

“Faith and Freedom”

Exodus 14: 19-31

October 11, 2020

A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie S. Osterhoudt

Just in case you haven't noticed, we are less than a month away from a national election. November 3. In the weeks leading up to an election, I always grow weary of the bombardment of political ads, phone calls and now they are even texting me. But the freedom to vote for our leadership in the United States is the bedrock of our democracy. Today I invite us to consider the role of religion in the making of our country and I believe that going back to those earliest years as our country was being imagined and shaped, and understanding how religion played a role in who we would become as the United States of America may be informative for our decisions in the coming weeks. Jon Meacham has written a wonderful book, “The American Gospel,” in which he documents this issue and I will be using it as a resource. Meacham states that the purpose of his book is “to explore the role faith has played in the American Republic and to illustrate how the Founding Fathers left us with a tradition in which we could talk and think about God and politics without descending into discord and division.”

In the autumn of 1620, the passengers aboard the Mayflower – 102 English Puritans who were seeking religious freedom, new lands, and better livelihoods – found themselves in a horrific storm as they were sailing the North Atlantic Ocean. During that violent storm, they thought they would surely die. When the ship finally came within sight of Cape Cod, they fell on their knees and blessed the God of Heaven who had

brought them through the vast and furious ocean. Many of the earliest immigrants to what would become the United States of America, were escaping religious persecution in the Old World, and so they saw the hand of God in their journey across the vast ocean. The biblical story which resonated with their own experience was the fleeing of the Hebrew people from the Egyptian Pharaoh – likened to the English monarch - through the sea and into the promised land. Many a sermon was preached from the Old Testament book of Exodus, to give meaning to the earliest settler’s experience of crossing the Atlantic.

Let’s listen to the story of the great escape of the Hebrews from the slavery they endured in Egypt and hear how God provided for the Hebrews, enabling them to cross safely through the Red Sea.

Prayer for Understanding.

Read Exodus 14 and Matthew 5:14

“You are a light to the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden.”

Why did God guide the Israelites through the Red Sea? In chapter 9, God clearly states his purpose: “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Go to the Pharaoh, and say to him, ‘Thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews: Let my people go, so that they may worship me. For if you refuse to let them go and still hold them, the hand of the Lord will strike you.’” Of course, we know how the story goes. Pharaoh refuses to allow his source of free labor just leave the country. God sends plagues upon the Egyptians trying to persuade them to release those who are held in institutional bondage, but the Pharaoh continues to believe, somehow, that he is above it all and more powerful than the God of

the Universe. And, we know how that will go, right? So, finally, the Israelites leave Egypt, but in one final attempt to regain his hold over the Hebrews, the Pharaoh sends his armies in pursuit and the Israelites find themselves backed into a corner. With the Pharaoh's armies approaching and the Red Sea behind them, they are trapped. Until God intervenes and divides the Red Sea. What seems like the making of epic destruction becomes a place where God steps in with salvation and the possibility of new life. The Hebrews escape, once and for all, the slavery they endured in Egypt, so that they may experience the freedom to worship the God of Heaven and Earth. Once the Hebrews cross through the Red Sea, life in the wilderness is more complex than they had anticipated – it becomes a struggle to survive. Their propensity for sin and division follows them into the wilderness. The same could be said for the early immigrants to this country.

The first years of this country's history were full of pious pilgrims passionately wanting to build a new nation which would be a City on the Hill for all the world to see, which Matthew describes. But there were also dashing gold hunters, ambitious London investors seeking their fortunes, anxious Jews fleeing from persecution, and stern Puritan politicians, intent on building this City of God, a place where they were in power. Good intentions become motivated by selfish desires. The first Charter of Virginia is 3,800 words and only 98 of those words, or only 3%, are about God. Eventually, having fled from European religious conformity, the Puritans sought conformity of their own. In 1631 in the Massachusetts Bay, suffrage and the right to hold office were limited to members of the church. In 1635 came an order for non-members of the church to attend church services, followed by a directive three years later that nonmembers should help

pay for the preaching that might lead ultimately to their conversion. Of course, we have all heard of the Salem Witch Trials, a mandate by the church for conversion and conformity. There were a few voices like that of the Reverend Roger Williams, who was “interested in saving the church from the state, not the state from the church”, believing that there needed to be a wall between the church and the state. Williams believed that the ambitions and vices of men could pervert the church, therefore he was a voice for religious tolerance and freedom. And so, the debate began about how Americans would order their public life according to their faith without faith becoming enslaved to the state – a situation which they had risked their lives to escape. The Hebrews also fled the oppression of the Egyptian state in order that they might freely worship God as they journeyed to the Promised Land. How do we balance freedom and faith?

Now let’s jump forward in history by two centuries. The date is July 4, 1826 – the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The courthouse bell begins to toll in Charlottesville, announcing the death of Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson was among the most eloquent and forceful of the Founders on the subject of the separation of church and state. He had experienced the religious rigidity of the earliest pilgrims – who in fact were about creating the kind of state which they had fled. A political state which mandated the practice of religion. Jefferson and the other Founders reasoned that civil societies dominated by compulsory religious rigidity were unhappy and intolerant, while religious liberty seemed to produce more prosperous, stable and popular cultures. Benjamin Franklin added that “when religion is good, I conceive that it will support itself; and when it cannot support itself, and God does not take care to support it, so that its professors are obliged to call for help of the civil power, it is a sign,

I apprehend, of its being a bad religion.” And so, Jefferson, Franklin and Adams were united in their conviction that religion and state should always be separate.

The first fight over faith came at the opening session of the Continental Congress on September 6, 1774 at Carpenter’s Hall in Philadelphia. A lawyer from Boston moved that the delegates begin their deliberation with prayer. Several delegates stood up to object. Their reasoning, as John Adams wrote his wife Abigail, was that they were so divided in religious sentiment – some being Presbyterian, some Congregationalist, some Episcopalians, some Anglicans, that they did not want to appear to giving credence to another denomination, thereby elevating it above the others. Samuel Adams stood and said that he supposed that they could “hear from a man of faith, even if it was not their choice of denominations, if that man was a friend of his country.” And so the concept of public religion was born and was later expounded on by Benjamin Franklin. Public religion believes in:

A God who is creator of the universe;

That all human beings are created in the image of God;

The fallibility and sinfulness of humanity and our limited understanding;

Has a spirit of charity;

Is generous in disposition;

The God of public religion, according to the Founding Fathers was not equated with the God of Abraham or the Christ of the Holy Trinity. In public, God was to be spoken of in unifying ways, not divisive. Therefore in the Declaration of Independence they deliberately did not use Christian language. Judge John T. Noonan once said, “nations do not worship, persons do.”

Some interesting facts about our Founding Fathers:

John Adams – considered ministry but chose the law. He was a Unitarian. His wife, Abigail, was the daughter of a Harvard educated clergyman.

George Washington – would not kneel to pray and never received holy communion. His wife, Martha, set aside one hour each day for morning prayers.

Thomas Jefferson was a deist. He did not believe in the Trinity and believed that Jesus was a moral teacher.

John Witherspoon, President of Princeton and Presbyterian clergyman who signed the Declaration of Independence, was an avid supporter of religious freedom. If you begin to limit someone else's right to religious freedom, then you place your freedom to worship as your conscience dictates in jeopardy.

The Declaration of Independence itself does not choose nations or peoples to favor. It does state the belief in a divine forces that created the universe, endows all people with human rights, and is an actor in the drama of the world which God made.

Hear again those opening words of the Declaration of Independence:

“When in the course of human events it become necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation. 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....

Today some Americans lament that the country has strayed too far from God. Others fear that zealots are waging a holy war on American liberty. Extremism in any form is the great problem of the 21st century and we are experiencing today how that extremism is being played out in our own communities. Extremism is a powerful partner of fear and certitude and, complexity and humility are its foes. The good news is that religion shapes the life of our nation without strangling it. From the beginning of this nation's history, politics and religion were in accord – not attached. The magistrate governs the state and Christ governs the church. We have and will continue to sort out appropriate religious expressions in public places. Let us remember that God desires freedom to practice our faith in our Creator God. But what we can learn from the earliest leaders of this country is that they had concern for the common good and protecting civil liberties, one of which was the freedom to practice one's religion according to the dictates of one's heart. God did not give us easy answers; we should not expect the world that God created to provide them either. Jefferson, on his deathbed, stated "For it is in our lives and not from our words, that our religion must be read."

Some years ago, I traveled with a group of folks from the Wake Forest Presbyterian Church to Pretoria, South Africa, where we spent 2 weeks engaged in mission work. Every place I went I tried to engage folks in conversation. When they discovered we were from the United States, they usually had many questions for us. I would ask them, "what message would you like for me to take back to the United States?" Their response was almost always the same and a version of, "you are a city on a hill. We are watching you and we would like the same freedoms you have in your country." For it is in our lives and not from our words that our religion must be read.