

2 Samuel 7:18-24

What, in your opinion, has made the United States of America the greatest nation on God's green earth? Very likely, many would answer that it is the military strength of our nation that has caused us to be a great nation. And that would be a difficult conclusion to argue with.

The United States is in fact, the dominant military, political and economic power in the world. And I agree with the need for a strong military, but I also want to suggest that our real and lasting strength as a nation, and as a people, does not come only because we have more missiles and guns and tanks and planes. These are necessary external defenses, and few people would deny that we need such weapons. But as a Christian, I believe that the real source of our strength and our national pride must come from a much deeper source.

Our scripture lesson gives us some guidance as to what I believe is THE SOURCE OF OUR NATION'S STRENGTH. Our reading from the second book of Samuel is a prayer of King David to God. The prophet Nathan has declared that the Lord had chosen Israel to be a very special people. As their God, He will protect them from all their enemies. God will be their strength and their defender.

David responds to God's graciousness with this prayer from verse 18: "*Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my family, that you have brought me this far?*" In other words, David wonders why God has blessed him, why God has chosen him from among so many others. David goes on to admit that it is not anything that he has done that has made him worthy of God's choice. Then he continues to pray in verse 23, "*What other nation on earth is like Israel . . . You have made Israel your own people forever, and you, Lord, have become their*

God.”

The message seems clear, then. The Lord God chose Israel. IT IS GOD AND GOD ALONE WHO HAS MADE THE NATION OF ISRAEL A NATION GREAT. And I want to suggest to you this morning that it is God who has made these United States of America like no other nation on earth. As the psalmist has written, *“Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord.”* (33:12)

I believe the United States will continue to be a military and economic superpower in this world. But the concern I have is whether or not we will continue to be a spiritual and moral superpower. The history of this world is riddled with nations who have been strong militarily, but weak morally. And all of those nations have eventually fallen! As we look back over the last forty years, or so, I think that most of us would agree that, as a nation, we are in a moral decline. OUR SOCIETY IS BECOMING INCREASINGLY SECULARIZED. In most main line Protestant churches, attendance at church and programs such as Sunday school and Bible Study, are becoming less and less a priority in the lives of more and more people. Individuals seem to have time and money for everything else but Christ and the Church.

This seems to me a curious development, for at stake are some very important issues like family stability; like the moral fiber of our nation; like the matter of eternal life – the very salvation of our souls. IT IS HARD TO BELIEVE THAT PEOPLE DO NOT TAKE MORE INTEREST IN THESE FUNDAMENTAL ISSUES OF LIFE.

And its not like the consequences of this relegation of religion to the back burner of our daily lives is hidden from us. The consequences are all too evident: The rising incidence of abuse of women and children – drug and alcohol use – increased levels of criminal activity and violence in our society are not without explanation. Having a strong faith in God does not

shield us from all of these problems, but statistically, fewer people who have Christ at the center of their lives experience these types of problems. So as we look toward the celebration of Independence Day, let us consider our purpose as a nation, and what we must become in order to be the New Israel, chosen by God for a special purpose, a country that is strong and free.

From the foundation of time, God ordained us to be a great nation and God supplied us with the natural resources, the mental capacity, the political and economic system and the leadership to become a great nation. Our country was founded upon Judeo-Christian principles. It was founded upon a relationship with God characterized by FAITH in God, FEAR of God, and FERVOR to serve God. IT WAS FOUNDED UPON A BELIEF THAT AMERICA IS A PART OF GOD'S PLAN FOR WORLD FREEDOM. But the blessings of freedom that we enjoy as Americans, and too often take for granted, could be taken away if we continue to follow a path of faithlessness.

We are told that the fifty-five men who drew up the Declaration of Independence, and later the Constitution, had some moments of heated debate. Finally, Benjamin Franklin asked permission to speak. He waited for quiet and then spoke. *"We have been assured in the sacred writings that except the Lord build the house, they that build it, labor in vain. I move that every morning, before we begin our work, we pray to God asking for guidance and blessing."* And from that day on, progress was made. A STRONG FAITH IN GOD! RELIANCE UPON GOD! Surely, that is part of the reason why America became a great nation.

But not only FAITH is needed. We also need to FEAR God. Not a fear that frightens us, but rather a fear in the sense of standing in AWE of God, LOVE for God, REVERENCE

for our Creator and our Redeemer. WHEN GOD CEASES TO BE AWESOME FOR US, THEN OUR FUTURE WILL SURELY BE AWFUL.

This is the lesson that we can learn from King David and the history of that nation called Israel. As we read the Old Testament, we discover that when Israel followed God, they were strong and prosperous. When they became corrupt and self-indulgent and began to worship idols, when they stopped putting the Lord first, they became weak; they were defeated and made captive to foreign powers.

God and freedom are closely related. We must make a decision. Do we want the personal freedom to DO OUR OWN THING, a freedom that is leading us down the path of moral destruction and slavery to sin? Or do we want the freedom that Christ can give, freedom for those who are spiritually bound and blind and oppressed; a freedom that will make us truly free? Is God still an awesome God in our hearts and minds and souls?

But faith in God, and fear of God is just the beginning. We must also have fervor, FERVOR to do the will of God. I imagine that the signers of the Declaration of Independence celebrated on that first fourth of July, and our celebrations have continued. But Tuesday as we celebrate our nation's birthday, let us remember that with liberty comes responsibility. If we are to retain the blessings of freedom, we must work for it. Teddy Roosevelt once said, *"This country will not be a good place for ANY of us to live in , unless we make it a reasonably good place for ALL of us to live in."*

For 230 years our faith in God, our fear of God, and our fervor to do God's will has made us a great and blessed nation. Not a perfect nation – we still have long strides to make before we fulfill Roosevelt's vision of what it takes to be a great nation. What I want us to think about on this Fourth of July is: DO WE STILL WANT TO BE A GREAT NATION? Do

we have enough faith, fear and fervor to do God's will? We were founded as a nation under God. Our lifestyle as a nation must continue to reflect that heritage. Are we really so NAIVE as to believe that God will continue to bless us if we live in faithlessness before God? If we are to remain free, then *"In God we trust"* must be more than just a slogan on our money, *"and one nation under God"* must be more than just idle words in our pledge of allegiance.

It is significant that on this Sunday when we celebrate our freedom as a nation, we would also celebrate our freedom from the powers of sin and death as we partake of the elements of Holy Communion. Christ invites you to come to His table. As the ushers direct you, come and celebrate, for if the Son of God sets you free, you are free indeed. In our personal lives and in our life together as a nation, only as we trust in God will we remain truly free.

#### AFTER SERMON STORY:

It may be one of the greatest acts of President Dwight D. Eisenhower's administration, that he put into motion the change in our Pledge of Allegiance that added the word's UNDER GOD to that pledge. *"One nation, UNDER GOD, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."* Here was a man who had commanded our armed forces in Europe during the darkest days of the war, and had realized how close we came to losing that world war. He watched thousands of planes and boats take off from England on D-Day, and had prayed to God, that in spite of the terrible casualties that would be suffered, that the Allied Forces would prevail against the incredible armies of Hitler. And when they did prevail, he knew it was not of our own doing. The free world had been saved by God. The United States owes everything to God. ISN'T IT ABOUT TIME FOR US TO ACKNOWLEDGE THAT FACT? Go in peace, and may the peace of God go with you.