Sermon

**“America: The Perils and the Promises”**

(First Week of July 2024)

Preacher: Dr. Donald W. Haynes, retired

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Scripture: Jeremiah 2:11-13, 21(written about 600-597 B.C.E.); then twenty years later, 31:33-35

Certainly, it is true that our history has been no cake walk. **Some of our promises were not kept.** **Our practices have not lived up to our principles. Some were not given what Jefferson called the “unalienable right” of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.** We have too much chaos at home, and we are eyewitnesses to a world on fire with the threat of another worldwide war. A part of our American story from beginning until this week is the threat of peril. As proud as I am to be an American, I must acknowledge on this 248th birth month of our declaration of independence that all is not well with America.

Though we must review moral issues in the context of their time, the darkest pages of our past were the tragic way in which the native Americans were pushed from their own homeland, and the equally tragic way that Black Americans were brought to these shores as slaves. The peril of our beloved South was selling our soul, losing our political influence, and losing our wealth when we pitched our tents toward the Sodom of slavery. Then we followed slavery with segregation to perpetuate the social evil. This, as well as the denial of women to vote until 1918, and refusing a path to citizenships to “dreamers” today, have been national sins like that of Pontius Pilate. The washing of his hands did not remove him from the pages of Rome’s history, nor can we ever undo what was done to deny some freedoms in America.

A schoolteacher in 1900 went to the World’s Fair in Chicago and then rode a train to Pike’s Peak in the Rocky Mountains. Miss Katharine Bates saw the beauty of the spacious skies and the “ambered grain” of the plain states. Then she saw what she called the “purple mountain majesties” that rose above the “fruited plains.” The sadness is that some, from the beginning, never could embrace America as being for everyone “a thoroughfare of freedom that pioneers built from the wilderness.” The early American journey was not a “thoroughfare of freedom” for the Native Americans who lost their own lands and African slaves who were brought against their will. Even today, too many of us are not praying for God to “to mend thine every flaw” and “confirm thy soul with self-control, or thy liberty in law.” The Jews have never been treated so shabbily in our history than today.

In reality, there has been a persistently precarious frailty about our existence as a nation. However, in admitting that we have not lived up to our dreams**, let us not ever forgot what the American dream is**! A poet names Irene Bennett tells the American story touchingly:

“Once upon a time,” the story goes, ‘this land was new, the soil untried.

On this domain, so vast, untamed…men and women toiled side by side

Houses and barns were slowly built, and bits of land fenced in.

Livestock and markets grew amass; the sod was turned, the soil set free;

And winters came with snow and cold, but work went on unceasingly.

And from these endless years of toil, there blossomed history’s brightest page;

The streams of sturdy pioneers—they are our heritage!”

A half century ago, I added to Ms. Bennett’s poem some verse of my own:

“God made himself a continent of glory and filled it with treasures untold

He carpeted it with prairies and sprinkled it with gold.

He planted towering forests and watered them with streams

He pushed up mighty mountains, majestic, and supreme.

Then he called some thousand peoples, and from their lands they came

With axes for the forests and rifles for the game

Pioneers brought also Bibles and hope within their hearts

They faced here their own future and prospered from the start.

With this, God built this nation—unique in all the earth

We call it still AMERICA—adopted or by birth!”

**However, freedom has remained in our national bloodstream**. Freedom’s holy light is embedded in many scripture passages. Even in slavery, many African Americans became Christians. Even from a Birmingham jail, Dr. Martin Luther King based the civil rights movement on our Christian heritage. The state of Oklahoma is right to make the Bible a part of their American history curriculum if taught carefully.

We did see it then **and I see it now** as a “new nation, under God, with liberty and justice for all.” Great Britain was the most powerful empire in the world; France and Spain wanted control of the western hemisphere as much as England did. Yet, either by a series of historical coincidences or Providential protection, we won our War of Independence with almost never winning a battle. There likely was never another time in history when we could have pulled off our miraculous beginning in 1781.

Alongside the incredible military victory were the unique documents of political genius or, again, divine Providence. Political wrangling between north and south compromised and adopted the work of men like James Madison and Thomas Jefferson in the adoption of our Declaration of Independence, our Constitution, and our Bill of Rights. Before America was a nation, she was a dream. We must still dream the American dream and help to make it come true.

On the back of every $1 bill is the great seal of the United States of America. At the top of an unfinished pyramid is the facsimile of a human eye, symbolizing that in the words of James Russell Lowell, “ standeth God within the shadows, keeping watch above his own.” At the bottom is a Latin phrase, “novus ordo seclorum” which means “a new order of the ages.” On our national “Great Seal,” the date that the dream was revealed is 1776 in Roman numerals. By the sweat of our face, “Yankee ingenuity,” the religious revival of the Second Great Awakening, and movements like suffrage and civil rights, even when scorched by war and racism and pestilence, the new order has stood the tests of time.

Our history is quite similar to that of ancient Israel. They considered their nation as “the promised land” and the result of their miraculous exodus from Egyptian slavery. However, Joshua occupied Canaan in about 1220 B.C.E. Centuries later, Jeremiah was a prophet when the evil empire of the middle east was Babylonia over in Mesopotamia. Jeremiah warned of impending national peril:

“You never asked where God was. You cared nothing for the Eternal. Your prophesies were based on the markets; your worship was at the foot of foolish idols. Has a nation ever changed her gods? You have! **You have forsaken the fountain of living waters and dug out for yourselves cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water.** I planted among you the conscience of a choice vine; but you became a wild, corrupt vine. You have broken your yoke and snapped your harness. Under every green tree and on every mountain height, you have lain with harlots and ceased to serve me. You run like a wild heifer in the time of heat. It is no use talking to you; you are in love with the foreign gods.” Jeremiah 2:13, 20-25

In the first Babylonian invasion, in 597 B.C.E., the enemy took all the gold and all the wealthy people and persons of leadership, leaving what Jeremiah called “the rabble” to be a vassal of Babylonia. But the Jews rebelled, and the Babylonians came again eleven years later. That time, they burned or demolished the entire city of Jerusalem. They offered to take Jeremiah safely into Exile along the Euphrates River, but he chose to remain with his people who were escaping to Egypt. Somewhere in Egypt, Jeremiah, who is called the “weeping prophet,” died.

**The Promises That America Can Keep**

**So it is that our practices have not always reflected our principles, but lamenting the perils is not enough. I believe in promise—the promise of a new tomorrow. What is the content of our promise, our word of hope?**

**Somehow**, before Jeremiah was taken to Egypt like a prisoner, **someone** got his book of prophecy to Babylon where it was preserved and then returned when Cyrus of Persia let the Jews come home 47 years later: Way over in his late writings, in spite of defeat, deportation, and death, Jeremiah left behind some good news. Twenty chapters later in the life of this same prophet, Jeremiah received a promise as God’s answer to the people’s peril:

**“This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel:**

**‘I will put my law in their minds, and write it on their heart….; I will be their God**

**and they will be my people…I will forgive their wickedness, and remember their sins no more.’” (Jeremiah 33:35)**

We must not surrender to voices of hate and fear and frustration with imperfection. I challenge you to memorize the promise of God to Jeremiah—that God’s law is etched into our national conscience. All of the American dream will never come to pass for every person but let us live by the hope in our heritage, not the sin in our performance. I still love our national motto: “In God we trust.”

**I am too much an optimist who believes in God’s providence and grace and America’s grit to talk about the “end of American democracy.”** The message for us Americans on this national birthday week is not a message of doom. The last word is not “peril,” but “promise.” I have seven grandchildren and seven great grandchildren. I am a member of the so-called “Silent Generation.” My great grandchildren’s generation will probably be given a new name other than the present “Generation Z” who have been born since 1996. They cannot live on my stories; they must write a new narrative about America as a land of promise.

**First of all, we must find some of the grounds for promise in how generations before us coped with the peril of their time.** Let me leave you with one example.I once drove along the Platte River in Nebraska, and stopped to read the markers. Horses could not sustain the punishing trip; so, they were traded for slow walking, strong oxen. Wheels of covered wagons fell off; at places where pioneers on the trail to Oregon the wagon trains stopped to bury their family members who had died. Some gave up and settled in. Many got to Oregon. Rich land was cleared in Williamette Valley. Homes and churches were built. They are a small part of the great American story that was duplicated in many places against horrendous odds.

We have a great inheritance. Now we must re-claim our heritage of freedom’s holy light and re-dream the great American dream. As we read in Deuteronomy, “You drank from wells you did not dig and ate from vineyards and olive trees you did not plant.(Deuteronomy 6:10-12) To the words of the Bible, we might add that we live by liberties we did not win with blood, tears, and labor, and institutions we did not establish. God’s way of salvation has been preserved in the Bible that has preserved by the Church, enriching the morality and ethics of the general population. Black Americans kept family identity even when knowing that some might be sold to other masters. In the Civil War, over 500,000 Union soldiers who had never seen a slave gave their lives to abolish slavery. Southerners whose Confederate money had no value lived with a barter system until they could earn some cash. My own great grandfather returned from Appomattox, re-opened his pre-war flour mile, became a notary public and a stagecoach driver, and accumulated 364 acres of land! He never owned a slave; indeed, he and Sally named a boy “Ulysses”!

As a gesture of reconciliation following the hatred of war, the will of General Ulysses Grant who commanded the Union army insisted that the pallbearers who carried his casket include officers of both the Union and Confederate armies. That happened in 1882. In World War II, women worked in factories building tanks and other weapons of war. They were known on billboards all over America as “Rosie, the riveter.” Men too old for the draft moved far from home to build ships in what were called “defense plants” in places like Newport News, Virginia and Groton, Connecticut, and plants in California.

**Another dimension of our promise is our national kindness.** In 1917-18, the United States sent soldiers to break the stalemate in the Western trenches and liberate France. Then, we fed Europe in the winter of 1918. In the Great Depression of the early 1930’s women who were home a. e fed millions of men on their backsteps to save total strangers from starving. Following World War II, America literally kept Berlin from being starved in the winter of 1946 by Russia when General George Marshall organized “the Berlin airlift” which landed planes, one behind the other, for months to save the people who had been the enemy. General Douglas McArthur did the same in setting up a democracy in Japan; yet salvaging their national heritage with allowing the emperor to remain a figurehead. As Winston Churchill said of Democracy, “Many forms of government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all the other forms that have been tried.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

For two years we have expressed kindness and concern and military support and refugee relief to the people of Ukraine. My own grandson and his wife went without fanfare, gone to Poland and Hungary as short-term missionaries to give emotional, nutritional, financial, and spiritual help to children and adults who have left their homes in Ukraine with little hope of their houses surviving the Russian invasion. Likewise, since October 7, 2023, the majority of Americans have supported Israel’s right to exist. The Fellowship of Christians and Jews reach out daily with food for victims of war and cruelty. Our kindness is part of who we are.

Today we have reason to be concerned about our churches, our economy, our upcoming election, and a world on fire with evil empires. But we must not abandon the great American STORY and the grace of God.

Must we be concerned? Yes. But must we give in to division, and hatred, and violence, and economic pessimism? NO.

I love to stand in front of old Park Street Church alongside the Boston Commons and picture the time that children gathered on the steps of that old church and sang a new song that had been written for Vacation Bible School by Samuel Smith:

“My country, ‘tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing, land where our fathers died, land of the pilgrim’s pride

From every mountain side, let freedom ring.”: “**Our father’s God, to Thee, Author of Liberty**, to thee we sing

Long may our land be bright with freedom’s holy light, protect us by thy might; Great God our King!”

Amen.

1. Churchill, Winston, House of Commons, November 11, 1947 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)