



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

A Time of Remembrance and Gratitude

SERMON BY REV. STEVEN GRANT ■ MAY 29, 2022

There have been times in churches across the country where there has been some measure of objection to displaying the national banner prominently in a place of worship. While it is true that in different places around the world, and at different times, this sort of thing has been abused, America is different. America is exceptional. Notice that the cross is front and center and looms over the sanctuary. But, we must never lose sight of the fact that our national banner represents religious freedom!

Our Scripture lesson is from the Book of Deuteronomy, where Moses gave his final sermons to the Israelites as they prepared themselves to go into the land that the Lord had promised them. I will read from chapter 8, verses 11-20.

Take care lest you forget the LORD your God by not keeping his commandments and his rules and his statutes, which I command you today, ¹²lest, when you have eaten and are full and have built good houses and live in them, ¹³and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied, ¹⁴then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, ¹⁵who led you through the great and terrifying wilderness, with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no water, who brought you water out of the flinty rock, ¹⁶who fed you in the wilder-

ness with manna that your fathers did not know, that he might humble you and test you, to do you good in the end. ¹⁷Beware lest you say in your heart, "My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth." ¹⁸You shall remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your fathers, as it is this day. ¹⁹And if you forget the LORD your God and go after other gods and serve them and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish. ²⁰Like the nations that the LORD makes to perish before you, so shall you perish, because you would not obey the voice of the LORD your God.

When I visit Valley Forge (which I try to do frequently), I intentionally spend time in the rebuilt soldiers' huts and silently contemplate what it must have been like to be there during that awful winter when it was brutally cold and there was not enough food or medicine, adequate clothing, or supplies. As I stand in one of those little huts, I realize that I do not even know those soldiers' names, and they certainly had no way of knowing me. It is a profound feeling to think that they, you, and I are all part of something greater than ourselves: it is the bond we have as fellow Americans. What hits me even harder is that I have the privilege of being an American because of them! If they had not been steadfast, if they had not fought the good fight, there would be no United States!

It has been said that one of the greatest things George Washington ever did was what he did **not** do. He did **not** give up at Valley Forge. That is a credit to his leadership, and from a leadership standpoint that is an amazing thing. When it looked as though all was lost and the odds were insurmountable, he did not give up. Through his charismatic leadership, he kept his men together. But the point that hits me in those little huts is that the men did not give up either. Under the most horrific of circumstances, the residents of those huts are the reason we have a country in the first place, and we do not even know their names.

For the two centuries since, their brothers- and sisters-in-arms have continued with the same resolve, the same dedication, the same commitment, the same courage and patriotism that enables all of us to enjoy the life we have today. This holiday weekend is not simply a time for barbecues and Memorial Day sales. We remember those whose lives were taken from them for defending the ideal of freedom, of liberty. We remember, as well, those who survived the conflicts but have since gone home to glory. It is well that we do this; first, simply because they deserve it. But secondly, if we do **not** remember the price that was paid for this land, for our Constitution, for our way of life, and for our descendants who will follow us, subsequent generations will not cherish this land as they did.

There is amazing power in connecting with our story, our heritage, and our family. PBS has a very popular and compelling show called “Finding Your Roots,” hosted by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Through ancestry research, celebrity guests learn about their own families—their stories, their struggles, and their successes—on the TV screen right along with us. The transformation of emotion and appreciation as they sense who they are is wonderfully obvious. Sometimes the celebrity even breaks down in tears as his or her life takes on a deeper meaning as they embrace their story and connect with those who went before them.

The Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook made an exhortation to the Jewish pioneer youth early in the 20th century. He tried to impress upon them the danger of forgetting the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament, which are the books of Moses. You see, the Torah contains their story. It contains the history of Israel. It contains the story of the Jewish people. He made the dire prediction that if they continued to be divorced from Torah, their children would reject the very land of Israel to which they had dedicated themselves. And, with some of the current trends in Israel, this is, unfortunately, proving to be somewhat prophetic.

But does this not also apply to America? The extent to which we forget our heritage and the sacrifices it took to build our nation is the

extent to which we lose our appreciation, our love, and our dedication to what it stands for and who we are as a nation. Our heritage is **our** story, warts and all. It is a story of great ingenuity, hard work, and idealism, all the way from advances in industry, inventions, education, the arts, science and medicine, to great causes such as the labor movement, the civil rights movements, and the principles of economy. All of this and so much more must be taught and passed on, but it will not be if we do not remember, if we do not honor, if we do not learn from and celebrate that story to give us direction on how we can make America even better in the future.

So, particularly during this Memorial Day weekend, we must embrace with remembrance and profound gratitude the sacrifices made by those who went before us. We must defend what we do and who we are. We must never lose a national awareness of the framing of the Declaration of Independence and the great principles expressed in that document. We must never forget places like Valley Forge and Yorktown and the creation of our Constitution and Bill of Rights—documents that have stood the test of time more than any other in the world. Do you realize that the American Constitution, even compared to ancient cultures like China and Great Britain, is the longest-standing codified constitution in the world?

We must remember what went into preserving that Constitution and Bill of Rights. The war that tested whether that Constitution would stand and that set a whole people free. Wars against tyranny in places like the Meuse-Argonne and the Somme, Normandy and Anzio, Iwo Jima and Midway; the struggle to stop the spread of totalitarianism in places like Korea and Vietnam; and more recent struggles in Iraq and Afghanistan against radical extremists: All of these and so much more give substance to that profound often expressed truth (not a cliché), “the price of Freedom is not free.” Will subsequent generations be willing to pay the price? Will they understand and appreciate why? Will they hold this nation dear? Will they see this nation as worth fighting for and preserving? Have we taught them well?

I have been profoundly moved when, on several occasions, I have had the privilege of being in Israel for their Memorial Day. In the Jewish calendar, the day begins at sundown. So, roughly around 8 o'clock in the evening, a siren goes off across the entire country and everything stops! Whether you are in the middle of dinner, still at work, on a bus, or in traffic, for a solid minute while that siren is blowing, everyone in the entire country stands silently in remembrance. It is profound! The next morning, usually around 11, they do it again, only this time it is for two minutes that the entire country stops to remember. I pray they never lose this practice. I pray they never forget their story.

Imagine if America ever tried to do something like that. What will become of us if **we** do not remember or honor our heritage or our story? We will be pulled away from our moorings. We will lose the foundation upon which our extraordinary nation was built, and it will be replaced with things that have **not** stood the test of time and are contrary to who we are. A corrupted worldview will lead us down paths we will regret. Rather than build from strength to strength, we will lose our appreciation for what we had. This is precisely Moses' concern in the passage we read from Scripture today.

Now understand, the United States is not the new Israel. We were called into being for a totally different purpose in a totally different era and in a totally different context, but there is still much that we can learn from them. The first lesson is: "Take care lest you forget the **LORD** your God!" (Deuteronomy 8:11). We must never forget the hand of God in human history. The Bible makes it clear that God makes nations rise and fall, that He is the Lord of all nations, whether or not those nations acknowledge or recognize it. The truth is He still is the Lord of all.

Our singing the "Doxology" at the end of the worship service illustrates the second lesson: "Praise God from whom **all** blessings flow." **All** the blessings we enjoy come from His hand. As Moses says in verse 17, "Beware lest you say in your heart, 'My power and the

might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.” It leads to the delusion of self-sufficiency and of being in control. With the rise of secularism, we forget our founding principles from where our blessings and our strength and abundance come. We leave ourselves open to this very delusion at our own peril.

Moses then says to the Israelites in verse 19, “And if you forget the LORD your God and go after other gods and serve them and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish.” We are in danger of making fallen human beings the alpha and the omega, which will lead to disaster. Left on our own, like all kingdoms of the past, we would eventually fall. By contrast the psalmist wrote, “Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD, the people whom He has chosen as His heritage” (Psalm 33:12). And as today’s sanctuary banner proclaims, “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Corinthians 3:17).

Let’s take just a moment to consider our own national creed as expressed in the national hymns we sing at patriotic events on a regular basis. Do we just sing these songs without thinking, or do we pay attention to what is expressed? Let’s start with the fourth stanza of “My Country, ‘Tis of Thee”:

*Our fathers’ 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!*

“Our fathers’ God, to thee...” acknowledges who our Founders’ God was. “Author of liberty...” affirms He is the source, the Creator of Liberty. “To Thee we sing...” (not to ourselves). “Long may our land be bright with freedom’s holy light; protect us by thy might, great God, our King!” We depend on God for our protection and for giving us freedom. He is acknowledged as our King. This was our Founders’ faith. It is not very popular today to suggest that our Founders were all Bible-believing Christians. Yes, a few of them were a bit different, but if you read their biographies (as I have taken

the time to do), you will see that the vast majority were Bible-believing Christians.

And from “America, the Beautiful” we sing:

*America! America!
God shed His grace on thee,
and crown thy good with brotherhood
from sea to shining sea!*

What is grace? Grace is often described as God’s unmerited favor. Here in this song, we are beseeching God for His favor and blessing to come upon us because we recognize our need for it. And, in response, we are to crown **His** good with brotherhood!

Friends, since we follow the Master Jesus, we Christians should be the ones who lead the way in establishing brotherhood from sea to shining sea. How do we engage one another? How do we engage people who are very different from us? How do we engage new people in our midst? How do we engage with people who have been here for a long time but with whom we have never dealt before? We who follow the Master are the ones who should be leading the way to establish brotherhood and sisterhood from sea to shining sea.

The second stanza concludes with these words:

*America! America!
God mend thine every flaw,
confirm thy soul in self-control,
thy liberty in law!*

This acknowledges that we have had, and still do have, flaws, but we are looking to God to mend those flaws or at least enable us to mend them. We still turn to Him and when He goes about mending flaws, He will do it according to His ways, not ours. “Confirm thy soul in self-control, thy liberty in law”: Self-control is one of the fruits of the Spirit. Freedom is exercised within certain boundaries. Freedom does not mean we can do whatever we want whenever we want with whomever we want. If there are no boundaries there is anarchy and

then there is no freedom. If there are no internal restraints the authorities are forced to inflict external restraints to keep order. The more we have internal restraints the fewer external ones are needed. We live within certain boundaries as expressed in our laws. Based upon what? God's ways, as He "mends [our] every flaw."

The third stanza begins:

*O beautiful for heroes proved in liberating strife,
who more than self their country loved,
and mercy more than life!*

The operative word is "liberating." Our goal is liberation. We take up arms not for conquest but in defense of the establishment of freedom. The verse continues with the theme of self-sacrifice ("...who more than self their country loved, and mercy more than life!"). Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13), which is exactly what He exemplified. He tells us that there are some things worth risking one's life. We are part of something greater than ourselves.

We must remember this weekend that there are some among us who are willing to take on the most difficult and unpleasant tasks for us. What did God tell us He required? In the Book of Micah, He tells us, "...to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

This stanza concludes:

*America! America!
May God thy gold refine,
till all success be nobleness,
and every gain divine!*

Once again, God must do the refining, and will do so "till all success be nobleness, and every gain divine" (that is, according to **God's** ways).

The fourth and final stanza:

*O beautiful for patriot dream
that sees beyond the years thine alabaster cities gleam,
undimmed by human tears!
America! America!
God shed His grace on thee,
and crown thy good with brotherhood
from sea to shining sea!*

Patriots look forward. We dream of the country we are capable of becoming and we are not discouraged when trouble comes. Our enemies declared after Pearl Harbor and after 9/11 that they had brought America to her knees. No! They did not bring America to her knees. If anything, they strengthened our resolve. Americans rise to the occasion and face the challenge of those things for which it is worth fighting. And to emphasize the need for God's grace, the concluding words of verse one are repeated at the end of the song.

Friends, these songs remind us that America is part of God's purpose in the world. That purpose is not to be a self-indulgent, selfish, sex-obsessed, self-serving culture but rather to be a beacon of freedom bounded by self-control and law with expectations of personal responsibility. We are to be a bastion of human rights and opportunity where we envision the possible and sometimes achieve what we thought was impossible. This is one place in the world where we somehow succeed with the vast mosaic of people from all over—different religions, different cultures, different nations. You see, America is the place to make a home, but we cannot do it without God's help.

Before I close, I want to share with you a motion that Benjamin Franklin made at the Constitutional Convention in 1787. Congress did not pass his motion, but I think Mr. Franklin captures what we have been talking about this morning, and we can be thankful to James Madison for preserving this for us. As I read, remember that the "Sir" in this case is the one presiding over the meeting—none other than George Washington.

In the situation of this Assembly, groping as it were in the dark to find political truth, and scarce able to distinguish it when presented to us, how has it happened, Sir, that we have not hitherto once thought of humbly applying to the Father of Lights to illuminate our understandings? In the beginning of the Contest with Britain, when we were sensible of danger we had daily prayers in this room for the divine protection. Our prayers, Sir, were heard—and they were graciously answered...

I have lived, Sir, a long time; and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth—that God governs in the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without his aid? We have been assured, Sir, in the sacred writings that “except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it.” I firmly believe this; and I also believe that, without his concurring aid we shall succeed in this political building no better than the Builders of Babel...

I therefore beg leave to move, that henceforth, prayers imploring the assistance of Heaven, and its blessings on our deliberations, be held in this Assembly every morning before we proceed to business, and that one or more of the Clergy of the City be requested to officiate in that service.

It has been said in the past that our way of life is “an experiment in self-government” and that was true, as nobody had tried it before. But no longer! After 200+ years Americans have proved that it works! But with neglect by future generations, as well as our own, forgetting our heritage and what we stand for, forgetting the price that was paid for what we have, **and forgetting the Lord our God**, we can lose it all more quickly than it took for our fathers and mothers to build.

My friends, I leave you with this: The American story with all its wonders and successes, its problems and its blunders, its blessings and its faults, is a story to embrace. It is a story worth telling. It is not a story about which to be ashamed. It is a story of the courageous

struggle to be free and to fight for what is right. It is a story of aspiring to the highest ideals. It is a story that tells of a people who do not shirk in the face of danger or give up because of setbacks.

“Take care lest you forget the LORD your God.” America is still the shining example to which the human spirit aspires and sees as possible. Of all the great stories of the history of nations, ours is the one I love best! May God be praised, and may God bless America! Amen!





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