

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 4th Sunday after Pentecost, July 7, 2019.

Our final hymn today will be the Star Spangled Banner, a fit conclusion to our Independence Day observance. We are all familiar with the first stanza which begins "O say can you see." But there are three additional stanzas. Our hymnal includes the fourth stanza, which begins "O thus be it ever."

Whatever the stanza, the feeling we have, or ought to have, when we sing the Star Spangled Banner is national pride. Our lessons today reinforce this theme.

The passage from Isaiah (**Isaiah 66:10-14**) reflects the pride of the people returning from captivity. They are back home. The Promised Land. Where God wants them to be, and where they want to be. The theme is "rejoice and be glad." We're home, finally. Praise be to God. "You shall see and your heart shall rejoice; your bodies shall flourish like the grass; and it shall be known that the hand of the Lord is with his servants." Things are back as they should be.

We have a sense of this as a people, don't we? We don't view the United States of America as an accident. It exists for a purpose, namely to be a light in the darkness. And at least once a year, this week, we revisit this purpose. We are proud of where we live and thankful for the privilege.

But we are also mindful that with this privilege comes a responsibility. Maintaining the light is not a given. It requires vigilance and sacrifice. And sometimes vigilance and sacrifice wane, which in turn means that a reminder of our responsibility is in order. The passage from Galatians (**Galatians 6:1-16**) is such a reminder: "If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all."

This morning's gospel (**Luke 10:1-11, 16-20**) is more specific. St. Luke reminds us of our marching orders. "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into the harvest." We are those laborers. Keeping the light on, keeping the darkness at bay, means hard work and sometimes disappointment. "But, do not fear," Jesus says, "I will be with you." The result: "The seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!'"

Our nation has its heroes. But it also has its masses, from which these heroes emerge. And those masses need to stay alert. All of us need to be on guard. We need to answer the call when the call is made. We need to be attuned to the needs of the nation and responsive to those needs.

This responsiveness takes many forms, some of which are highlighted and most of which take place without fanfare. But always with pride, we would hope. We all have roles to play in keeping the darkness at bay. From **Psalm 66, verse 7**: “Make the voice of his praise to be heard.” That’s our assignment and that’s our joy.

“Make the voice of his praise to be heard.” Well, how does this happen? It happens in all sorts of ways. Acts of kindness and acts of courage and acts of doing our best and acts of trying hard and acts of winning and losing gracefully - they all carry great strength, individually and collectively. They are the real marks of a great nation. Helping one another. Inspiring one another. Carrying not only one’s own weight, but the weight of others, as necessary.

Think of the people who inspire you. They do something that adds, not subtracts. And often they do it when they don’t have to do it. And they take pride in what they do. They don’t seek recognition. They seek only opportunities to be helpful. Selfishness does not drive them.

Think also of the people who don’t inspire you. These are people who subtract, not add. We don’t want to be like them. We want rather to raise them up. At our best, we are a nation of raisers. And it is in raising that we find fulfillment, in giving rather than receiving.

You and I gather to remember that Jesus gave his life for us. “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” It is this sacrificial attitude that moves us. And it is this sacrificial attitude that built this nation, and will keep us on track.

Are there times when we are not on track? Of course. That’s the nature of the human being as an individual and as a collective. But it is also our nature to want to recover from our mistakes and go about building rather than tearing down, bringing together rather than driving apart, restoring what we know should be.

And from whom do we learn how to recover? Well, for you and me, in addition to family and friends and other models of raised life, we look to Jesus of Nazareth. Is there a better model of recovery than his birth, life, death and resurrection? I don’t

think so. He is evidence of what God is capable of, and evidence of what we can do if we give His Son and ourselves a chance.

“If we give God a chance.” Here’s the key. We have to keep God at the center of our lives. The victory of Jesus means little if we don’t acknowledge it and give thanks for it and reflect his new life in our lives. God chooses to act through us. If we pull back from this role, our communities suffer and the nation suffers. Remember that God often chooses to let us live with our choices. If we choose to ignore the darkness rather than spread the light, God just might let us live with the darkness rather than step in. At least for awhile. The message is simple: complacency should not be an option. Better to be at God’s side rather than fall behind.

We are in an era when religious beliefs and institutions and symbols, including monuments, are under a microscope. Fair enough. But a public monument in the shape of a cross that honors heroic sacrifice of persons, whatever their Faith or non-Faith, should not be a threat. The shape of the monument doesn’t stand for religious superiority. That is not its intent. Rather, it stands for sacrifice, including sacrifice unto death, in battles of many kinds and places, whatever the belief of the person making the sacrifice.

Jesus, whose self-sacrifice is represented by a cross, was a Jew. If the monument was in the shape of a tablet, would there be less controversy? Who knows. What we do know for sure is that in really challenging times, we come together, whatever our faith. It is faith after all in a good outcome that drives self-sacrifice.

Are we the only country with this trait? No. And we don’t claim to be. But, what we do claim, especially in this setting, is that seeking the Lord’s forgiveness and accepting that forgiveness and doing a better job because of that forgiveness and sharing this conviction with others, is our special contribution to the whole enterprise we know as America, and by extension to all of humanity. We are building on the faith and sacrifice of others, and we hope and pray that our children and grandchildren will build on our faith and sacrifice.

For you and me, “God bless America” is not a command, not an order, but a profound thank you.” A thank you that leads us to sing today “Oh thus be it ever.”

Amen.

