

John Sampson  
"Many Blessings"  
Text: Psalm 48  
Preached at KVCC  
July 8, 2018

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you our rock and our redeemer.

Amen.

Today, we celebrate the birth of our nation. It's a couple of days late, but that's what happens when Independence Day falls on a Wednesday, and you're a church that only meets on Sundays.

241 years ago the British colonies of North America declared their independence from England, and started a new chapter in the history of the people of this continent that began way before Europeans settled this land, and will continue long after we are but a memory. 241 years ago the United States of America was founded, and since then has grown and changed, been challenged and experienced moments of great awakening.

But this celebration of our nation occurs in the context of a much larger celebration.

It is the celebration that I have called Extraordinary Time, which is a celebration of God's presence and spirit moving through our lives, and our world.

In Extraordinary Time we're invited to see how God is blessing us right here, and right now, right in the middle of our ordinary lives, right in the midst of our celebration of this nation's birthday.

The psalm, or hymn, we just heard was written by another people, living in another time, in another country. Most psalms are traditionally attributed to King David, the founder of the Kingdom of Israel. I don't know if this psalm was really written by David or not, but it is a wonderful expression of another people giving thanks for the blessing of their country, of their culture.

It tells how the Israelites felt God was among them when they looked at their cities, and lived in security. If ancient Israel had an Independence Day holiday back in the day, maybe this is a song the people would sing together as they watched fireworks being shot off from the rooftops of Jerusalem – not that such a thing actually happened. But you get my drift.

And so it asks a question of us this morning.

How do we feel God is with us this Independence Day?

When we look out across our nation where do we see the places that God is blessing us, as individuals, and as a people?

Today, on this extraordinary day, as we live in God's love for us, what is the song we want to sing together as we watch fireworks explode in the sky?

When I asked all of you to share with me your suggestions for subjects to preach on this summer, many of you said you wanted me to preach about what is happening in our country.

But the suggestions I received for the most part weren't suggestions of joy, or of thanksgiving.

They were suggestions tinged with concern, and fear, and anxiety for what is happening in our country, and where we are going as a people.

And two weeks ago in my sermon I addressed the outrage many of us were feeling regarding the children who had been separated, and are still separated, from their families as they have come to our borders seeking refuge.

But today is a different day.

Today is the other side of the coin.

We have plenty of time to engage with all of the challenges of country – whether they are current, or the residue of our earlier history.

Outrage and resistance are powerful tools to motivate us to do the work of God in this world.

But we should never forget that joy and thanksgiving and happiness are also just as powerful. These are also sacred emotions, which allow us to give and receive love, from those we know and those who are strangers to us.

And so in our Independence Day celebration here, this morning, I'd like us to put down the concerns we have for our country, just for this one hour. And I'd like us to remember all of the things we love about our nation. I'd like us to see how God is blessing us as we seek and strive to realize a more perfect union together.

So I ask again, when we look out across our nation where do we see the places that God is blessing us, as individuals, and as a people?

I'll share a place I felt deeply blessed recently. It was a place I felt God's presence, not in a literalistic way, but in the way that I knew I was part of something right, and good, and filled with compassion and respect.

I share with you a story of watching World Cup soccer in a Brazilian bar in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. And if God can be found there, she can be found anywhere!

As many of you know I am all about World Cup soccer. I love to watch as many games as I can, follow who's winning and who's going home. I love the drama on and off the pitch. So I went to NYC and met a friend of mine. We have a rule when we watch World Cup games that we have to watch them at a bar that caters towards the nationality of one of the teams playing. So if England and Sweden are playing we would have to see the game at either an English pub, or a Swedish bar. And in NYC you can do that.

So we just finished watching Germany, the team I was rooting for, get beaten by Mexico, which should never have happened, and we hopped in a cab to Williamsburg to see Brazil play Switzerland at a Brazilian place.

When we got there the bar was off the hook. The crowds were literally spilling on to the street, there were lots of expat Brazilians there, but also people from literally all across the world, everyone was drinking caipirinhas, there was a live samba band...and I showed up in my German soccer jersey and my lederhosen, I showed up wearing the jersey of Brazil's archrival in the tournament. I showed up in the jersey of the team that had humiliated Brazil in the last world cup.

And everyone loved it!

I got lots of good-natured ribbings, some condolences at Germany's loss, lots of questions about my lederhosen.

And as we settled in to watch the game – and at this point I was rooting for Brazil just like everyone else there – I looked around and I felt that I was in a place where everything was right.

I looked around and was living the dream of what this country could be, and often is.

I looked around and was living God's dream for what her children could be.

People coming together from all around the world in peace and with good will towards each other.

People sharing their cultures with one another as gifts and as a sign of hospitality to friends and strangers.

People speaking languages from every corner of the world, but also using English not because it was mandated, but because at that time and at that place it was the lingua franca that could bridge all of our linguistic difference.

We were citizens, and those trying to become citizens, and those who were just visiting our country for a time.

And when the band played that samba, everyone, gay and straight, was on the dance floor.

There was a friendliness and openness to everyone there – even those of us wearing lederhosen.

And I realize that this experience of shared humanity and the celebration of diversity I had that afternoon could not be had everywhere in the world today.

This bar experience in Williamsburg was so ordinary, but also so extraordinary. Because it manifest the dream of our nation, *e pluribus unum* – out of many one.

And it realized the dream of our God for all her children: peace, friendship, diversity with unity.

Aren't these the things we want as citizens of these United States of America?

Aren't these the things we have been promised as citizens of God's kin-dom?

So, I ask again, when we look out across our nation where do we see the places that God is blessing us, as individuals, and as a people?

Is there anyone who has a brief story they would like to share with the congregation? A story about where you see God blessing us through our nation? Or it doesn't need to be a whole story, it could be simply a word or phrase of something you are thankful for in our nation this day.

[Allow people to share their stories, words, phrases.]

The ancient Israelites worshipped God because they looked out over their country and they saw beautiful cities. They worshipped God because they lived in peace and security. They worshipped God because they had food, and the blessing of family.

One this Independence Day week we too look over the blessings of our nation. Of all of the words, and stories, and phrases we have shared from our lives – our extraordinary spirit-filled lives and are we not also thankful?

Amen.