



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR  
THE SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 9, YEAR B, JULY 4, 2021  
2 SAMUEL 5:1-5, 9-10; PSALM 48; 2 CORINTHIANS 12:2-10; MARK 6:1-13

## RETHINKING THE FOURTH OF JULY



**2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10** [All the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron, and said, “Look, we are your bone and flesh. For some time, while Saul was king over us, it was you who led out Israel and brought it in. The LORD said to you: It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you who shall be ruler over Israel.” So all the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron; and King David made a covenant with them at Hebron before the LORD, and they anointed David king over Israel. David was thirty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned forty years. At Hebron he reigned over Judah seven years and six months; and at Jerusalem he reigned over all Israel and Judah thirty-three years. David occupied the stronghold, and named it the city of David. David built the city all around from the Millo inwards. And David became greater and greater, for the LORD, the God of hosts, was with him.]

When I was in eighth grade at the Cathedral School in Little Rock, our history teacher invited the Cathedral Dean's wife, who was English, to speak to our class about the American Revolution. Lady Caroline, who is distantly related to the Queen, brought with her a book of English History—a thick tome with at least a thousand pages, as I recall, making the point that England's history was a much longer story than our own. This would have been in the late 1970s, and having just celebrated the bicentennial of the Fourth of July in 1976, the narrative of independence figured prominently in our lessons in American History that year.

What I remember about Caroline Pugh's reflection with us is her turning to the page in her English history book that mentioned the rebellion in the American colonies, and reading the account, which was less than a page altogether, a mere nod in the direction of that fateful loss of imperial control, not much more than a skirmish by English historical standards,

scarcely worth including in the book which devoted entire chapters to more seismic details of Hadrian's wall or the Hundred Years' War. There was no mention of tea taxes or Thomas Jefferson, or Lexington and Concord, or Yorktown. The perspective was just altogether different.

And then two weeks ago, I received an email from a friend who serves in the Massachusetts State Legislature, and is also the Vice-President of the House of Deputies for our Church's General Convention. It was in this latter role, as church leader, that he sent his annual exhortation to all of us who have served in the House of Deputies, having taken our place in the Episcopal Church's version of the House of Representatives in our bicameral system structured naturally enough upon this nation's model of government.

Byron Rushing is a Black man who has devoted his life to public service, and because the Fourth of July is also included

as a church feast day, known as Independence Day, he sends his annual reminder to Episcopalians in the United States that the words in the Independence Day collect are neither accurate nor helpful.

Listen to the words of Collect (BCP, pg. 242) for Independence Day, July 4<sup>th</sup>:

*Lord God Almighty, in whose Name the founders of this country won liberty for themselves and for us, and lit the torch of freedom for nations then unborn: Grant that we and all the people of this land may have grace to maintain our liberties in righteousness and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

Mr. Rushing continues: “This phrase [the founders of this country won liberty for themselves and for us] is only possible because slavery was forgotten or ignored by its author—or that the “us” was not meant to include me. A better and

approved BCP collect for the 4<sup>th</sup>,” he says, “is ‘For the Nation’ (BCP, pg. 258):

*Lord God Almighty, you have made all the peoples of the earth for your glory, to serve you in freedom and in peace: Give to the people of our country a zeal for justice and the strength of forbearance, that we may use our liberty in accordance with your gracious will; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

That, my friends, is the collect we use this morning to call us into prayer on this holiday. I hope you can hear it as a call to continued work of justice and repentance, even as we hold so much in the balance today. The pen strokes on a hot Philadelphia day 245 years ago did not make those truths self-evident to all people, nor did they forge us as a nation to become the biblically-assured “city on the hill” or the “greatest nation ever,” as some have claimed. I am not sure how we would

measure that greatness, but to measure it, we would need to account for the good, of which there is much, and the bad, of which there is too much. To speak of greatness reveals a hubris that attempts to obscure many truths about us as a people, and pride surely goeth before the fall.

What history book shall we read to learn the more rounded story? Whose truths are self-evident, and whose truths have been obscured or obliterated or altogether ignored?

Just two weeks ago, our nation said Juneteenth is as much a holiday of independence as the Fourth of July, even if we do not yet know fully what that means. There is a sense that if we practice it, over time we might just come to believe it. That's what holidays—or holy days—are designed to do: mark time by the rituals and stories that become our legacy so that we might teach it to our children, and to our children's children. Again, whose stories will we tell? And by what light?

This is the work for us as people of faith also. Our canon of scripture contains stories that speak of goodness and blessing and purpose. Even today's brief passage from Second Samuel in which David is anointed king and manages to unite the kingdom into a nation. Liberation theologians suggest we must read our stories with a "hermeneutic of suspicion"—that is, an interpretive lens that critiques the account on the page, and always by the light of God's justice, which is aligned with the poor and the oppressed.

But that doesn't mean we stop reading the stories; precisely the opposite: we must read them, learn from them, and speak their truth into our time. King David was a faithful man, a great leader, and a scoundrel who abused his power for evil. His family system was a study in dysfunction.

We are asked to read his story, not as a hero epic, but as one of the human condition, and we must read it from the

margins, with a discerning eye, to see the lessons it has to teach us today. We must ask where is God in it all, and where are we, because it must be our story if its truths are to be self-evident today?

The stories we tell matter, my friends. As Americans and as Christians. They need not be in opposition, but if they are, then we are asked to weigh what is most important to us.

This is why we make our prayer to have a zeal for justice and a strength of forbearance. What does that really mean, and how do we tell our stories if we really mean that?

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/quotations-jefferson-memorial>

Thomas Jefferson, at once brilliant and broken, popular and problematic, has this quote immortalized at his Memorial in our nation's capital: "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just."<sup>i</sup>

They are sobering words, perhaps because they invite us to consider how appropriate they are for us even today. So let's not jettison Jefferson; let's learn from him, and the others, in all their humanity, good and bad, while we own ours, too, so that "we may use our liberty according to God's most gracious will," so that we may teach it to our children, and to our children's children.



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