

“Looking Back to Some of America’s Founding Values”

(a sermon based on Joshua 24:13-15, page 216 in the Old Testament, NRSV pew Bible)

by

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The Fourth of July weekend is our annual opportunity as a nation to think of the *patriots* of our past and the *founding principles* of the American republic. I selected a text from the book of Joshua in which he asked his people, at the founding of *their* new nation (Israel), to choose who they would serve: that is, to decide their priorities and to make their commitments.

The options he gave them were all religious-based. Namely, the gods their ancestors served in the lands from which they came – on the one hand, *the gods of Mesopotamia* (where Abraham’s family originated, ancient Babylon, modern-day Iraq) which was still a world-class empire in their day; or more recently in their history, on the other hand, the *gods of Egypt* (where they had lived as slaves, subject to Pharaoh and the Egyptian priesthood). A third option Joshua suggested would be to adopt the *gods of the Canaanites and Amorites* in whose land they now were living.

Joshua knew that it would be *convenient* to pattern their “new” nation after any of those existing kingdoms. They had the model of *centralized hier-archies* like Egypt and Babylon, with great buildings, pyramids and temples, and extensive literature about how their gods operated (on earth and in the spirit world); a centralized social system bolstered by a cadre of priests who insisted their national rulers were themselves representatives of the gods! And they had the model of *decentralized fertility cults* and the totemistic/animistic tribal beliefs of the native people in the land of Canaan (Baal-worship). It would be easy for the new nation of Israel to fall into step with *either* of those religious models: a *centralized institution* of priestly

power-brokers employed by the king, or a *decentralized paganism* like the mystery religions offered.

Joshua suggested a *third option* was one that the world had never seen: radical monotheism, allegiance to one God, but *without* centralized structure (or hierarchy), *nor* with any of the fertility rites, rituals & myths of the rural tribes whom they had conquered. “*I gave you a land on which you had not labored,*” said God to the Israelite settlers through Joshua, “*and towns that you had not built, and you live in them. You eat the fruit of vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant.*” They had no reason to put their allegiance in the gods of those places or honor the divinities of the conquered tribes.

Revere the Lord (Yahweh, who brought them out of slavery) *and serve God in sincerity and in faithfulness.* That was Joshua’s recommendation, but the choice would be left up to the people themselves, and to their “coming generations.” The temptation to adopt the religions of their neighbors would always be present for the Israelites, whose God “Yahweh” *had no shape, no hierarchy, no statues, nor prescribed rituals* apart from memorial festivals. All that Joshua offered the new nation of Israel as a proposed Constitution was the Ten Commandments, stories of Torah, memories of patriarchs, & poetry.

“*As for me and my household,*” said Joshua, “*we will serve the Lord.*” And the people gathered there in Shechem, the elders of all the tribes of Israel, also swore to serve the Lord Yahweh (“for he is our God,” they said). In that day there was *no separation* of church and state; their *voluntary obedience* to God’s ways & God’s words was the glue holding the people of Israel together.

To me, there is a direct parallel between that text, in which the people of Israel (at the founding of their new nation) were asked to *choose* who they would serve – to decide their priorities and to make commitments – and events in the summer of 1787 when America’s own founders had tough decisions to make in Philadelphia at the *Constitutional Convention*. What kind of government were *they* going to design for the United States, based on what model?

I'm sure you remember from your high school civics class that the "Articles of Confederation" which had governed the thirteen colonies for the first decade of our existence following the Revolutionary War were fragile.

Our early American patriots (coming through a war for *independence!*) had feared *giving too much power* to any centralized hierarchy (such as they had known in the monarchies of old Europe) to such a degree that the *united confederation* had no authority to persuade the colonial states to anything. They couldn't muster an army from the states militia, if any state said no; they couldn't impose taxes. It was too weak to govern the *13 independent states*.

For seventeen hot weeks in Philadelphia – June thru September, 1787 – a group of 55 people (about the size of our active members here at Seaside) wrestled with deep & difficult decisions about the *direction* and *implementation* of governance in America. Our U.S. Constitution was the outcome.

One of the biggest issues to be decided was how much *relative power* would be given to population and to wealth. You may remember from your civics class the contest between *Edmund Randolph* (representing Virginia) who wanted political power based on population (since his was a well-populated state!), and *William Patterson* from the Garden State of New Jersey, who preferred that each state have equal representation in Congress, otherwise the *small states* (like his!) would have no chance against the big ones. They would always be outvoted, and *the majority* would always win every debate.

Similarly, *George Mason* (also of Virginia!) wanted *not only* the distribution of power to be proportionate to each state's population *size*, but he also proposed a second house in Congress (which he would call a "senate") whose members' standing would be *based upon wealth* – much like the Prussian Parliament's "Junker" nobility or the English "House of Lords." *Aristocratic Virginia* had a good number of "*landed gentry*" (plantation owners like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson), unlike *Puritan* New England states or the frontier colonies, who had no elite "aristocracy" to speak of.

It is obvious that *self-centered interests* can hold sway in government decision-making as well as in individual hearts. *Institutions* are not immune to self-serving power-plays! (If it's true in Congress, it may be true in church.) During those hot debates in Philadelphia 221 years ago, each state's delegation argued to increase their *own* power relative to the *other* states. Bigger *size* should carry more weight; more *wealth* should carry the day! *No...* each state, nomatter how small, should have the same voice, same number of votes.

Three weeks into the wrangling, when it looked as though the meeting would break up in fruitless confusion for all the intractable self-serving of the member delegations, 81-year-old Benjamin Franklin arose to say:

“Mr. President: I perceive we are not in a position to pursue this business any further. Our blood is too hot. I therefore move you, sir, that we separate for three days, during which time, with a conciliatory spirit, we talk with both parties. If we make a Constitution, it must be the work of Compromise.

“And while I am on my feet, I move you, sir, and I am astonished that it has not been done before: for when we signed the Declaration of Independence, we had a chaplain to read the Bible and to pray daily; and now I move that when we meet again, we have a chaplain to meet with us and invoke the blessing of heaven. For, sir, it has been wisely written: ‘Except the Lord build the city, they labor in vain who build it.’ And if it be true that ‘a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without God’s notice,’ surely a nation cannot rise without God’s aid.”

George Washington seconded the motion. After the three-day break, with their minds energized by prayer, and focused on biblical values, those 55 state delegates prepared what has been called “the grandest document ever struck from the brain of [humankind].”

The person I give most credit to for achieving the spiritual understanding which grounded our Constitution on *the “common good”* rather than on *special interests and self-interest*, was the *third* delegate from the state of Virginia, 36-year old James Madison (who was later to become our fourth

President). James Madison had trained for the *ministry* – he was a Hebrew scholar. While his life-story may be tame when compared to Moses and Joshua, his mind was steeped in the Word of God (Old Testament as well as New). The teachings of *Torah Law* from Moses, the establishment of Israel under *Joshua*, and the subsequent political commentaries from the *prophets*, historical chronicles of the Kings, and so forth, filled James Madison’s mind with the political perspective of God’s Word. (Yes, I said “political” from the pulpit!)

Madison is the one who steered the compromises, and devised a system of “*checks and balances*,” so that one party’s self-interest would be counter-acted by its opponent, thereby maintaining a balance (albeit, a stormy balance).

“*If men were virtuous,*” Madison reminded the Convention, “*there would be no need of governments at all.*” But his Hebrew and Christian roots told him that was not the case. As I said last Sunday: *we all make mistakes. We are all “sinners” in some ways, self-centered by nature.* With the biblical view that all people are “bent” toward self-centeredness and the lust for *gain in personal power* over others, James Madison said the same was true of every human institution. *Large states* wanted power over the small; *federal governors* wanted jurisdiction over the states’ rights; *executives* wanted power over legislators; the *Senate* wanted power over the House of Representatives; the church over the state, and vice versa (the state over the church).

For any one *faction* to have the power to “force” compliance – or to set one faction at a *disadvantage*, such that their opinions would always be suppressed by the majority – was *against the Gospel of justice* and the full expression of *Liberty*. The trick was, instead, to keep any one of the factions – any one “vested” interest – from becoming a tyrant. It would take creative compromises to keep the system from stalemate; people would have to choose to make it work as a conscious collaboration among semi-autonomous groups.

James Madison proposed a system that would guarantee a “balance” – a stormy balance, perhaps; sometimes gridlocked and not easily manipulated – which recognized a basic principle about human beings: namely that *there is so much bad in the best of us, and so much good in the worst of us, that it ill becomes any of us, to “lord over” the rest of us.*

It was my intention on this 4th of July weekend to look back to that early time in our history (221 years ago) in order to reclaim Ben Franklin and James Madison’s spiritual insights as our own and to remind ourselves of the biblical and prayerful underpinnings of our “American experiment” in government – our Independent & Democratic Republican form of government. (There, I said the names of at least three political parties in a single sentence! Is that fair & balanced?)

General George Washington, America’s “founding father,” has been called “the American Moses” because of his crucial role (first) in leading the colonial army through the Revolutionary War and (then) serving as our first President. Frankly, I think he should have been called *America’s “Joshua.”* Because it was *Joshua* who had to secure the land of Israel by military conquest, and it was Joshua who had to devise its system of government. George Washington did not even emancipate the slaves, like Moses did; he left that for Abraham Lincoln, 100 years later!

Joshua had some hard decisions to make about governing the new nation, and he didn’t have a committee of 55 wise advisers to help! For example: what would be the legitimate source of power in the new tribal confederacy? What would be their ultimate authority? Obviously, *God.*

If the nation were set up like Egypt, from which they had come – with a centralized hierarchy – or patterned itself after the many little kingdoms and warlords scattered across the Fertile Crescent, *what would keep Israel from becoming “just like the other nations”?* How could they be a nation of priests, a holy people, people of God (a new order) if their government relied on the *same* centralized, coercive, and totalitarian patterns as all Empires do?

And yet, if they remained a loose confederation of 12 tribes, how would they be able to defend themselves against the Empires, warlords, and kings in whose midst they lived? What kind of communal arrangements and agreements could they make to assure that *God's vision of justice toward all* would prevail rather than the vested interests of greedy, grabby, self-centered coalitions? And *who would interpret the Law?* The Ten Commandments were fairly clear and straightforward, but who would *enforce* them?

Those were the same kinds of issues which had to be decided following America's War for Independence. If the principles of "Empire" and the patterns of "Monarchy" (Lords and Ladies and Landed Gentry) were simply repeated in the "New World," it would not have been a very "Revolutionary" War after all! America wanted to come up with a new *balance of powers*.

If, on the other hand, we were hoping to be subject to God (a nation in service to God, a new Israel), a new kind of "kingdom" *purposely unlike* the other kingdoms of this world – a new creation, ordered by different values... not self-serving and power-hungry, but (as Patrick Henry put it) to be "*a beacon of freedom, hope, and faith*" to the refugees fleeing "the Old World soaked in blood and heavy with the oppressor's hand" – we needed a vision.

Moses in his day, Joshua in his day, and others throughout biblical history, appeared to be *so "in tune" with the Will of God* for their people in their time (that is, God's divine intention for the human community seemed so clear to them) that they could insist that people *choose* between "God's Way" and the ways of the world around them. We heard how Joshua put it:

"Revere the Lord and serve [God] in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods [those things] that your ancestors worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt [those ideas of power, false measures of greatness, idols of silver and gold], and serve the Lord! Now, if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve (whether the gods your ancestors served in Egypt, or the gods of the people in whose midst you now dwell); CHOOSE! As for me and my household [me and my family], we will serve Yahweh!"

Before any decisions are made about government design, system of taxation, military service, distribution of property, delegation of power... every person must decide for herself/himself *who they serve* – whose they are: a slave to *self-interest*, or a servant of *the common good*? A servant of the liberating, loving, justice-God “Yahweh” of the Bible, or given over to the competing “gods” of money, sex, power, status, prestige, pleasure...?

Each of us, and every generation, has to *choose* among those competing values. And the fact remains that, nomatter how clearly and persuasively one may sense God’s Will and God’s Way (as I do, and perhaps you, too), people cannot be *compelled* to do it. Faith is always a matter of free choosing, not forced compliance. *Love and allegiance is a matter of the spirit, not of the sword*. From his own sense of history and personal faith, Joshua could testify to the gathered assembly: “As for me and my family, we will serve the Lord.”

We look back on our history – biblical history as well as our nation’s history – in order to *make sense of* the present situation, and *in hopes of* enabling an alternative (better) future for all concerned. We look back on our history to discover (and reclaim) those “godly” principles which informed *them* and which may be able to guide us in the present political situation.

I’ll admit it takes some *work* to claim the vision that informed Moses & Joshua, Ben Franklin & George Washington, James Madison and the rest. It may require some self-searching and social critique, as we try to *mobilize* the “body politic” to pursue our dreams for a better America. But it is work well *worth doing* from time to time, and a 4th of July weekend is just the time for it.

If as Christians, filled with the Holy Spirit, and informed by Jesus’ own ethic of justice, we want to *call our people to accountability*, perhaps we, too, must first decide “whose we are.” You and I must *choose* (freely, voluntarily) to follow God as known through Christ, and then behave accordingly.

We took the time today to look back on our “formative” history. We do so in order to *reclaim the values* that have helped make us who we are. And then, accompanied by patriots and patriarchs alike, I encourage you to *keep on dreaming God’s dream* for America, and for all humanity.

Amen.