

MY COUNTRY, IS IT OF THEE?
Psalm 9:9-20

Dr. J. Howard Olds
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We called her Miss Anna. She was my first grade teacher in a tiny, four-room Kentucky school. Miss Anna taught us to stand at attention, to speak with reverence, and placing our hands over our hearts to pledge our allegiance to “one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

Life seemed much simpler back then. I guess it was. I didn’t know anybody who didn’t believe in God. Unlike Michael Newdow out in California who last year tried to get the “God-word” out of the pledge, parents back then seemed pleased that President Eisenhower had put it in.

“One nation under God, with liberty and justice for all.” Maybe after all these years, it’s time to ask what these words really mean and what implications they might have for our corporate life together.

WHY BE A NATION UNDER GOD?

The Psalm we consider today closes with these words: “*Let the nations know they are only human*” (Psalm 9:20). If that had meaning to Israel who considered themselves the specifically chosen, does it not also have implications for us, the “singular standing world power” whom some have frightfully nicknamed the “new Israel” of our time?

Under God is a matter of humility. We need to be under God because we need somebody superior to us and to whom we are accountable. If you are under God you are not God — something I find more and more politicians locally and nationally need to consider.

If you are under God, you are answerable to God, something all of us would be wise to remember. If you are under God, you are not the master of your own fate, the captain of your own soul. You are a citizen under orders, subject to God’s control.

There is an old story about the commander of a naval ship who was feeling the power of his maiden voyage. Not far from shore the commander received this communication. “Alter your course 10 degrees to the south.” Quickly the commander sent this reply. “I am the commander of the ship; alter your course 10 degrees to the north.” After a brief silence this simple communication was returned across the airwaves. “Sir, this is the lighthouse speaking, alter your course ten degrees to the south.”

Maybe we need to remember today that we are a country rooted in “freedom **of**

religion, not freedom **from** religion.”

As the founders of this country struggled to frame a constitution and found themselves bogged down in bitter dispute, it was old Ben Franklin, not a particularly religious man, who rose to his feet and said, “I have lived, sirs, a long time and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth—that God governs in the affairs of man. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid? We have been assured in sacred writings that ‘except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it.’” With that they called a recess and the founders of this country got down on their knees to pray and when they arose they had the phrase “E pluribus Unum” — Out of many, one.

Under God is a matter of goodness. America is great because America is good. If America ceases to be good, she will likewise cease to be great.

Shakespeare put it this way:

Goodness is not a sudden blaze of glory won

Goodness is the accumulation of days in which good deeds are done.

“The nations have fallen into the pit they have dug, their feet are caught into the net they have hidden” (Psalm 9:15). While we appropriately celebrate a military victory in Iraq we might also remember who put Saddam Hussein in power in the first place.

I listened Friday night as reporters asked Nashvillians what Independence Day meant to them. I was shocked by the responses. “Freedom for me means that I can do as I please.” One person elaborated on it. “I can do what I want, when I want, any way I want, any time I want. That’s what freedom means to me.” Is that why our forefathers and foremothers gave their lives so that people are free to wallow in their own drunken self-indulgence and do whatever they want to do, any time they want to do it, any way they choose to do it? Is that what freedom is all about?

Lord, save us from weak resignation to self-centeredness that is certain to destroy us all. Great nations ask not what looks good, feels good, makes good but great countries seek the “common good” of all those entrusted to its care.

Of the fifty-six who signed the Declaration of Independence, five were captured by the British, tortured and executed; twelve had their homes burned; nine lost their lives in the war; and two lost their sons in the war. Goodness is not an easy road. It never has been. Goodness is an impossible thing to accomplish on our own. We can’t do it ourselves.

Paul discovered that he could not make the grade of goodness on his own. Remember what he said in Romans 7. *“The law is spiritual but I am not spiritual. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but*

what I hate, I do. When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. What a wretched man I am. Who will rescue me from this body of death?" We need some help if we want to do good.

Something bad happens to all of us when some of us go bad. When big-time brokers cheat the system and defraud the people who trust it, everybody suffers. When the rich and powerful betray the trust of the little people, everyone is betrayed. When preachers of the gospel cheat their followers out of cash and hang out in brothels, everybody hurts. When political leaders violate the rules of their own game, all suffer.

If we can't help it, maybe it's time to make a declaration not of independence but of dependence—dependence on God who empowers us to be the kind of people He calls us to be.

WITH LIBERTY AND JUSTICE FOR ALL

What God calls liberty and justice has nothing to do with courts and juries and everything to do with compassion and righteousness.

Lady Liberty says it best. You remember those words.

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these the homeless, the tempest tossed to me.
I lift my lamp beside the golden door.

"It is help for the needy. The needy will not always be forgotten" (Psalm 9:18a). The judgment of God upon nations from generation to generation has been in proportion to its ability to care for the least of its members.

There is an old parody of Jesus' parable concerning the least of these which goes something like this:

I was hungry and you formed a committee to discuss my hunger. I was thirsty and you debated the ethics of certain drinks. I was a stranger and you called the welcome wagon.

I was naked and you questioned my morality. I was sick and you made health care unaffordable. I was in prison and you voted for capital punishment.

Liberty and justice for all. I looked that word **ALL** up in the dictionary and here is what it said—everybody, everyone, everything, entirely, altogether, completely, wholly. What part of **ALL** don't you understand, we might ask America today?

One thing that haunts me in the night and concerns me through the day is that I am further removed from the cries of the needy than ever before in my life. I haven't decided what I am going to do about that, but I do know I don't ever want to become deaf to the huddled masses yearning to be free. God save me from

becoming deaf to the cries of the needy.

It is hope for the afflicted. “*The hope of the afflicted will never perish*” (Psalm 9:18b). The hope of the afflicted. I find that an interesting phrase. Hope of the most lost among us.

I was serving my first pastorate out of seminary. It was the custom of the Council of Churches in that community to deliver Christmas baskets to the needy. Like Ebenezer Scrooge we made our list and checked it twice to see if any imposters slipped behind the lines of our generosity. There was in that community an African-American pastor who became a mentor for me. The first lesson Brother Goately taught me was how to be generous without being cantankerous. When it came time for Brother Goately to give his list he never mentioned the words need, or deserve, or qualify, or was eligible, or ought to have. He put it this way:

Sister Jones has not been well. We want to remember her this Christmas. And Brother Harry has been feeling lonely since his boy went to prison—remember him. Miss Lucy, she’s trying hard to make it as a single mother—remember her. One by one he went through his list until a \$50 Christmas basket was transformed into a sacramental act of compassion and a lasting moment of remembrance.

A nation will be great when it remembers the least among us.

- the forgotten people in nursing homes
- the forsaken people in long-term care facilities
- the kid who thinks nobody cares
- youth who feels despair

Liberty and justice for all.

I love America, this land of the free and the home of the brave. I love her rock and rills, her woods and templed hills. Because I love her, I want her to be a sweet land of liberty. One nation under God, with liberty and justice for all.

