

# **"One Nation Under God"**

Grove Presbyterian Church

July 4, 2010

For you are a people holy to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession.

It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the LORD set his heart on you and chose you—for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who maintains covenant loyalty with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations, and who repays in their own person those who reject him. He does not delay but repays in their own person those who reject him. Therefore, observe diligently the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that I am commanding you today.

The pilgrims often drew inspiration from this text from Deuteronomy, seeing themselves as the new Hebrews - an exodus community seeking to build a holy commonwealth, a nation founded up this divine covenant with God. Divine election. It is not as if they deserved this role. If anything the Hebrews, as the Pilgrims, were the least likely. Poor, homeless, powerless, and few in number. The least likely. The people were the treasured possession, not the land, not the place.

Simon Peter reminds his Christian community that they are the fulfillment of this covenant of God, a community bound together in a spiritual citizenship rather than a geographical, racial, or political nation. Christianity has become the universal expression of Judaism. Judaism no longer is defined by blood or name or race or place but by faith in Christ. Each believer is chosen to serve. Each a stone of flesh, a living stone, by which the house of God is built. Each a priest. Each a prophet. Each elected to be God's elected representative. Election (in Greek, *eklekton*) means not superiority but responsibility.

**Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones,**

let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture:

'See, I am laying in Zion a stone,

a cornerstone chosen and precious;

and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.'

To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe,

'The stone that the builders rejected

has become the very head of the corner',

and

'A stone that makes them stumble,

and a rock that makes them fall.'

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

Once you were not a people,

but now you are God's people;

once you had not received mercy,

Our United States pledge of allegiance includes the phrase borrowed from Lincoln who borrowed it from the Bible: 'one nation under God.' It is easy to say it. How can we prove it? How can we build up our unity as a people without confusing unity with conformity. Litmus tests cannot be imposed.

Fareed Zakaria, author and Newsweek journalist, offers some insights about the American spirit.

Democracy is insufficient. At its worst, democracy means mob rule. Populism can be demonic: the tyranny of the majority competing against the tyranny of the few. We enter the minefield when group rights displace individual rights, when special interests - from the NRA to AARP to Sierra Club -- bully or bribe our leaders to get what they demand.

A Republic requires leaders of conscience, honor, and accomplishment rather than seismographs. Once upon a time our Senators viewed themselves first as members of the Senate, second as representatives of their state, third representing their political party. They heeded Edmund Burke: "Your representative owes you not his industry only but his judgment; and he betrays instead of serving you if he sacrifices it to your opinion..."

Winston Churchill once was counseled to keep his ear to the ground. His reply? "The British nation will find it very hard to look up to leaders who are detected in that position."

Alexander Hamilton had a vision for our republic: where ministers, lawyers, and professors would always remain neutral, avoiding partisan positions, so they could serve the nation as respected and trusted arbiters between factions, as disinterested clarifiers of the larger issues.

Once upon a time, presidential candidates were reflections of party platforms. Today parties reflect their candidate.

Similarly, primaries have replaced conventions - meaning that marketing has replaced grass root, hard-knuckled negotiations of positions and policies.

Let us be grateful we are a Republic instead of pure democracy. For the ship of state to navigate you need sails, of course. The sails are our democracy, propelling us forward. But without keel, ballast, and rudder of a constitutional ethos, this Mayflower is going to sink.

To be accurate, the Pilgrims did not come on the Mayflower and later establish the Massachusetts Bay Colony to practice freedom of religion. That's popular fiction. They came to establish a Holy Commonwealth, a city of God, a theocracy ruled by their interpretation of the Bible.

By 1740 the colonists realized a Holy Commonwealth wasn't going to happen. America was becoming America with its untamed outpouring of a variety of religious expressions, with its rugged spirit of independence and don't tread on me.

Jonathan Edwards, America's greatest theologian, quickly saw in the 1700's how the church was living in a new age, called out of the world, where town meeting and church meeting were not the same, where faith came by conversion rather than by citizenship, where it is our mutual obligation to this constitutional ethos that binds us together.

And we are the better for it. It is harder, but far better.

America is a people more than a place. For America to succeed, we the people each are responsible, chosen to make it succeed.

Coach calls you off the bench and tells you to play hard. It's all about the team, so you play with all your heart.

You are persuaded to run for school board. Your friends want you to push for better art rooms or an auditorium. In your new role, you learn how much bigger are the issues and how likely it is you will disappoint your friends.

Your neighbors ring you up and want you to babysit Friday night. They leave, and you are responsible for those two little boys.

It's as if we've been given an egg to hatch. Precious yet fragile. Like Penguins through blizzard and hunger, guard that egg well. And who here deserves this privilege? Well, that's how the musical "1776" described the Continental Congress: Midwives to an egg. And America? The egg itself.

*Franklin:*

A farmer, a lawyer, and a sage  
A bit gouty in the leg  
You know it's quite bizarre  
To think that here we are  
Playing midwives to an egg

*All:*

We're waiting for the chirp, chirp, chirp  
Of an eaglet being born  
We're waiting for the chirp, chirp, chirp  
On this humid Monday morning in this  
Congressional incubator

*Franklin:*

God knows the temperature's hot enough  
To hatch a stone, let alone an egg

*All:*

We're waiting for the scratch, scratch, scratch  
Of that tiny little fellow  
Waiting for the egg to hatch  
On this humid Monday morning in this  
Congressional incubator

*Adams:*

God knows the temperature's hot enough  
To hatch a stone

*Jefferson:*

But will it hatch an egg?

*Adams:*

The eagle's going to crack the shell  
Of the egg that England laid

Americans become Americans because, regardless cultural heritage or special interest, together we submit to and stand tall upon our British constitutional principles of individual freedom, liberty of conscience, political democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. These truths are more important than any one of us. For which it stands. They're more important than any one agenda, party, ideology, ethnicity, religion.

Such is our sacred trust. Our egg.

We today take our turn to sign the Declaration of Independence. What are you going to do to fulfill this sacred trust?

We today are midwives to tomorrow's America.

To be God's own people. One nation under God. The naïve and mistaken use this phrase as boast or blessing when it is admonition. If we stand under God, we're held accountable to God. It's our national burden. Our responsibility. Our privilege. Our purpose. Our duty.

Hey you, come here please. I've got a job for you...

Chosen, you have to step up beyond yourself and beyond what you want, to look in terms of the larger national interest.

**And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.**