

Sermon at St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, CT
The Reverend Hope H. Eakins
Sunday, July 1, 2018

One Independence Day a few years ago, we did something quintessentially American, and it is likely that some of you will do something similar this week. What we did was to go to a Fourth of July event in a small town where people waved flags as they watched a 4 mile road race and kids rode tricycles with red, white, and blue crêpe paper streamers woven through the wheels. And as we walked along, we heard a group of people gathered around picnic tables, playing guitars and singing *This Land is Your Land*.

“This land is your land, this land is my land, from California to the New York Island, from the redwood forest, to the Gulf Stream waters. This land was....made for you and me.”

I sang along in my head as we walked down the road, “this land was made for you and me.” Or was it? Way down in most of our hearts, that's what we seem to believe: that God made this beautiful, bountiful, splendid land just for us. The purple mountains' majesty and alabaster cities' gleam must have been divinely ordained, planned before time and forever – just for us. This land IS your land and my land, isn't it - because who else could it belong to?

The people of Israel felt the same way 2500 years ago and many of them still do today. They were, after all, the Chosen People, chosen by God. They entered the land and conquered the inhabitants, and they lived there until they were conquered themselves and exiled to Babylon where they lamented over and over again, ‘How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?’ For generations, they yearned to return to their homeland, for the land that God had promised them when God chose them, a land where they could be fruitful and multiply until their descendants would be as many as the stars in the sky. And in the fullness of time the prayers of the exiles were answered, and they came home rejoicing and telling the old family stories of how God had promised Abraham an heir and how God had delivered them from the Egyptian army through the Red Sea waters, and how God had brought them out of the Babylonian exile. The Israelites rejoiced when they heard the voice of the Lord making them a promise: “I will extend prosperity to [your land] like a river... you ...shall flourish like the grass, and it shall be known that ... the Lord is with his servants.” And when they heard that promise, Israel burst into psalms of praise, and whatever words they sang, what they were really singing was *This Land was Made for You and Me*.

But pretty soon, the Israelites forgot God's warning that the Promised Land would be taken away from them if they abused it or tried to keep it for themselves. They forgot that when God chose them, God commanded them to provide liberty and justice for all, for all the people who lived in their land, for immigrants and foreigners and sojourners, for everyone who came within their borders. God gave the Promised Land to Israel with the proviso that the people live there in peace, worshipping God and caring for the stranger and the widow and the orphan. God also asked Israel to shine so brightly with peace and prosperity and

love for everyone that Israel would be a light to enlighten all the nations.

Now isn't Israel's story very like our own, the story of a new land given into our hands not as a possession but as a gift to use for God's purpose? And aren't Israel's stories of salvation and redemption like the stories we were told as children about our place in this land, the stories which define us as Americans? We learned how God guided the Pilgrim refugees across the Atlantic to escape religious persecution, and we learned that God gave our armies victory over Britain to establish a nation whose hallmark is freedom. The stories of America being the Promised Land are told yet today in the place names that abound in New England: New Canaan, Bethel and Bozrah, Bethlehem, Salem, and Goshen. We learned the stories of the pioneers who tamed this land after it was "discovered." It is easy to imagine that this land was empty until WE got here, that this land IS made just for you and me.

When the Israelites returned from exile, no longer under Babylonian rule, they didn't remember that, as God's Chosen People, they had obligations and responsibilities. All they remembered was that they were free at last. Sometimes we are no different. We may disagree about religion and politics and taxes, but what we all do agree on is our Constitutional freedoms: freedom of religion, freedom of choice, freedom of speech, the freedoms on which our country is built.

Now freedom is the goal of adolescents, freedom to have a car to go wherever and whenever they please, without getting permission from Mom and Dad. And when those adolescents grow up and become professors, they demand academic freedom as the foundation of our university system, and those of us who become preachers want freedom to stand in our pulpits and preach the words that God gives us to speak.

We have built a society in which an unprecedented amount of freedom is given to our citizens. Much of that liberty is a blessing, and some of it is not. Freedom is a blessing when it fosters creativity and supports individuality and gives everyone a voice that is heard. Freedom is destructive when it leads us to believe that we are free to do what we want and forget about everybody else. There is a cost to the freedom to blare our car radios as loudly as we want without considering our neighbors' ears. There is a danger in the freedom to walk into public libraries and access pornography on the Internet while our children walk by. There are consequences to the freedom to eat too much and drink too much and spend too much, for that kind of freedom has an ever-rising threshold of expectation, and our freedom to consume sets us up to keep on consuming from one year's new and improved model to the next.

The freedom that our forebears fought for has too often become permission to be self-indulgent and greedy; that is what happened to Israel. But St. Paul gives us another model of independence and freedom. Paul reminds us that we are really not very independent after all because we are all members of one community, a big one called the Christian family, the Church, the body of Christ. When one member of this community suffers, says Paul, we all

suffer. "Share what you have," he exhorts, "so that the one who has much does not have too much and the one who has little does not have too little."

Jesus calls us to an even wider understanding of community. God gives us abundant gifts not to hoard but to share, he says. God has blessed us with good things, not just for our own benefit, but so we can use our gifts to make God's Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

If we live as though this land is made just for you and me, we will feel free to pollute our waters and contaminate our air, forgetting that we are only stewards and not owners of our environment. If this land is made just for you and me, we will feel free to set up barriers to separate who's in from who's out and build walls so that we can keep all our blessings for ourselves. If this land is made just for you and me, then we have the right to be here, and they do not. But if this land is given to us with the holy responsibility of spreading and serving God's Kingdom, then we will have to stop looking out for Number One and live as members of the human family, so that the whole world becomes the Number One that we all look out for together.

When my husband and I were first retired and brand new interim clergy at a parish in Rhode Island, we learned that a warehouse fire was raging in Pawtucket. Bill called the senior warden and asked what we should do - Should we open the church? Start a prayer chain? Collect blankets and food? "Not to worry, Father," said the warden, "the fire is not in our part of Pawtucket." In God's economy there is no other part of Pawtucket. This land is your land and it is my land, but it is not made just for you and me.

As Americans we have not always been faithful to God's big vision for our nation. Sometimes we have. Sometimes we have been proud of our Statue of Liberty and its declaration "Give me your tired your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the refuge of your teeming shore." Sometimes we have not. Sometimes we fail to remember that God has extended prosperity to us here so that we can make the world rich; God has made us flourish like the grass so that we can bring health and healing to the nations, and, when we do that, it shall be known that "the hand of the Lord is with us."