suffering from rampant inflation; and the Great Resignation is changing the way we work;
- The war in Ukraine and the growing threat of China have many of us anxious and afraid;
- The Jan. 6<sup>th</sup> Congressional hearings have disturbed us and the repeal of Roe v. Wade has further divided us;
- And now, the tragic death of 53 undocumented immigrants smuggled into the back of a semi-trailer in San Antonio has been added to the school shooting in Uvalde, both of which are breaking our hearts as we make our lament saying, “How long, O Lord? How long?”

In light of these realities, it might seem tempting to “take a pass” on celebrating our nation’s birthday this year. But that, I firmly believe, would be a mistake. It is precisely because of these difficult issues and troubling events that we must turn to God in humility, with gratitude

for what is right and good and with a persevering faith in God's future that calls us to the work of reconciliation.

More than 3200 years ago, the Children of Israel stood poised on the banks of the Jordan, ready to enter the Promised Land. God had spoken to Moses, telling him that he himself would not be going with them. The text of Deuteronomy forms Moses' final admonition and blessing of the nation of Israel.

We read in Deuteronomy about the Ten Commandments and the Great Commandment, about God's "statutes and ordinances" and the words of the Shema, which are written on parchment and placed in the Mezuzahs which grace the doors of practicing Jews to this day: "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone."

That same confession has guided many an American life also, as people across many generations have seen themselves as part of a nation not above or apart from, but under the Lord our God.

In Chapter 8 of the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses speaks of God's plans for Israel in the time to come, when the people have eaten their fill and live in fine houses, their herds and their flocks have multiplied, and their silver and gold as well. He then delivers this solemn warning: "Do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God...Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.'" Moses warns the Israelites that this way of thinking will lead to destruction, but doing God's will in remembrance of God's mercies will produce blessings of wellbeing and peace.

According to Scripture, ancient Israel was a people in covenant relationship with God in order to be a blessing to the world. In many ways, the American experiment in democracy has been understood in a similar light. "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free," say the words below the Statue of Liberty. "I lift my lamp beside the Golden Door." This poem has captured America at its best. And yet, from the institution of slavery to the treatment of Native Americans, from the violence toward Jews and Muslims and LGBTQ people to the new Jim Crow, and now the twin crises of out-of-control gun violence and out-of-control immigration, we are a long, long way from being the "City on a hill" that Jesus spoke of in his Sermon on the Mount. Our light is still shining—but there is a lot of smoke in the air, which our gasping political process bears witness to.

But if "taking a pass" on celebrating the Fourth of July this year, or even worse, giving in to cynicism, indifference and disillusionment is not really in keeping with remembering what God has done, then maybe what we can do as believers in one God coming from many political persuasions is to recommit ourselves to embrace three things on this Fourth of July:

- 1) First, let us embrace the spirit of humility. Humility is the opposite of arrogance and the antidote for self-righteousness. Humility listens before it speaks. Humility puts others before self. Humility leads to renewal. Humility brings forth peace. This nation needs leadership that serves humbly, because humility is a form of strength.
- 2) Second, let us embrace the virtue of gratitude. No matter what's wrong with America, being grateful for what is right beginning with this good land itself, as Deuteronomy says, gratitude is the first step in maximizing our ability to address and repair what is wrong. Gratitude brings with it clarity, deep joy, and lasting peace. It also produces generosity, something which has distinguished America out of all the nations of the world.
- 3) Finally, let us embrace the hard work of reconciliation. In all truth, there is no path that can bring America forward without it. Moving part of us forward is not moving forward at all. Can our common faith in God be the means of bridging our political differences? Reconcilers are willing to meet people in the middle, where positive things actually get done. Reconcilers are willing to affirm and give credence to people's suffering in light of widespread inequity and injustice, "with malice toward none and with charity toward all," as Abraham Lincoln famously said. Reconcilers will go out on a limb to bring people of radically different mindsets together, in the same way Jesus did when he ate and drank with the rich and the poor, the Jew and the Gentile, with the greatest and the "least of these" alike. Following his example, we too can work for and contribute to the reconciliation of the world.

So yes—as this beautiful Fourth of July weekend continues to unfold, and we spend quality time with friends and with family, let our communion at this Table inspire us to be humble and grateful ourselves, members of one Body, trusting in God's providence and committed to Christ's work of reconciliation, in order that this great nation's noblest aspirations may never become "a fool's hope," but always remain "a patriot's dream."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.