

Freedom – The Truth of God

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Our Savior's Way Lutheran Church

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you this day from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

A blessed Fourth of July and joyous Independence Day to you. While this is not a holiday of the church, it might be good to look at Independence Day as it relates to us Christians. Former President Ronald Reagan wrote the following in an article titled *"What July Fourth Means to Me."* –*There is a legend about the day of our nation's birth in the little hall in Philadelphia, a day on which debate had raged for hours. The men gathered there were honorable men hard-pressed by a king who had flouted the very laws they were willing to obey. Even so, to sign the Declaration of Independence was such an irretrievable act that the walls resounded with the words "treason, the gallows, the headsman's ax," and the issue remained in doubt.*

The legend says that at that point a man rose and spoke. He is described as not a young man, but one who had to summon all his energy for an impassioned plea. He cited the grievances that had brought them to this moment and finally, his voice falling, he said, "They may turn every tree into gallows, every hole into a grave, and yet the words of that parchment can never die. To the mechanic in the workshop, they will speak hope; to the slave in the mines, freedom. Sign that parchment. Sign if the next moment the noose is around your neck, for that parchment will be the textbook of freedom, the Bible of the rights of man forever."

He fell back exhausted. The 56 delegates, swept up by his eloquence, rushed forward and signed that document destined to be as immortal as a work of man can be. When they turned to thank him for his timely oratory, he was not to be found, nor could any be found who

knew who he was or how he had come in or gone out through the locked and guarded doors.

Well, that is the legend and may not be accurate. But we do know that this small band of 56 unique men, perhaps unlike any seen since, had pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor to freedom. Some gave their lives in the war that followed, most gave their fortunes, and all preserved their sacred honor.

Nine of them were immigrants. Two were brothers, two were cousins, and one was an orphan. The average age was 45. The youngest, Thomas Lynch, from South Carolina was 27 and the oldest, Benjamin Franklin, from Pennsylvania was 70 years old. Although two were clergymen previously, only one wore clerical apparel at the meeting. Almost all the signers were Protestant Christians and only one was a Catholic, Thomas Carroll, from Maryland.

What manner of men was this group of 56 brave souls? Twenty-four were lawyers and jurists, eleven were merchants and tradesmen, and nine were farmers. Two were clergymen, but only one was practicing. They were soft-spoken men of means and education. They had achieved security but valued freedom more. In signing they were committing treason. All of them were risking their families and everything they had. John Hancock, the first to sign, summed it up when after signing, he said, *“the price on my head has just doubled.”* Most of them PAID a price for their brave act. Five were captured by the British and tortured before they died. Twelve had their homes – from Rhode Island to Charleston – sacked and looted, occupied by the enemy, or burned. One had his wife kidnapped by the British. Two of them lost their sons in the Army; one had two sons captured. Nine of them died in the war from its hardships or its more merciful bullets. These were not poor men or wide-eyed radicals. These were men of means; these were rich men, most of them, who enjoyed much ease and luxury in personal living. Not hungry men – prosperous men, wealthy landowners, substantially secure in their prosperity. But they considered liberty much more important than their security. Ironically, all five delegates from Virginia owned

slaves. They were committed to speaking out and defending the truth.

This is what the Fourth of July, Independence Day, is all about – freedom and separation from tyranny, from taxation without representation, from government-imposed worship. It is about men who shared a common ideal as expressed in the New Hampshire state motto: *"Live free or die."* Odd isn't it – that these men would value freedom even more than life itself?

While this has been a very good thing for us, for the United States, and arguably, even the world, if we look back to the beginning, we see the very source of all our problems in God's Word. God created everything and it was good. It was very good. But, when He created humans, things did not turn out to be so good for His creation. For the first humans, Adam and Eve, God was the only government and he made only one law. God said, ***"You may eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."*** (Genesis 2:16-17) But God also gave the first humans freedom and they used their freedom to eat of every tree in the garden but that wasn't enough. And...as you all know, Adam and Eve violated the only law on the books. They used their freedom, with the encouragement of Satan, to disobey the one law of God. So Adam and Eve declared their independence from God that day in the garden when they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and brought certain death to themselves and all of us. So their motto and the motto for all sinful humans to this day has been not, *"Live free or die,"* but *"Live free AND die."*

Now, as time progressed, in their freedom, humans did all manner of evil things to ruin the good that God had created. The next known act was murder. Cain used his freedom to kill his brother Abel. So, during early Biblical times, God was forced to govern His people. He had to be the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. He made the laws and directed the punishments for them. God governed through His chosen leaders (the same as He does today). He used

people like Abraham, Isaac, Moses, Joshua, and a group called Judges, including some women, as His agents. God remained the authority but ruled through His chosen leaders. He made the laws – 10 of which are so adequate that we use them as the basis of our laws today. He also made dietary, religious, and interpersonal rules for His people. But the first one of those ten Laws was that humans were to accept God as the ultimate authority – as the source of what was good and right. Whenever God’s people made decisions contrary to the laws of God, they violated the very First Law – they put themselves above the authority of God. Whenever they did that, God acted and punished them for breaking His Law. Whenever they turned to a new authority, to a new or alternate god, they were punished. After many years, at the death of Joshua, God’s people decided they wanted to be like other people around them. They wanted a temporal ruler. A king. God warned His people about such a person invested with the freedom to wield power and authority. He knew the potential evil that could come when sinful humans were free to act over others. He told them through his spokesperson, the priest Samuel, that a king would impose taxes on them and take their sons to wage wars. (I might point out these were at the very heart of the grievances against the King in the Declaration of Independence.) God spoke the Truth. His people should have listened to Him. They didn’t. Starting with their first king, Saul, God’s people were led by both God-fearing and God-ignoring leaders. Some were obedient to God and some turned away from God. The results were just as you would imagine. The God-fearing leaders brought good times. Those who ignored God brought all manner of disaster. (Not much has changed today.) The Historic Books of the Bible, 1 and 2 Kings, and 1 and 2 Chronicles detail that history. The devil took advantage each time a leader emerged who disregarded the authority of God. And, over time, the role of God became so eroded that ultimately God’s people turned away from Him completely and He punished them. He allowed them to be overrun by a foreign power and they suffered harshly. With their freedom, they had separated themselves from God and many didn’t even know who He was. And God separated

Himself from them just as He separated Himself from Adam and Eve. But God always had mercy on them and consistently sent prophets to help restore them to Him and restore His role as their God. Prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Hosea. That is a part of the story we heard in the Old Testament reading this morning as the prophet Ezekiel, who was living amongst God's enslaved people in exile in Babylon under King Nebuchadnezzar, ministered and prophesied to them.

Using their freedom, God's people had become hopelessly enslaved in a foreign land. They had not listened to the Word of God – The truth. They had used their freedom to assume an equal status with God. And now they were in desperate need of freedom from domination from foreign powers (more than one) and more importantly from the spiritual domination they suffered from their sinful nature and from Satan who continued to prey on them. They needed a Savior. Therefore, God so loved humans that He sent His Son to free them. He sent His Son to speak for Him and give them the truth about the Law. His Law still stood and they were subject to it, but their human nature was now so polluted by sin that they were hopelessly entrenched in sin. Freedom from sin would cost life and blood, just as political freedom did in the American Revolution. Even though God's Son came to them and spoke to them, just like the previous prophets and spokespersons of God before Him, they did not listen to Him either. Of their own free will, they often killed His Old Testament prophets and they killed His Son. But in so doing, they brought justice for themselves. What an irony. The death they imposed on Jesus brought them life. In their slavery to sin, they freed themselves by fulfilling God's plan to save them and give them life and spiritual freedom. They only needed to have faith in the grace they had been given by God through Jesus their Savior.

Throughout the whole history of the Bible, man has used his freedom to act as if he were God, declared his independence from God, and become hopelessly enslaved. Throughout the whole history of the Bible, God acted as a judge to punish the sins of man but in His

mercy, He always acted to save man from himself and God's judgment. And He has always retained a remnant of the faithful to return to Him.

We are a part of the story too. We were once rebellious too but through the work of God in our Baptism and by his Word of God we are freed from our slavery to the evil of sin and death and Satan. Jesus acted to save us from ourselves, from sin, and death. Our freedom is only limited by 10 laws – summarized in two – Love God and Love Our Neighbor. He has made us free to love, serve, and obey God and in faith believe in Him.

Now, what is our response to this great freedom in these times? Certainly, the times in which we live are no different than Biblical times. In these times, we see the free practice of religion in this county under attack. We see the euthanasia of babies, the feeble, and the aged as accepted and even endorsed in the legal code (something God abhorred in Biblical times). We see God abandoned and replaced by a variety of idols. We see the good creation of God desecrated by humans. We see the name of "God" criticized, expunged, and ridiculed when spoken or written, ironically, as a violation of the principle of the freedom of the separation of church and state. We see humans use their freedom to act like Cain who killed his brother Abel. And this happens repeatedly on a daily basis in countless, senseless murders. We see God's rules for social order frivolously disregarded and flaunted. We see all the 10 Laws of God broken with reckless abandon. In Biblical times, God warned His people that their sinful acts and especially their declaration of independence from Him would lead to disaster. Before action, God always demonstrated His displeasure with preemptive responses through which He showed His people He meant what He said before He acted with fury. (Not any differently today – wildfires, pandemics, violent storms, buildings collapsing, etc.) Sometimes, His people listened and were spared. Other times, they relished their freedom, ignored His authority and control, and suffered misery and death. God is no different today from who He was in Biblical times. But we,

who have faith in God, have His Truth, His Word, as a guide to show who He is, what He has done, and what others have done or not done and the consequences. And we have been called as a “holy priesthood” to be the prophets, the priests, and the spokespersons of God who know His Truth. (Just ordinary people like the first disciples and those men in 1776.) We are called to speak for Him in this time and in the places where we live. God has called us to be witnesses to His Truth. Called us to help save others from the tyranny of sin. We are like those 56 men in 1776 who needed to stand up and the disciples who were sent by Jesus, two by two, in the Gospel today. We are the ones who know God has the supreme authority and we have the freedom to tell what He can do both in His mercy and His wrath. We are the ones who are free to implore others to repent of their evil ways. We are the ones who are free to help them declare their independence from Satan and their sinful natures by the power of the Holy Spirit. We are the ones who, like Ezekiel, live among an enslaved people and are called and freed to share the message of God’s 10 Laws and His saving grace. We are the ones who are free to cast out the demons, heal the spiritually sick, and bring them to the saving grace of their Savior before disaster comes to the unrepentant. And, that disaster we call the Last Day. The day in which the King of all Kings will either call us to Him personally or appears in the heavens to all humans. The day the Lord of all Lords will come to be the judge of all in heaven and on earth.

Our ancestors were free to cast off the oppressive rule of a temporal foreign ruler in this land 145 years ago and acquire temporal freedom. As Christians, we are free from the rule of sin and have the duty and obligation to declare the mercy of God and the salvation of grace to those around us. We are free to be the servants of our King, free to cast off the oppressive rule of evil and sin in this land. We are not only the free citizens of this temporal land but also the free citizens of heaven where the King of Kings is our King. Now and forevermore.

On this Fourth of July, we celebrate temporal freedom in this land but we have an even greater spiritual freedom in Christ. And our temporal and spiritual freedoms give us the obligation to serve God and our neighbor. As you celebrate your temporal freedom today, may you be the one who rises to speak passionately for Your Lord and Savior to those around you, reminding them all that true freedom comes from God, using all the strength and fervor found in your temporal and spiritual freedom to speak the Truth of God as His loyal, committed, and active servant and to His glory. May our Land recognize God as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords in it. And in our recognition of God, may God bless our land. Amen.