

July 2, 2017 Worship
Mary R. Brownlow

Readings:

Deuteronomy 10: 17-21
Romans 6: 17-23
Mark 12: 12-17

Hymns:	O Beautiful For Spacious Skies	My Country Tis of Thee
	Thou Judge by Whom Each Empire Fell	Lift Every Voice and Sing
	This is My Song	God of Our Fathers
	This Land is Your Land	

First Meditation: The Land as Gift

You may have noticed that our order of worship is a bit different today. I normally ignore secular holidays and focus instead on the church calendar or the lectionary readings. I feel that we are so often bombarded with messages or sales campaigns around certain holidays, and when we come to this place we should be able to escape the popular media and think about the Gospel and our faith traditions. But today, knowing that Independence Day is two days away, I am going to engage in a particular kind of reflection, using both Scripture and our national hymns. When we speak or sing of freedom, and when we speak of independence (or dependence or interdependence), when we think of allegiance, we are in spiritual territory as well as patriotic territory.

Our Hebrew ancestors were moved by a radical dependence on one God: the God whom they saw as active in their history, and deserving of absolute love and allegiance. Everything flowed from this primal response to the “God of gods and the Lord of lords”: the yearning for justice, for freedom, for harmony, for peace. And throughout history, those who follow in that Hebrew tradition, including ourselves, have continued to translate the love of God into a growing understanding of what it means to live in right relationship with one’s neighbors and the world. We have received the gift of a moral code, a moral compass.

But the other side of the human/divine relationship was the perception that God’s people were given a land to live in as a gift from heaven. “The Promised Land,” “The land flowing with milk and honey” was what it was called over three thousand years ago. It would be a place of refuge after generations of slavery and desert wandering. And so it was...after the local inhabitants had been defeated in battle. And so it was...until it became an empire itself, intent on amassing great swaths of territory. And so it was...until a stronger empire came along and tore it all down. Some saw this reversal as punishment for infidelity to God. For thousands of years the descendants of the wandering Hebrews have looked to a promised land, a gift from God, as either an impossible ideal or a birthright.

Clearly, our European ancestors inherited this ideal and this yearning. As religious and economic refugees, they arrived here hoping for a better life, explicitly borrowing from the Exodus story to justify settling a new “promised” land. As the years unfolded, and the wealth of natural resources in this continent became apparent, the idea that the Europeans were somehow entitled to settle and own it became stronger and stronger. We adhered to a Doctrine of Discovery – as though those already living here had not discovered it millennia ago. We put forth the concept of Manifest Destiny, a claim that God gave us the whole continent, as was written in 1849:

*“And that claim is by the right of our **manifest destiny** to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which **Providence** has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federated self-government entrusted to us.”*

And so our forebears acquired the rocks, rills, woods, and templed hills, not to mention the purple mountain majesty, because they really, really wanted to believe that it was God’s plan. Those pilgrim feet successfully beat a thoroughfare for freedom across the wilderness. Well might we sing “God mend thine every flaw.” Today, some of us recognize the hubris of manifest destiny. We certainly recognize the suffering that was caused to millions of displaced or murdered people. And yet we love the beauty of the land, and we hold up the ideal of freedom. And so we sing our love of country.

Around 1940, Woody Guthrie was writing songs. He certainly saw the poverty and inequity that was rife in our land. He got a little sick of the popular “God Bless America,” a song written by Irving Berlin as a patriotic anthem in WWI, which was all over the airways in the late thirties. So he wrote a song that was originally titled, “God Blessed America for Me.” We are going to sing it later on with the title it finally got: “This Land Was Made for You and Me.” Guthrie used the tune of a Gospel hymn, with the ominous title of “When this world is on fire.” The original 6th verse of Guthrie’s song reads:

*One bright sunny morning in the shadow of the steeple
By the [Relief](#) Office I saw my people —
As they stood hungry, I stood there wondering if
God blessed America for me.*

Even though it is a secular song, it suggests a religious question: Was this land made by some kind of higher power for some kind of higher purpose? Guthrie’s song is an egalitarian antidote to the idea of privilege and exceptionalism that has plagued our history and our moral discourse. The “you and me” of the song includes people of every color, national origin, faith, and ability.

The land is a gift. Let us accept it with gratitude, humility, penitence, generosity, and a sense of purpose.

Second Meditation: The Gift as Responsibility

As soon as you give your allegiance to God, it brings your relationship to earthly authority (say, the empire) into question. As soon as you give your allegiance to an earthly authority, it brings your relationship to God into question. This is not a new issue: even in a theocracy, when your ruler speaks for God, you will find prophets and martyrs who hear another voice. Fortunate are those who find earthly and heavenly allegiance to be completely congruent.

In the Gospel passage that was just read, we hear of an interchange with two normally antagonistic groups, the Pharisees and the Herodians, joining forces to trap Jesus into either public blasphemy or collaboration with the oppressors. It is a sort of “gotcha” question of the first century. Many people have dissected Jesus famous rebuttal (render unto the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and unto God the things that are God’s) to search for contemporary clues on our church/state issues. But the story is about entrapment, not a policy for our current relationship to

God or empire. Never did Jesus allow allegiance to any earthly power to trump our moral obligations or our relationship with our neighbors.

Ralph Wheeler, a long time civil rights activist, has said, “Real history includes both beauty and ugliness. What a nation does with its ugliness sometimes will be more determinative of its national character and civic health than will all of its other major accomplishments.” Since this nation’s founding, America has, in the words of former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, suffered from a congenital birth defect. The fact that the founders of our country, and leaders for generations, could accommodate the ugliness and injustice of slavery has been a deep wound up until this day. It has made a disparity that takes tremendous will and empathy to overcome.

Back in 1852, Frederick Douglass challenged white Americans on the blatant inequalities in the system in America in his speech “What to the Slave is the 4th of July?” Douglass said: *“I say it with a sad sense of the disparity between us. I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity, and independence bequeathed by your fathers is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought light and healing to you has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth of July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn.”*

And so, with the gift of the land comes human sin and greed, as well as prosperity and opportunity. To me, this all adds up to responsibility, which is a kind of gift in itself. When we acknowledge our responsibility to make our society better, to help our community and nation live up to its stated ideals, we find a deeper meaning in all our songs of joy, praise, and repentance. We look for ways to reach across impossible divides of race, gender, nationality, faith and experience. We take on the tasks of healing the wounds of the past and present, using our God-given gifts of Word, Sacrament, and Spirit-led action. In doing so, we reveal allegiance to both God and the greater good.

I want to close with words, a call to action of sorts, from Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address, which has inspired many lovers of God and country for 150 years:

“With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

Amen.