

Many preachers find it difficult, even risky, to preach the Sunday nearest Independence Day. I do share that trepidation. People the world over have patriotic feelings, and in Americans it runs deeper than most – often in different and contradictory directions. That makes the whole national holiday treacherous ground for preaching. Wisdom might say “avoid it” on the grounds of church-state separation. But then I turn to the Scripture passages given in the lectionary for today, and we have these – Paul’s compelling discussion of “freedom” in the Epistle to the Galatians; and in the Old Testament, that gadfly of the government, Elijah, passing on his office to his trainee. Too good to pass up!

“For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters,” writes Paul, “Only do not let your freedom lead to self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.” A dramatic statement. What does freedom *really* allow us to do? To become “slaves of one another.” Paul sees our freedom as a gift given in Christ – not contingent on how we use it, but a gift given, accomplished. If we are loving, we use it as Christ would, in self-giving ways for the other. He cautions against the temptation to give in to our “lower nature”, or “the flesh” (*sarx*), and instead seek the gifts of the spirit – “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup>gentleness, and self-control.”

Not to take anything away from the celebration of our national holiday, but to be really clear : this is a different kind of freedom than we usually think of when Americans hear the word. Our history is one of celebrating the individual, myths of Daniel Boone, Horatio Alger and Rocky Balboa, a lone gun fighter, “nobody tells *me* what to do”, two-fisted individualist.

More than that, we inherited a sense of chosen destiny from the early Puritans - the “errand into the wilderness,” as Samuel Danforth called it, Ben Franklin’s “American Mission.” There is in the history of our nation the belief that the United States is the chosen nation. The new Israel. And not just from crazy TV preachers or the Christian Identity movement, but from regular folks, A myth so accepted that they are startled when you point out the heresy of it. If there is a New Israel, it is no nation-state (not ours, not modern Israel), but the community Jesus gathered around the table, and even that assertion is theologically problematic.

Free Christians – *really* free, the way the Apostle meant – are everywhere around the planet, and many of them live in societies that are *not* free. They are in China and Indonesia and even Iraq, places where it is not safe to be Christian. They are in the Third World, some captive to hunger and disease – but free in the sense that belonging to Christ they can never be snatched from the hand of God. Called to freedom as we have been, and called to love one another so much as to be slaves to one another. And if they are in desperate poverty, illness or danger, then we dare not ignore the politics and the economics that threaten them, if we are to love as slaves to one another.

This is our country, and we may easily love it without endorsing the fallacy that it is God’s chosen nation – no matter what Falwell said in Lynchburg, Robertson says in Virginia Beach, or Dobson says in Colorado Springs. We may forever be a religion-obsessed people, but the most that the Puritan errand into the wilderness ever brought us was Salt Lake City!

So let’s turn to our other text – 2 Kings 2, where Elijah, at the end of his career, is transported to

heaven. His protégé, EliSHa, has asked to inherit a “double portion” of the old prophet’s spirit – that is, the share of an inheritance that the eldest son would get. Elisha desires to become the successor of EliJah. And does he know what he asks? Elijah has been hounded by the government, the troops of Ahab and Jezebel, lied to, abandoned, lonely, discouraged, and often the lone voice speaking the truth of God. Still Elisha desires to be like the old man.

The text enters an otherworldly realm of mystery then, and describes Elijah being taken into heaven on a whirlwind, and as he goes, the young would-be prophet calls after him: “My father! The chariots of Israel, and its horsemen!” And the mantle, the cloak, of Elijah fell; young Elisha picked it up, struck the river as he had seen his mentor do. It parted, and he inherited the mantle of the old saint. A new generation of prophet entered the vocation.

Where, in this story, has been Israel’s true defense force? Its arsenal? In one old prophet – Elijah. “My father! The chariots of Israel and its cavalry!” cried Elisha, and he spoke true. Against the greater military might of surrounding nations, and against the corruption in his own government, Elijah stood alone. “Homeland Security”, if you will – one old guy. A defender of Israel, mainly from its own leaders.

And largely uncelebrated in his own time. Isn’t that the way? Walt Whitman was proclaimed a great poet, America’s poet, long after his death. Thoreau thought to be loony, and Ralph Waldo Emerson an entertaining speaker at graduations but considered strident in his anti-slavery positions. The great Puritan theologian Jonathon Edwards was distrusted in his time by liberal individualists and old-line Calvinists alike. It is later, in retrospect, we learn that the voices who challenged the accepted views of the time were the right ones, and those are the voices that finally shaped us. The Elijahs. The lonely soul of conscience who inherits the mantle of being the chariots of Israel.

Who today remembers Senator Albert Beveridge of Indiana? No one, because he was a braggart and a fool. Yet over a hundred years ago his views, and speeches on the Senate floor, carried the day and helped establish foreign policy. He made an impassioned plea for the US conquest and occupation of the Philippines because “great empires are entitled to great territory.” And in a succinct combination of jingoism and racism, he said: “God has not been preparing the English-speaking and Teutonic people for a thousand years for nothing but vain and idle self-contemplation ... he has marked the American people as his chosen nation to finally lead in the regeneration of the world.” No reason to remember poor Beveridge now, except that things have been said in recent years that sound uncomfortably similar.

What is the mantle that has been picked up by religious leaders today? That of Senator Beveridge or the Robber Barons? From the darkest side of our history? Or from the side when we were at our best, those moments when we *did* range ourselves on the side of democracy and liberty?

I don’t know who our Elisha is today. I worry that it has been Pat Robertson, who says God sent hurricanes to kill those sinners on the Gulf. I worry that it has been James Dobson, promising to return the country to righteousness, with his saying like: “*My observation is that women are merely waiting for their husbands to assume leadership.*” (Gosh, I’m really afraid to break that news to the Presbyterian Women!) In fact, if a protégé of Elijah appears today it is most likely to be in the voice of a woman or ethnic minority, someone who can see beyond business-as-usual.

But if we would pick up the mantle of an American Elijah, I hope it would be...

a Jonathon Edwards, who wrote that

*“The business and trade of a Christian is to live unto God,” and thought that ingratitude, the refusal to acknowledge limits on human powers, the wish to achieve God-like knowledge and capacities – was the antithesis of virtue and the essence of original sin.*

a Reinhold Niebuhr, of only 60 years ago:

*“From (the Puritan days) to this it has remained one of the most difficult achievements of our nation to recognize the fortuitous and the providential element in our good fortune.”*

a Ralph Waldo Emerson:

*How much, preventing God, how much I owe  
To the defenses thou hast round me set;  
Example, custom, fear, occasion slow –  
These scorned bondmen were my parapet.  
I dare not peep over this parapet  
To gauge with glance the roaring gulf below,  
The depths of sin to which I had descended,  
Had not these against myself defended.*

Agree with all they said or not, there were some giants in the land, in our history. Do we seem now reduced to a culture seeking little but amusement, comfort, and material possessions? Does there not have to be *more* to a celebration of freedom than: “Defend your right to party!”

What freedom shall we seek? The kind of freedom that defends us against ourselves – our unbridled greed, our selfishness, our pride; this kind:

“For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not let your freedom lead to self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.”

Thanks be to God for Jesus Christ, who came that we might know the truth, that the truth might set us free indeed.