

Independence Day Service - 2006
"No King but King Jesus"
(Battle Cry of the American Revolution)

Reading – Henry Ward Beecher

***Hymn No. 688 – "The Star-Spangled Banner" (1)**

***Pledge of Allegiance**

Welcome

Daniel 2:21

Reading – The Declaration of Independence

Special Music – Jack and Joyce Johnson

Comment

Tithes and Offerings

John 15:13

Anecdote – Nathan Hale

Comment

Recognition of Armed Forces

***Hymn No. 692 – "Battle Hymn of the Republic"**

Isaiah 61:1

New York Times Article – Janina Atkins

Special Music – Bill Marr

Comment

Proverbs 14:34

Quotations – Founding Fathers

Special Music – Nancy Wardle

Comment

***Hymn No. 687 – "God of Our Fathers"**

***Benediction**

Henry Ward Beecher

Henry Ward Beecher was a celebrated American editor, abolitionist, and clergyman. In 1861, he wrote these words about "Old Glory," the American flag:

"In 1777, within a few days of one year after the Declaration of Independence, the Congress of the Colonies in the Confederated States assembled and ordained this glorious national flag which we now hold and defend, and advanced it full high before God and all men as the flag of liberty.

It was no holiday flag gorgeously emblazoned for gayety or vanity. It was a solemn national symbol.

Our Flag carries American ideas, American history, and American feelings. Beginning with the Colonies, and coming down to our time, in its sacred heraldry, in its glorious insignia, it has gathered and stored chiefly this supreme idea: Divine right of liberty in man.

Every color means liberty; every thread means liberty; every form of star and beam or stripe of light means liberty. It is not a painted rag. It is a whole national history. It is the Constitution. It is the government. It is the free people that stand in the government of the constitution."

Declaration of Independence

On July 4 1776, delegates of the Continental Congress voted to accept a document declaring the independence of the 13 American colonies from England. That document of course is *The Declaration of Independence*, part of which reads like this:

“When in the course of human events, it becomes 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 Nature’s God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to 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, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

WE THEREFORE, THE REPRESENTATIVES OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, in General Congress, assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the name, and by authority of the good people of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be FREE AND INDEPENDENT STATES.

And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.”

Nathan Hale

Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address is probably the most celebrated speech in American history. Now consider what is probably the most celebrated sentence in American history.

In August of 1776, General George Washington desperately needed information about British plans and strength. So, he asked for a volunteer to go to Long Island, penetrate British lines in disguise, and gather information. The mission was so dangerous that only one man volunteered, Nathan Hale.

On September 12, Hale penetrated British lines and disguised as a schoolmaster, followed them to Manhattan.

Nine days later, on September 21, he was found out and captured just after he had completed his mission.

He was then taken before British General William Howe, to whom he courageously confessed.

The next morning, September 22, 1776, he was taken to the gallows.

There, just before the noose was placed around his neck and the trap door opened, he uttered these unforgettable and inspiring words, *"I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country."*

Janina Atkins

Many years ago, a Polish immigrant to America named Janina Atkins wrote an article that appeared on the editorial page of *The New York Times*. In it, she expressed her never-ending gratitude for the freedoms that she found in America.

“Just over six years ago, I came to this country. There is something in the air of America that filled my soul with a feeling of independence, and independence begot strength.

I love this country because when I want to move from one place to another, I do not have to ask permission. Because when I want to go abroad, I just buy a ticket and go.

I love America because America trusts me. When I go into a shop to buy a pair of shoes, I am not asked to produce my identity card. I love it because my mail is not censored. My phone is not tapped. My conversation with friends is not reported to the secret police.

Sometimes, when I walk with my husband through the streets of New York, all of a sudden we stop, look at each other and smile and kiss. People think we are in love, and it is true. But we kiss because we are also in love with America . . . standing in the street amidst the noise and pollution, we suddenly realize what luck and joy it is to live in a free country.

God bless America.”

Quotations

Our founding fathers grasped that righteousness was and still is essential to the strength and success of our nation. Listen to their words.

James Madison (chief architect of the United States Constitution)

"We have staked the future of all of our political institutions upon the capacity of mankind for self-government; upon the capacity of each and all of us to govern ourselves, to control ourselves, to sustain ourselves according to the Ten Commandments of God."

John Adams (Signer of the Declaration of Independence and 2nd president)

"We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. Avarice, ambition, revenge, or gallantry would break the strongest chords of our Constitution as a whale goes through a net. Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."

Noah Webster (statesman, educator, author of Webster's Dictionary, and architect of Article 1, section 8 of the United States Constitution)

"The moral principles and precepts contained in the Scriptures ought to form the basis of all our civil constitutions and laws. All the miseries and evils which men suffer from vice, crime, ambition, injustice, oppression, slavery, and war, proceed from their despising or neglecting the precepts contained in the Bible."

Welcome

I'd like to warmly welcome you to our annual Independence Day Service.

Independence Day is a time for reflecting. We recall the people and events that were involved in the founding and sustaining of this great nation of ours – and the truths that they teach us.

It's also a time for giving thanks. I remind you of what President Nixon said. If he could choose to live at any time and in any place in all of human history, it would be America in the 20th century. You and I are of all peoples truly blessed in that same regard and we thank God for it.

In our service today, we're going to do both of those things – reflect and give thanks. We're going to do that by looking at four verses from the Bible. These verses speak quite pointedly and powerfully to our Independence Day celebration. And we're going to examine what they say.

The first verse is Daniel 2:21. READ IT.

Daniel 2:21

Let me ask you a question. Who is considered "the Father of the American Revolution?" It's Samuel Adams.

But ultimately, Samuel Adams isn't the Father of the American Revolution. Daniel 2:21 tells us who is.

This verse teaches us that human history isn't just a random occurrence of chance events. It is literally God's project instead. He Himself is guiding it to achieve His ultimate purpose – the summing up of the entire universe in Jesus.

The birth of America was part of that project. What we call "our founding fathers" understood that as well as anyone did.

You heard part of *The Declaration of Independence* read today. It was called that because it declared the independence of the 13 American Colonies from England. This document shook the world. It established among the powers of the earth a new and separate nation, the United States of America.

But do you know what? This document that those 56 men signed might just as well have been called *The Declaration of Dependence*. That's because in the course of declaring their independence from an earthly power, they declared their dependence on a divine power, the triune God.

You heard the clause, "*And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine providence . . .*"

Now consider this fact. A University of Dallas professor, Dr. M.E. Bradford, carefully researched the 56 men who signed *The Declaration*. Based on what he found, he concluded that definitely 50 of the 56, and possibly 52, were Christians, followers of Jesus.

That fact gives content to that clause. The signers meant what they wrote. They weren't a group of deists who were just giving lip service to God. They actually believed in the triune God and in *The Declaration* sincerely declared their dependence upon Him.

One of those signers, Benjamin Franklin, said it well at the Constitutional Convention in 1787:

"I have lived, sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth: that God governs in the affairs of man. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid? We have been assured, sir, in the sacred writings that except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it. I firmly believe this."

Yes, it's true. God does change the times and the epochs. He does remove and establish kings. So let's be humble like our founding fathers were. Let's boldly declare the complete and utter dependence of this great nation of ours on the triune God. He is its founding and sustaining Father.

TAKE TITHES AND OFFERINGS

READ JOHN 15:13

John 15:13

A couple of years ago, I saw a handwritten sign posted on a Philadelphia telephone pole. It said, "*Nothing is worth dying for – especially in Iraq.*"

That slogan stands in sharp contrast to what Jesus says in John 15:3. Notice his words, "*lay down his life.*" What He's saying is this. There are some things that are actually more valuable than you and I staying alive on earth is. And we should be willing to die for those things.

That raises a critical question of course. What are those things? What do you think? Suppose I asked you to write down on a piece of paper all of the things that you would honestly be willing to lay down your life for. What they would be?

The first of course should be Jesus. The second should be people, which is the point of John 15:3. And the third should be our country.

Let's consider the third of those for a few moments – our country. Our founding fathers were willing to die for America. They made that perfectly clear in the very last words of *The Declaration of Independence*: "*And for the support of this Declaration . . . we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.*" That's what our founding fathers said and they meant it.

We need to understand who those men who signed *The Declaration* were. They weren't a rabble of poor, wild-eyed pirates who had nothing to lose. They were wealthy landowners – comfortable, happy, and secure in their prosperity. They were also highly respected and regarded leaders in their communities.

They had everything to lose and many did. Of the 56 men who signed *The Declaration*, five were captured by the British and tortured before they died. Twelve had their homes sacked, looted, occupied by the British, or burned. Two lost sons who were killed in battle. One had two sons captured. And finally, nine died in the war either from its hardships or bullets.

It's clear. Those 56 men were actually willing to lay down their lives for their country – and so were millions of Americans since. Some of those are in our own congregation. I'm talking about those of you who have sacrificially served or are serving in our Armed Forces.

It's our Independence Day weekend tradition to honor them and so we do that today.

I'm going to ask those of you who have served or are serving in the Armed Forces to come forward and stand in a straight line in front as I call your particular branch. Coast Guard, Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines.

We'd like to honor you and all of America's armed forces by singing as you stand before us – the Battle Hymn of the Republic.

READ ISAIAH 61:1

Isaiah 61:1

Isaiah 61 is a messianic prophecy. It foretells the coming of Jesus in other words and the work that He would do. That work, according to the opening verses, is directed to two things – spiritual and social transformation.

The last two lines in verse 1 reveal what part of that spiritual and social transformation is - liberty and freedom for all.

Let's think about that liberty and freedom in the social context. Almost all of you know the acronym "the ACLU." It stands for the American Civil Liberties Union. Two facts make that the most ironic acronym of our day. The first fact is that the ACLU is anti-Christian. It is hostile to Jesus. The second fact is and I quote prison reformer Chuck Colson, *"The greatest civil libertarian of all time was Jesus Christ."*

That is not an exaggeration. Jesus truly is the greatest civil libertarian of all time. Whenever and wherever societies have embraced His gospel as their cultural consensus, unparalleled liberties and freedoms have followed.

America is certainly the most celebrated example of that. As I've already pointed out to you, our founding fathers were collectively Christian. They followed Jesus. They were also, collectively, the most impassioned civil libertarians in history.

Well, the link between those two things wasn't accidental. It was causal. It was the fact that they followed Jesus that caused them to be impassioned civil libertarians that they were.

That explains the Bill of Rights. The delegates to the Constitutional Convention in 1787 accepted the Constitution conditionally. The condition was that amendments had to be later added guaranteeing certain fundamental rights, the very rights that the King of England had tried to take away. These amendments were added four years later in 1791. There are ten of them and they are called the Bill of Rights.

Those ten amendments, along with others that were added over the years, make you and me freer than any people at any time and in any place of history. We have more freedoms than anyone ever has, in other words.

I challenge you today. Never take those freedoms lightly.

In December of 1776, patriot Thomas Paine wrote this about freedom:

"What we obtain too cheaply, we esteem too lightly."

That is so true. For most of us, our freedoms haven't cost us anything. So, we tend to be ingrates and take them for granted.

Don't ever do that. Highly value and constantly thank God for the freedoms you have.

Here is one way to cultivate an attitude of gratitude. Buy a copy of the United States Constitution or go to the library and check one out. Then carefully go through the Bill of Rights. Take the time to focus on each one and its practical implications to your everyday life. Pray and ask God to enlighten your mind and open your heart as you do.

He will and you will eventually see this. The Bill of Rights vividly illustrates the social aspect of the last two lines of Isaiah 61:1. Its social freedoms are the very ones that Jesus came to give us. As Thomas Jefferson once observed about Americans and their freedoms, we are the most fortunate people on earth. Let's live like it.

READ PROVERBS 14:34

Proverbs 14:34

Righteousness is one of the dominant themes of the Bible. It usually applies to individuals but in Proverbs 14:34 it applies to nations instead. God wants nations to be righteous.

The Hebrew word translated "righteous" refers to conduct directed by the word and will of God. Every nation has what is called a cultural consensus - a set of beliefs about right and wrong that its people, on the whole, acknowledge as true. For a nation to be righteous means that its cultural consensus is Biblical or Christian.

For the first 190 years of its existence, America was a righteous nation as I just defined it. Listen to the words of a United States Supreme Court decision in 1892. In a case captioned *Church of the Holy Trinity v. United States*, the court wrote: "*Our laws and institutions must necessarily be based on and embody the teachings of The Redeemer of mankind. It is impossible that it should be otherwise; and in this sense and to this extent our civilization and our institutions are emphatically Christian.*" The United States Supreme Court was right. America's cultural consensus was Biblical or Christian.

But it's not anymore. Something happened and that something was The Sixties. When I say "The Sixties," I'm not talking about a decade but a revolution in culture. The Sixties began in 1952 and ended in 1973 and was one of the most dramatic and world changing cultural revolutions in history.

America has experienced and is experiencing the consequences of that revolution, one of which is this. Our cultural consensus is no longer Christian. It's secular. Apologist Francis Schaeffer said it well. We live in a post-Christian culture. God and His word, the Bible, are no longer dominant factors in our cultural equation.

Countless examples abound. Here is just one of those. Recall what the United States Supreme Court said in the *Church of the Holy Trinity* case. Now contrast that with something the Court said in a 1967 case, 75 years later. It held that a four-line nursery rhyme couldn't be recited in a kindergarten class. It explained why it couldn't this way: "*Although God does not appear in it, the rhyme is unconstitutional since it might cause someone to think of God.*" The 1892 court would have thought that absurd. The modern court thinks that it's constitutional.

What a contrast and its representative of American culture today. Its institutions, artifacts, and activities have become secularized.

But notice what this proverb teaches us. Righteousness exalts and sin is a disgrace to any nation.

In his controversial book, The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers, Paul Kennedy argues that America is just one of a long succession of great powers that have come and gone. He contends in that regard that our decline into a second rate power economically, diplomatically, and militarily has already begun.

Kennedy's thesis does address, correctly or incorrectly, a valid issue. Will America be a great power 30 years from now, 50 years from now, 100 years from now?

Based on Daniel 2:21 and Proverbs 14:34 together, I believe that one factor more than any other will determine that. That factor is America's righteousness.

So, work for that righteousness. First, pray and ask God to bring a revival of righteousness to our nation. Do that fervently and persistently. Second, be righteous ourselves. Think, feel, and act like God and His word are true. And third, bring others to righteousness by sharing Jesus and His gospel with them. The best way to make our nation righteous is one by one – one individual, one citizen at a time.

Will you and I as followers of Jesus first of all and patriots second of all make the commitment to do those three things?

If you are, make that commitment to the triune God by standing and singing with me in closing page 687, "God of Our Fathers."