

July 2, 2017

Independence Day 2017

Let Freedom Ring!

Joshua 24:11-15

Opening words: This is the history of Independence Day. In June of 1776, a Virginian by the name of Richard Henry Lee proposed an American independence from England. The idea kept gaining support until the Second Continental Congress voted for independence from England on July 2, 1776. The group decided a document was needed to explain their actions. A committee of five was selected to draft that document; the chief writer was Thomas Jefferson. He submitted the document back to the Congress, who tweaked the wording. It was approved on July 4, 1776. Richard Henry Lee was the first to sign the Declaration of Independence. Copies were made, and the new nation embraced their independence. Because this Declaration of Independence was dated July 4, not July 2, it was viewed as our Independence Day. How are you celebrating this Independence Day?

Our scripture reading for today comes from the twenty-fourth chapter of Joshua. So much had already happened to God's Chosen People. They had endured their slavery in Egypt. They had already received the Ten Commandments and endured forty years in the wilderness. They had already said, "Good-bye," to Moses and had welcomed a new leader, Joshua. Do you remember their story? It was Joshua who led them into the Promised Land. Our scripture reading for today is Joshua's words, as the people are about to enter their new home, the Promised Land. I am using Joshua's words today as a backdrop to my comments on this Independence Day weekend. Our scripture reading for today is Joshua 24:11-15. Let me call this message *Let Freedom Ring!*

Joshua 24:11-15 ¹¹ "Then you crossed the Jordan and came to Jericho. The citizens of Jericho fought against you, as did also the Amorites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hittites, Girgashites, Hivites and Jebusites, but I gave them into your hands. ¹² I sent the hornet ahead of you, which drove them out before you—also the two Amorite kings. You did not do it with your own sword and bow. ¹³ So I gave you a land on which you did not toil and cities you did not build; and you live in them and eat from vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant.'

¹⁴ "Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. ¹⁵ But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."

Abraham Lincoln once said, "*My dream is of a place and a time where America will once again be seen as the last best hope of earth.*" If that is your dream too, say, "**Amen!**"

We find ourselves today in the twenty-fourth chapter of Joshua. At this point, Moses is dead and the people are being led by Joshua. After forty years of wandering in the wilderness, the people are about to enter the Promised Land. Everyone must have been excited, but Joshua saw the significance of that moment. They were about to begin a new nation and a choice had to be made. Would they become like all the other nations scattered around the world? Or, would they become a different kind of nation? Standing before the people, Joshua challenges them to be a true nation of God. He longed for his nation to rise above the rest. That is why this Old Testament passage speaks to us. It is the same vision you and I have for America. In our heart of hearts, we believe it is true. America truly is a special place. If you believe America is a special place, say, **"Amen!"** The secret to our success is freedom.

One of the great political masterpieces in the history of the world is the United States Constitution. It was written in 1787 during the Philadelphia Convention. It replaced the impotent Articles of Confederation. When I saw it on display in Washington DC, I was emotionally moved. I do not consider myself an expert on the Constitution, but I do have a basic understanding of how it works. It is the supreme law of our land and sets us apart from the rest of the world. Generally, it protects individual liberties, while it places limits on the role of the government. It has been called a living document because it is always changing. Did you know that since the Constitution came into force in 1789, it has been amended twenty-seven times? I do not have time to talk about all of our freedoms, but I do have time to talk about three. These three freedoms have shaped us as a country. So, if you are ready to begin, say, **"Amen!"**

Freedom of Choice

First, in America, we have freedom of choice. In other words, we live in a democracy. We believe in a government that is run by the people. That is why your private ballot is so important. The majority wins! The opposite of a democracy is a dictatorship. In a dictatorship, all the power is controlled by a person or a small clique. A dictatorship may be more efficient than a democracy, but it is also more sinister. Would anyone here like to move to China, North Korea or Venezuela? They have dictatorships. According to planetruler.com, there are fifty dictatorships in the world today.

Did you know, according to CBS News, \$6.8 billion was spent on the national election last year by all the candidates. Democrat Hillary Clinton spent 1.4 billion to be your president. Republican Donald Trump spent \$957.6 million to be your president. Both candidates understand the power behind the freedom of choice. Let me say this clearly. I will never encourage you to vote for a certain candidate, because churches are not permitted to endorse candidates; we can only back issues. However, I will always encourage you to vote. I was taught, if you don't vote, then you can't complain. Don't tell me you don't understand the issues, don't tell me they are all the same, don't tell me they are all criminals. Use your education and be an educated voter. In America, we have the freedom of choice. Don't waste it. There will be no voting this year in North Korea. If you are thankful the constitution gives us freedom of choice, say, **"Amen!"**

Freedom of Speech

Second, in America, we have freedom of speech. In other words, you have the right to say anything that you want, no matter how foolish it makes you look. Some believe the best part of every newspaper is the editorial page. On the editorial page, everyone gets to exercise their freedom of speech.

You may have heard that the Supreme Court redefined marriage. When I was born, the world understood marriage to be between a man and a woman. Now, marriage can occur between a man and a man, or a woman and a woman. Sexuality is such a big topic and so many people are confused. I will be honest. I am confused. I was still working on Kaitlin Jenner. Many believe sexuality will cause the next great schism in our denomination. Do you believe changing the definition of marriage would be the Waterloo of our denomination? Do you believe changing the definition of marriage would be the best thing that ever happened to our denomination? How do you feel about same-sex marriages? The gay and lesbian community has been celebrating since the Supreme Court ruling. When the ruling was announced, two million people showed up in New York City to for the gay pride parade. Like it or not, we have freedom of speech. In Istanbul, the crowds gathered to celebrate gay pride. They were met with water cannons. If you are thankful the constitution gives us freedom of speech, say, **"Amen!"**

Freedom of Religion

Third, in America, we have freedom of religion. The very first amendment to the constitution is the freedom of religion. I do not believe that was an accident. It was intentional because so many came to North America originally seeking religious freedom. Your faith can take any form. You can follow any set of beliefs you desire. According to the Gallup Poll, 77% of our country is Christian. That means 23% of our country are non-believers. Did you know many of the patriots didn't identify themselves as a Christian?

During the time of the American Revolution there was a great theological movement called Deism. It was a product of the "enlightened age". That school of thought believed the human mind had the potential to solve the world's problems. Deists believed God created the world and set natural law in order. It was at that point that God removed himself from the world. Natural law could not be broken. There was no sense in praying for a miracle because natural law couldn't be broken. There was no sense in believing in the resurrection of Jesus, because it broke natural law. In varying degrees, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, James Madison, Ethan Allan, and even George Washington were deists. Thomas Jefferson had his Bible rewritten to eliminate all the miracles. His Bible was a third of the size of yours. They chose to believe in Deism. It was within their rights. You chose to be a Christian. It is within your rights. In America, we have religious freedom. If you are thankful the Constitution gives us religious freedom, say, **"Amen!"**

Everyone knows the name Elizabeth Taylor. She lived her life in the spotlight. She was born in a London suburb to American parents in 1932, so she had dual citizenship, the United States and Britain. At the age of twelve, she landed a part in the movie *National Velvet*. After that movie, other movies came: *Father of the Bride*, *A Place in the Sun*, *Giant*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and *Suddenly Last Summer*. She won an Academy Award in 1960 for her part in *Butterfield 8*. She won a second Academy Award in 1966 for her role in the movie, *Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. She became known for her glamorous lifestyle, beauty and her violet eyes. This is something you may not know: Did you know that in 1965 Elizabeth Taylor signed a document renouncing her American citizenship? However, in 1977, she reapplied for American citizenship when she married her seventh husband, Senator John Warner. (Don't forget she was married eight times.)

Would anyone here sign a document renouncing your American citizenship? Did you know in 2016, according to the US National Registrar, 5,411 Americans gave up their citizenship? They say the number one reason people gave up their American citizenship was tax reasons. Can I give you some pastoral advice? Don't do it. I have been to some amazing places in this world. I have been to Canada and Mexico. I have been to Haiti and the Philippines. I have been to Great Britain and France. I have been to Italy and Germany. I have been to Russia and Ukraine. I have been to Belarus and Holland. I have been to all those places. Each one was amazing, each one was different. However, they all have one thing in common. None of them can hold a candle to the United States. After each trip, I was ready to come home. I do not make that statement based on emotional patriotism, I make that statement based on fact. America is still the land of the free. I would love to know why Elizabeth Taylor renounced her American citizenship. She was too bright to do something so foolish. Would anyone here sign a document renouncing your American citizenship?

According to the Chicago Tribune, on November 30, our country welcomed 52 new citizens. They represented 27 different countries from around the globe. They came from Algeria, Brazil, Cambodia, Canada, China, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Ghana, Iraq, Kenya, Mexico, Moldova, Morocco, Nigeria, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Taiwan, Thailand, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom, Uruguay, Vietnam and Zimbabwe. It must have been quite a scene. The emotions of our country's newest citizens must have been running high. Do you know how hard it is to become a legal nationalized citizen of the United States? It isn't just a matter of showing up for a ceremony.

These are the requirements:

1. You must be a lawful permanent resident. In other words, you must first hold a green card or have served in the military.
2. You must live in the United States at least five years.
3. You must read, write and speak ordinary English.
4. You must have a basic understanding of United States history and government.
5. You must have a basic understanding of the United States Constitution.

6. You must be of good moral character. That means you have paid your taxes and not gotten involved in any criminal activity.

Could you complete all those requirements to become a citizen? I feel truly fortunate to just be born here. Those 52 people worked hard to stand with us and they would do it again. They worked hard to be called an American because they know there is something special about America, and so do you. We live in the land of the free. As any of those 52 would tell you, America stands alone. Abraham Lincoln once said, "*My dream is of a place and a time where America will once again be seen as the last best hope of earth.*" If that is your dream too, say, "**Amen!**"