



# The Trinity Pulpit



## **Stones, Stars and Stripes**

**Joshua 4:1-9**

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There are many symbols of our national pride that relay our nation's values. There is the Statue of Liberty that beckons the troubled, the downcast and the outcast who are looking for a nation that will treat them with dignity and grant to them the opportunity they do not receive in their own nation. There are all of the memorials that fill the landscape in our nation's capital, war memorials that remind us of sacrifice and service. When we arrive in such places there is a sense of reverence, as though we are standing on sacred ground. There are the memorials like the Washington Memorial, the Lincoln Memorial and Jefferson Memorial that remind us of great leaders who have come and gone. Each, in their own way, has helped us form a more perfect Union. There are also lesser known memorials all across our nation in county courthouse yards that remind us that our nation's greatness is not always measured by fame or notoriety. In those courthouse yards are memorials to people we have never heard of and many in their own community have forgotten them. Yet, they remind us that it takes all of us together to create a nation where we can be proud to live.

Yet, of all of the symbols, whether it is the Statue of Liberty, the Eagle, or the many statues and buildings, the one symbol that seems to be found at each is the flag. Our flag is really our symbol of the nation. When we see it flying we are reminded of our past, our present and our future. The stars and stripes remind us of our forefathers and mothers who courageously chose independence. The stars remind us that over the years others came and joined them to create the greatest nation in the world. As the flag flies, it reminds us of the importance of the freedom of the individual and also of our shared common interest. If I were to ask you what the flag represented, many of you might say freedom or independence.

Today, as we celebrate our nation's birth, we have to remember that our nation's birth was anything but certain. It was a brash and tedious endeavor when they signed the Declaration of Independence declaring that the 13 colonies were now the United States of America. Yet, that courageous event launched the events that would finally lead to our nation's independence from England. How-

ever, as important as the concept of independence is in our nation's value, I want to suggest that there are three other important values that our nation must remember if it is going to remain a great nation and a nation blessed by God.

Our text today is one of those texts that we might recognize. It is the story of the people of Israel crossing over the Jordan River into the land of promise. We know well the story of the Red Sea parting as Moses and the Hebrew nation were leaving Egypt and being pursued by the Egyptian Army. This important story, like the one of crossing the Red Sea, is about God again moving on behalf of the Israelites to finally bring them into the land of the promise after their 40 years of wandering.

God had led the people to the very edge of the Promise Land, but you may remember that a spying party had been sent out by Moses to come back and report about the land and the people who lived there. When the spies returned, all but Caleb and Joshua said that they could not take the land. They were afraid and spread a report of fear. The result is that Moses and his generation passes away in the Wilderness, and Joshua and Caleb will be the new leaders as the nation crosses over into the Promise Land. The book of Joshua is the beginning of this part of the story. It is the moment that a promise becomes a reality. In chapter 3 as the nation is camped at Jordan's edge, the officers go throughout the camp and tell the people to prepare to cross the Jordan. They are to consecrate – ready – themselves and prepare themselves in regards to their spiritual life so they may cross into the land God has promised them. Then the day comes when they are to cross.

The Ark of the Covenant of the Lord went before the people. Remember, the Ark is the beautiful container that was built to hold the Tablets of the Ten Commandments, and the Ark represented the very presence of God in the midst of the people. The priests lifted the Ark and carried it toward the Jordan River. We are told that the Jordan was at flood stage during this harvest season which makes this story all the more remarkable. When the priests carrying the ark touched

their foot into the Jordan something happened. The way it is written in chapter 3 is “then it happened.” It is written in a way to startle us and call us into attention, like a good story teller would tell a story and get our attention with language and mood. “Then it happened.” What happened? The Jordan became dry. We are told that the waters of the Jordan heaped up and piled up in a city to the north named Adam. The result was dry ground. The people of Israel crossed over the Jordan just like they had crossed the Red Sea, on dry ground. The importance of this moment is not only that they are crossing but how they are crossing. They are crossing as an act of God. The God that delivered them from Egypt had not abandoned them in the Wilderness. In fact, God had been faithful and was still performing his mighty acts.

As the Priests stood in the middle of the Jordan River with the Ark of the Covenant, the whole nation crossed over. This is when Joshua is instructed by God to create a memorial of this moment. Joshua chooses 12 men – one from each tribe – to go into the Jordan River, take a stone from the place where the priests stood, and erect a memorial so that from that day forward everyone would know that God had delivered his people. Then everyone would know that God is powerful and that the Lord God is always to be feared.

Now the story in Chapter 4 is filled with repetition of God’s command about the memorial. From our best reconstruction of the events, it seems that the 12 stones are first set up in the middle of the Jordan with the priests as the people walk by. Then they are erected just on the other side as a sign that the crossing occurred. Later these stones are erected permanently at Gilgal as a memorial to this moment. So, those generations who follow would know that God had delivered his people again.

When I read this story I am reminded that this is not a personal story. We can read it and find personal application, but this is a story of a nation. That is what I want to do this morning: discover if there are some qualities in this story of a nation that apply to our own story as a nation. I think there are three qualities in this story that we need to remember as the United States of America.

Here is the first. We are at our greatest not when we speak of independence but when we speak of dependence. When our nation is aware of our dependence on God, then our nation is at its greatest. Here in our text the story is not about the people, it is about God’s activity, God’s provision, and God’s mighty hand. The concept of being dependent upon God is found throughout our nation’s history. In our Declaration of Independence

we are told that we all have the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. However, we sometimes forget what is the origin of these rights. According to the authors of the Declaration of Independence these rights come from our Creator. They are God-given rights. They are dependent upon God.

Our forefathers understood the dependence a nation had upon God even as they sought their own political independence. Still, after all of these years and years of revisions of our nation’s history, the notion that we are dependent upon God is still a part of our nation’s heritage and practice. Every time we watch a new president take office we marvel at the scene and the moment of peaceful transition.

Then the newly elected president takes the stage and the oath is repeated:

*I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully execute the Office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States.*

Although not required by law, early on as a response and not a part of the oath, many presidents began to add the words, “So help me God.” It is not known how many presidents used the Bible or added those words. Some evidence shows that George Washington added these words as he affirmed the oath. Whatever the case, what we all seem to notice are that many presidents become more interested in spiritual matters once in office. The weight of the job seems to produce a


newfound dependence. They truly ask for God’s help. That is the word of dependence.

When he assumed the leadership of a divided nation at the time of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln, America’s sixteenth president said,

*Unless the great God who assisted Washington shall be with me and aid me, I must fail; but if the same Omniscient Mind and Mighty Arm that directed and protected him shall guide and support me, I shall not fail. Let us all pray that the God of our fathers may not forsake us now.*

Later, Lincoln acknowledged, “I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go.”

In a recent editorial by Bob Kaylor of *Homiletics* magazine he writes of the difficulty of celebrating July 4<sup>th</sup> and other national holidays as a part of worship. He tells the story of a time when one of his parishioners was angry with him because he had not had the United States Flag



**“Our  
independence  
comes from a  
dependence on  
God and  
interdependence  
with one another.”**

in the sanctuary as a part of worship on July 4<sup>th</sup>. The mother told the pastor that he obviously did not respect the United States or her son who was serving in the armed forces at the time. The pastor who was a veteran himself said that was not the case.

*I served for 10 years in the infantry and I have saluted the flag, displayed it in my home, worn it on my sleeve and the stars and stripes have a deep meaning as a symbol in my life. However, according to the U.S. Flag Code when a flag is displayed in a church or public auditorium it is to be at the prominent position to the speaker's right hand. The pastor went on to explain that in worship there was another symbol that must take prominence and in respect for the flag he would not want to display it inappropriately so he chose not to have it in the sanctuary that day.*

What was the other symbol that must hold prominence over even the US Flag in worship? It was the cross. When we come to worship, we are always reminded that there is one symbol that is prominent over everything else to which we give our allegiance. The cross and the relationship that it represents must always permeate everything we do. It must also inform our patriotism. As American Christians, we must always remember that our independence is actually a result of our dependence. America is at her best when she remembers her dependence on God.

As we celebrate our independence, let us also celebrate our interdependence. In our story, the Israelites were learning their dependence on God and their interdependence on each other. Their independence from Egypt was the result of both dependence and interdependence. As they crossed the Jordan River the story is clear to indicate that they went together. Over and over again the emphasis is on who crossed over. The whole nation crossed including the Transjordan tribes whose land was on the side of the Jordan where they were already encamped. They all crossed over and readied for the battles that would be theirs as they went into the land of the promise. They do not cross without everyone being together. From the priests to the leaders to the least of those in the nation, all are important. They were going as one.

In his new book *The Seven Faith Tribes*, pollster George Barna outlines what he believes are the signs of America's demise. In this list there are several items that indicate a lack of understanding that we as a nation are interdependent on one another. He suggests that any society declines when the following happen:

- \* People cannot hold civil conversation over matters of disagreement because they are overly possessive of their values and beliefs and too unyielding in preferences.
- \* Public officials and cultural leaders insist on posturing for position at the expense of their opponents after the exchange of competing ideas.

- \* The public cannot agree on what constitutes goodness, morality, generosity, kindness, ethics or beauty.
- \* People lose respect for each other and do not show a measure of dignity that every human being deserves.
- \* The population embraces the notion that citizens are accountable solely to themselves for their moral and ethical choices because there are no universal standards and moral leaders.
- The evidence of these matters in our culture according to Barna is many, but let me mention the ones that have to do with a disconnection from the whole.
- \* Immigration was once an opportunity to come and embrace American values and it meant to assimilate into a new culture. The concept was the melting pot. Now many immigrants' goal is to live a more comfortable life without surrendering native culture. The new image is a mosaic.
- \* There is a move from voluntary accountability to belligerent autonomy. We resent others – individuals, family, public officials, organizations, society – who place restrictions and limitations upon us no matter how reasonable or necessary they may be.
- \* We have moved from responsibility to the common good to the champion of the individual's rights.
- \* We have shifted from contribution and sacrifice to comfort and fulfillment.
- \* We have shifted from intellect and character to fame and image.<sup>1</sup>

Our constitution begins with the words "We the people." There is a sense from our Forefathers that we were in this together. They gave up their own selfish desires and even their own fortunes and reputations for the common good. The seal of the United States contains the value of interdependence. *E Pluribus Unum*, means "out of many ...one." We are at our best as a nation when we realize our interdependence. Our Forefathers believed that independence came only by interdependence. We must again discover this truth. Our independence comes from dependence on God and interdependence with one another.

Lastly, let me suggest that America's greatness is found in the act of repentance. In our text the nation of Israel prepared for greatness by consecrating themselves. In chapter 3, Joshua's officers go throughout the camp telling the people to "consecrate yourselves for tomorrow the Lord will do amazing things." The word "consecrate" has for the root the sense of separation. The idea of setting yourself apart from the rest of the world around you and prepare yourself spiritually for what God is about to do. The phrase "amazing things" was a phrase to indicate God would act in a way that was beyond expectation and leave the nation amazed.

America is a great nation, but what is needed for God to do amazing things is our repentance. That word sounds odd in political terms these days except for the constant private repentance of government officials getting caught in private scandal. But the word

“repentance” was not always a strange word in regards to matters of the state.

Early in our nation’s history the leaders, many of them the signers of the Declaration of Independence, participated in and ordered as governors of their states, days of humiliation and prayer.

“Day of Fasting, Humiliation and Prayer, with a total abstinence from labor and recreation,” in response to the beginning of the War for Independence – Proclamation on April 15, 1775 for May 11<sup>th</sup>.

*In circumstances as dark as these, it becomes us, as Men and Christians, to reflect that whilst every prudent measure should be taken to ward off the impending judgments, ...at the same time all confidence must be withheld from the means we use; and reposed only on that God rules in the armies of Heaven, and without His whole blessing, the best human counsels are but foolishness...*

*Resolved; ...Thursday the 11th of May...to humble themselves before God under the heavy judgments felt and feared, to confess the sins that have deserved them, to implore the Forgiveness of all our transgressions, and a spirit of repentance and reformation ...and a Blessing on the ... Union of the American Colonies in Defense of their Rights [for which hitherto we desire to thank Almighty God]...That the people of Great Britain and their rulers may have their eyes opened to discern the things that shall make for the peace of the nation...for the redress of America 's many grievances, the restoration of all her invaded liberties, and their security to the latest generations.*

#### **Samuel Adams**

Signer of the Declaration and Governor of Massachusetts wrote: "A statewide Fasting, Humiliation and Prayer Proclamation issued by Samuel Adams on February 28, 1795, while serving as Governor of Massachusetts."

#### **John Adams**

President John Adams issued a national fasting and prayer proclamation on March 23, 1798.

#### **Jonathan Trumbull**

"A statewide Fasting, Humiliation and Prayer Proclamation issued by Jonathan Trumbull on February 20,

1807, while serving as Governor of Connecticut."

#### **James Madison**

A National Humiliation and Prayer Proclamation, issued by President James Madison on July 9, 1812; Also Four Hymns to accompany this day of national Humiliation and Prayer.

#### **James Buchanan**

A National Humiliation, Fasting, and Prayer Proclamation issued by James Buchanan, President of the United States, on December 14, 1860.

#### **Abraham Lincoln**

In 1863, amid civil war, President Lincoln proclaimed a national day of "public humiliation, prayer and fasting."

Our nation has a long history of prayers of repentance.

This is the hard part of any sermon regarding our nation. Repentance is needed by our whole nation but it must start with you and me. God promises, "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land." (2 Chronicles 7:14)

Repentance begins with you and me. It must begin with the church. America’s greatness depends on God’s people in America, the church, being who God has called us to be. We are called to be the light and salt of our world. We are to be the light that shows others the true way to live. We need to redefine greatness

and what is important in life. We are the salt of the world. Our presence should preserve a nation that might otherwise disintegrate culturally. Our independence is dependent upon our repentance and being the people of God we are called to be.

On this Independence Day weekend, as we wave our flags, honor our veterans and celebrate our greatness, let us not forget that our Independence is really dependent on God. It finds its strength in our interdependence with one another. It finds its future with our repentance so that God can continue to do amazing things with and through our nation. When we celebrate these values as a nation, then truly God will bless America. ✨

*“America is a great nation, but what is needed for God to do amazing things is our repentance.”*

<sup>1</sup>George Barna, *The Seven Faith Tribes: Who They Are, What They Believe, and Why They Matter* (Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2009) 2-6.

