

A Sermon for the Fourth of July

As far as I can remember, I've never preached a sermon on the Fourth of July! And certainly never about the Fourth of July. And, perhaps coincidentally, I've never preached on this lection from 2 Samuel. As Holly reads it aloud, I invite us to think about how the latter (this passage) may speak to the former (this national holiday). Holly? [Holly reads the lesson.]

We may not have an American flag in our sanctuary any longer (I'm told that we used to, in our old building). But the United States of America is our country, our nation, our homeland. And therefore it seems fitting that we celebrate its birthday (as I'm sure most if not all of us will continue to do throughout the day today). But a pair of questions popped into my head earlier in the week. First, would our 16th century Anabaptist forebears have celebrated the Fourth of July, or a holiday like it? And second, how about our 19th century Mennonite forebears, the ones who immigrated from the Ukraine, and settled right here, in Marion County, just south of Hillsboro? And named their new village "Gnadenau," German for "the meadow of grace." Would they have celebrated the Fourth of July? I will come back to those questions.

As I was reading this lesson from 2 Samuel this past week, I thought I was reading one of the *Game of Thrones* books! It has all the same ingredients, and almost the same plotlines. Kings. Battles. Conquests. Royal declarations.

As with the *Game of Thrones*, it's always helpful to go back and review what has happened thus far, what has brought us to this point. So, let's review. The descendants of Israel had been clamoring for a king. So God had given them Saul, the "mad king." David, meanwhile, was the eighth son of Jesse, and so the least likely to become anything other than the humble identity into which he was born: a shepherd. But God chose him. Because of which, David's life was blessed. Despite grave challenges and hardships along the way. We know the stories. Facing the Philistine giant Goliath in battle, with nothing but five smooth stones. Fleeing from King Saul's frightening paranoia. Gathering around him an army of miscreants and outcasts. Leading them to victory after stunning victory. Leading the tribes in the south to eventually crown him their king. While the tribes in the north remained loyal to Saul and his sons. Until they ran out of sons. Which brings us to this morning's passage.

As Holly read, the elders of the northern tribes come to David, to ask him to be king over the north as well as the south, over Israel as well as Judah, over all twelve tribes, over all the Israelites. And he consents. They make a special agreement, called a covenant, a binding agreement ratified by God. (After all, had not God's hand been in this, all along?) David chooses the fortified city of Jerusalem, smack dab on the border between north and south, as his capital. Problem was, Jerusalem at that time belonged to neither the northern tribes nor the southern. It belonged to the Jebusites (who most scholars say were descended from the original inhabitants, the Canaanites.). No problem. Just one more battle, and, the city was his. The newly anointed "City of David." No hubris there. Just a cause for all manner of celebration. There surely would have been fireworks, if they had had them. A new nation had been born. Israel would be known as God's chosen nation, chosen to lead all other nations of the world to God. Jerusalem, atop Mt. Zion, would become known as the epicenter of God's involvement in

the world, the “capital” city of not one but three of the world’s religions. And David would be forever remembered as “God’s man.” God’s ideal king. The one to lead Israel to fulfill God’s grand and glorious purposes for them. Or as the historian says in verse 10, “And David became greater and greater, for the Lord, the God of hosts, was with him.”

As I learned in seminary, the lectionary is notorious for leaving out verses it doesn’t like. Verses that the editors consider particularly difficult or problematic—problematic for preachers, for theologians, really for all of us. In this case, the lectionary left out verses 6-8. Listen to what we missed. [Have Holly read.]

⁶ The king and his men marched to Jerusalem against the Jebusites, the inhabitants of the land, who said to David, “You will not come in here, even the blind and the lame will turn you back”—thinking, “David cannot come in here.” ⁷ Nevertheless David took the stronghold of Zion, which is now the city of David. ⁸ David had said on that day, “Whoever would strike down the Jebusites, let him get up the water shaft to attack the lame and the blind, those whom David hates.” Therefore it is said, “The blind and the lame shall not come into the house.”

And so we are reminded that any human leader, any human nation, has a dark side. Even those chosen by God. Did David really say that he hates the lame and the blind? Did he really command his men to attack them first? Is that one of the stories on which Israel as a nation was founded? One of the victories they would continue to celebrate?

And we have to ask, is there also a dark side to this nation we call home, and whose birthday we celebrate today? If so, are we going to take those uncomfortable verses out, or leave them in? Who were the original inhabitants of this land, who just might have been forced out, perhaps even killed, by the European settlers? Or, to put it differently, on whose land are we now worshipping God, and celebrating our nation’s birthday? Who were those disadvantaged people our nation’s founders may have oppressed? Were they really all that different from or inferior to the pale-skinned Europeans? Who were the “blind and the lame” our forebears determined unwelcome in the “house” our founders built?

As regards that uncomfortable part of this morning’s story from 2 Samuel 5, when David refers to the lame and the blind as “those whom David hates,” some commentators believe that David was merely using the Jebusites’ own words against them, their taunt that “even the blind and the lame will turn you back.” Some propose that David’s victory over the Jebusites was relatively bloodless, that his scheme of attacking them through the water shaft caught them completely by surprise. That would certainly make it more palatable, wouldn’t it? Especially to us pacifist Mennonites? Some even propose that the Jebusites were actually allowed to remain in Jerusalem after the battle had been decided. We can hope these things are true. We can hope that David’s 40-year reign over the nation of Israel was by and large good, and admirable, and honorable. We can appreciate that the Bible doesn’t omit the darker side of that reign, like David’s growing arrogance, and what happened just a few chapters later with Bathsheba, and her soldier husband Uriah the Hittite whom David had killed in battle. Perhaps when we consider both all the good and all the bad that David and his nation had done, the good will outweigh the bad, and we will still be able to see signs of a good God at work amongst his inevitably imperfect human messengers and servants.

Would our Anabaptist forebears have celebrated the Fourth of July? On one hand, their passionate understanding of what it meant to be a faithful church was based on a clear separation

between the “church” and the “state,” the realm of God and that of the world. They were passionate about declaring their allegiance to Christ and Christ alone. And yet, didn’t the “New World” provide for some of them a place of safety and liberty in which to practice their faith, after they had begun to be severely persecuted, especially in Switzerland and the Netherlands? Is that not worth celebrating?

And how about our Russian Mennonite forebears who immigrated to Marion County in 1874? Would they have celebrated this holiday? Once again, this nation offered them land to farm and a place to call home. Whether or not these pious Mennonites believed in celebrating national holidays, there how could they help but be grateful to that nation who made all this possible?

So let us also celebrate this holiday in gratefulness for all the good this nation has done—for us Mennonites, for all its citizens, for the world as a whole. But let us celebrate with our eyes wide open, acknowledging our imperfections, and sins, and yes even our arrogance, asking God to forgive us wherever we have fallen short, and to guide us as we seek to live out God’s call, now and into the future.

Amen.

Reading of Response: VT 1043

Hymn of Response: VT 710