

July 4, 2010
Mechanicsburg Presbyterian Church

Psalm 125
Colossians 3:12-17

“Rebuilding A People in Freedom”

As we gather in the house of God this Fourth of July, it is vital for His redeemed people to remember that God is the ultimate author of liberty. We are very grateful that God has given this nation bountiful gifts of freedom, liberty, and prosperity. We revel in the diversity of its beauty and grandeur. Yet, our challenge this day and every day is to remember and give sincere thanks and highest praise to God who alone is the only Source and Provider of every good and perfect gift. God alone can write the love notes and music of peace for us to sing and speak to the hearts of all who work and long for freedom, justice, and equality. For centuries, saints and servants have given their lives that God’s truth would march on. May we continue to commit ourselves to live and teach the disciplines of freedom that rebuild peoples and nations in God’s love.

HYMN INTRODUCTION TO: “My Country, ’Tis of Thee”

Today, our service includes a mini-hymn-sing of a national hymn and an international hymn, with explanation. The first hymn is ***“My Country, ’Tis of Thee,”*** which is perhaps the most widely sung American national hymn. Samuel Francis Smith, a Bostonian linguist and prominent Baptist minister wrote this “national song” in 1831, at the age of twenty-four while a student at Andover Newton Theological Seminary. He was inspired to write the text after reading a German patriotic hymn text given to him by Lowell Mason, a well-known musician and educator. The hymn’s theme is in the first line, “sweet land of liberty.” Even as a new nation, Americans felt deep affection for the physical geography of their homeland and a central commitment to its form of government which Abraham Lincoln described in his “Gettysburg Address” as, “a nation conceived in liberty.”

We will not join the controversy over the origin of the hymn tune. We will simply enjoy Lowell Mason’s arrangement of the tune he received. It was first sung at Park Street Church, Boston, on July 4, 1831 by Mason’s children’s choir.

As we sing, may our hearts be most attentive to and appreciative of the last stanza. It is the last stanza with its distinctively Christian emphasis which makes this a national hymn of praise. It reminds us that God is the ultimate author of liberty. In the laws governing the people of Israel, God

established the concept of the regular provision of freedom for all. In Leviticus 25:10, we read, “Proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants.” In His messianic prophecy and fulfillment, Jesus came “to release the captives.” So, Samuel Smith completed his national hymn with the prayer that God, our only true Sovereign, will sustain the light of freedom by His mighty protection.

As we sing this hymn, may we let the Spirit of God open our eyes to see what we can and must do to let “freedom’s sweet song” ring throughout this land and around the world today, and until Jesus returns. (SING: “My Country, ‘Tis of Thee”). The Worshipping Church,* Kerchal Armstrong

HYMN INTRODUCTION TO: “O God of Every Nation”

“*O God of Every Nation*” was written by William W. Reid, Jr. for a contest sponsored by *The Hymn Society*, and was published in 1958 in their *Twelve New World Order Hymns*. It is a strong prayer for world peace, and presumes and builds upon the common desire to experience relief from the armed conflicts that keep breaking out in all parts of the globe. As we sing, please note other national and social sins that are mentioned: “search for wealth and power,” “scorn of truth and right,” “pride of race and nation,” and “blindness to God’s way.” This prayer will doubtless be voiced continually until the glorious morning when “Christ shall rule victorious.” Let us unite our voices to prayerfully sing and sincerely open our hearts to hear God speaking to us. *See above. J.F.S. (SING -“O God of Every Nation”)

HOMILY - “Rebuilding A People in Freedom”

We have sung words of hope, words of peace, words of truth which declare that in God alone can our homes, nation, world...this good earth, find peace, justice and love. The world cannot heal itself. Because it is beguiled by the evil one, the world remains as “people sitting in darkness who have not seen the great light.” The moral corruption and decay, greed, false pride, and a steady march away from love, integrity, and compassion for all creation, open the door to wars, oil spills, hate, hunger, poverty, injustice, abuse...everything that robs people of the good God established at creation.

And the solution goes beyond keeping “In God we trust” on money, the Ten Commandments and crèches on display, and crosses on hills. God wants to change hearts. Christ is calling for the church, you and me, to do

the hard, daily, self-sacrificing work of being “light in darkness,” salt,

hope...literally being Christ's letters of recommendation declaring His power, living His truth, and praying in season and out of season for a world that is new. Our women and men in armed forces in Iraq, Afghanistan and around the world were never meant to do the work of "peace" alone. We must be in partnership with them and missionaries of the gospel at home and around the world to speak to, pray for, and rebuild/build peoples of the earth to become God-fearing, neighbor loving, hope-machines who, if they do not agree with one another, at least respect the rights of others.

God has given us all the tools we need to work with Christ in the Holy Spirit to rebuild lives broken in sin. We heard a good beginning in the texts for today. "Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever." "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him."

But we must be bound to Christ, and free of the world's "stuff" if we are to make a holy difference among peoples. No governor, president, legislator, business executive, and even armies were ever meant to do what the church is called to do. Why? Because we know freedom in the Lordship of Christ which is true freedom. And it empowers us to turn the world upside down and right side up. Free from attitudes of greed, hate, unjust judgments, and pride, we see all peoples and creation as gifts from God. We stand in the gap for anyone and everyone who needs a fresh glimpse of God's glory. Born again in this glorious freedom, let us hear these words of the Apostle Paul: "I urge all who have been redeemed to stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free." And Jesus said: "If you hold to My teaching, you are truly My disciples...Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free...So if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed." But how free *are* we in Christ?

In a lecture given by Philip Yancey this spring at Messiah College, he gave a challenge that spoke to me, and I think many others in the audience. Let me paraphrase his words: "If you really believe the love of God and the power of prayer, are you free enough in that faith to daily pray for a terrorist?" May I also add: hardened criminals, ruthless or perceived-to-be ruthless local, national, world leaders or business persons? Their names and faces are on the internet, in the newspaper and on television. Whoever and

wherever they are, believe this: God is there inviting us to join Christ's transforming work. And if our sincerity and daily commitment of this

“offering of God’s love” spreads to every congregation of every denomination in every town, state and nation of the world, how soon would it be before our, and women, men and children in all armed forces would come home, and peoples in bondage be set free? Are we free enough in Christ to begin with self, and join Him in building peoples and nations of love in prayer power all over the globe? Faith believes that the ills, pains and despair of the world would drastically diminish and God’s great kingdom would come on earth, if the church led the march toward less negativity and gossip, and more compassion, praying and trusting in God.

Beyond its faults and errors, this great nation was built on the foundation of God’s sovereignty. We love and are grateful for this nation, its freedoms, privileges, and opportunities. But above all, we join followers of Christ everywhere, praising God for indescribable freedom that is found in Christ alone! In this freedom, we join God’s people around the world to rebuild peoples and nations whose foundation and rule of life is the love of God. On this Fourth of July, let us again pledge and rejoice to do so. And all the while, may we sing: “Glory, glory Hallelujah! His truth is marching on. Thanks be to God! Amen!