

WINGS OF THE DOVE  
THE END OF A NATION

Texts on Sunday, July 1, 2012

2 Samuel 7: 1-17; Luke 4: 16-30

**D**ID YOU EVER see a congregation swing so fast from glad to mad at their preacher? One minute Jesus is reading from their ancient Scriptures, speaking a word they hear as a renewed promise that their bedraggled nation has not come to an end after all. Next minute they try to kill him. It sounds like they didn't even have a congregational meeting, with ballot cards waving. They just meant to murder him. What happened?

When Jesus came home to Nazareth in Galilee to begin his ministry, he came to Jews living not as a nation, but as subjects of the Roman empire, surrounded by tribes they did not like or understand. A mountain of historical evidence testifies to the desire of Jews living in the Roman provinces to unite and overthrow their oppressor, just as they had been united by David a thousand years earlier. Why else do you think David's name was so beloved after so long a time? It is this. Like America's George Washington, David had pulled a pusillanimous people together into a fighting force able to keep foreigners out and friends in. He forged a nation. In Jesus' time, they longed for that leader and that nation to come to life once more.

When Jesus offers this first sermon, they feel this hope and pride running like blood in the veins. All speak well of him. They ask him to do some miracles. It sounds like a presidential campaign—except that Jesus turns the tables. He gives instruction in citizenship such as would cause Jesus-lovers to try to kill him still if he put it in their ear today. *Back in the day, he says, when God might have sent Elijah to solve our nation's problems, God gave up on us—here in America; God sent Elijah to save a widow ... in Vietnam! And back in the day, when God had prepared Elisha to solve the health care crisis of our nation, God gave up on us; Elisha went and healed the general of the armies of Iran instead. God is not pleased with this nation, Jesus is saying. You are not serving the purpose for which you have been set on earth, so no healing can happen here. And all the people say, in effect: Crucify him!*

Let's be reasonable (Jesus certainly wasn't): What is wrong with wanting to be a nation like all the other nations? In the days before David, when the rag-tag tribal elders came to Samuel, they said, "Appoint a king to govern us, so that we may be like other nations, and our king may govern us and go out and fight our battles."

(1 Sam 8:5,20) Isn't that the purpose—the end—of a nation?

The word itself, *nation*, tells a story. It has the same root as other *nat-* words: *natural, native, prenatal, nativity*. They all come from Latin for "being born." Those born in the same place make a nation; that's all. Why? It is this simple. Since time before memory when our ancestors first felt the lure of their imaginations to desire more than they needed—indeed, all they could imagine—we became a dangerous, marauding species against whom defenses are needed. Those who look alike and speak alike, if they have numbers enough, are able to care enough about each

other to fight and die for their fellow birth-mates; for their nation. So the first answer to what a nation is for is simple: To keep the land secure enough that its inhabitants may give birth to new natives and raise them up to be able to keep the land secure enough that its inhabitants may give birth . . . Yes, first of all, a nation exists for itself. It is a place in which to live safely. That's the end of a nation. And, if you could leave it there, there's nothing wrong with that. All over the globe, tyrants do trash this purpose, but even so, wherever fathers and mothers raise children to adulthood, you can feel something of the end of a nation.

Certainly that is part of what King David was up to when, as the story offers, he had "rest from all his enemies." But now trouble comes. The story also says the Lord was behind his victories. It adds that David wants to build a temple to the Lord. Of course! Power always wants divine sanction for its violence. The prophet Nathan tells David that no, not he will build a house for God, but that God will build a house for him—that is, build a dynasty. In fact, "your house and your kingdom shall be made secure forever, says the Lord," says the story. What is the end of this nation? There won't be one, says the story. God loves you. God will protect you. You're here forever. Does this sound familiar to Americans? How hard it is for us to countenance the end of our nation, in that other, awful sense. But Israel sure got it wrong.

The facts of history are that four hundred years into the dynasty project, the house of David was destroyed, stone from stone, and all the people scattered. The facts of history are that the story we read was itself written down hundreds of years after David had died. It was written for encouragement—you could say propaganda—to persuade the people that God was still on their side, forever, even though the wars and empires raging around them threatened the old tale that they had been chosen for an eternal throne. It wasn't so. God doesn't make mistakes. It just never happened that God promised them an endless nation. They made it up! And how that people had to grow and change in a new understanding of the end of their nation, when the end came in violence, sorrow, and exile.

Things get complex when you bring God into the question of a nation. It's election time in America, so we know we're about to be drenched in the songs and jargon of God's favor. Is God on our side? If so, does that mean God is *not* on the side of our enemies, though they claim the same? How do we suppose we can know such a thing? We sound like brats in a playground fight: *Is too! Is not! Is too!*

When Jesus lays judgment on his hometown folks for their too-small idea of the nation they aim to be, his mind is fixed on a great vision for the end of the nation, one upheld by the law and the prophets. "In you, all the nations of the earth shall be blessed," says the Lord. (Gen 12:3) "It would be too small a purpose to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth, says the Lord." (Isa 49:6) Deep in ancient Israel's DNA there is inscribed an end for their nation which has no end but God: They are to live for the good of all the nations. It is not too simple to say that the stories of the Old Testament tell of a fierce contest between forces of preservation in Israel, who

cared not for this message but who contended for the safety of only the people inside the wall; and the forces of invitation to a new future and a new kind of security beyond the walls; forces of spirit contending for the possibility of the peaceable kingdom “on all my holy mountain.” For these dreamers, the end of the nation is never secured in its own good only, but only in the good of all.

You need both, you know—both wings. Every nation, every organization, needs the conservatives, who give attention to the existing structure and all that has helped it come down to this generation. And every nation needs its liberals and its progressives, who give more attention to what must yet come into being, and must come into our being, if we are to adapt to the forces of change in society and technology which history throws up like siege works against every living thing. Liberals are usually more at peace with the reality of conservatives than conservatives are with liberals. Perhaps this is because conservatives have the power and almost all the money of the existing structure, and liberals have only the necessary principles. However that may be, partisans often actually think that the bird would fly better with the other wing cut off. Unfortunately for conservatives, Jesus was a liberal—if by that term we might mean that he prayed that the nation might once more feel after its great end, that all may be one. So the beat goes on.

America long ago entered on this extraordinary plain of battle between the ordinary and the extraordinary ends of a nation. This happens always, whenever a few people get serious about divine purpose and national purpose. You can't get much more serious about that than this:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

O people, you have been blessed, or burdened, with a strange purpose—to be a blessing to all the nations. Truly, it is not at all self-evident that all people are created equal—all people, not just my people. It is a vision, not an axiom; not a bit of logic, but a revelation. And it is the truth toward whose invisible mountain top all great spiritual pioneers ascend, who see that no nation is important unto itself; no people more beloved of God than another; no history literally inscribed by God for glory—but that all which happens under heaven is a figure, a parable of kingdom, whether for good or evil, whether for God or for our self alone. To be blunt, the call of Jesus Christ, arising from the spirit of the prophets of Israel, is that every one of us loosen our grip on our pride and security in national heritage, so that all may be one; that we cease from supposing our citizenship held in just one nation so that God may make us into the hands She's got the whole world in. For saying this about the end of the nation, they tried to nail him in Nazareth. Still we nail him, nation by nation, for saying the same, even as we pray to him.

One hundred forty-nine years ago this early July, a horrifying battle was underway in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, one stage in the strife of this nation's tragic test of its ultimate end, “whether this or any nation conceived and dedicated [to the proposition that all are created equal] can long endure.” Eleven years prior to that

battle, almost to the day, Frederick Douglass had been invited by well-meaning white liberals in Rochester, New York to help them celebrate the Fourth of July, for all spoke well of him. Douglass went. He began in this manner.

What, to the American slave, is your Fourth of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him more than all other days in the year the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing, empty and heartless; the denunciations of tyrants, brass-fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are to him mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of these United States at this very hour.

Did they not want to throw him from a cliff after that opening? But Douglass moves on to raise to the highest degree his admiration and gratitude for the vision and risk of the founding fathers, so that there might be for his listeners and indeed the whole nation a context for hope and right action, in spite of the cruel hypocrisy of their murderous past. In an extraordinary essay on Douglass' speech, the philosopher Jacob Needleman writes in his volume, *The American Soul*:

[The speech] shows America as imprisoned in man's eternal incapacity actually to will and to do what he knows to be right. . . . Douglass is thus in effect calling upon America to become the most morally shocked . . . people on earth, the people who see and suffer most acutely [humanity's] failure to be [hu]man. . . . [He] is calling for that rarest of movements a human being can make—a fusion of inner opening and decisive outer action. Feel the truth of what you have been, America, and at the same moment, act! Risk yourself for what you know is right and true. [pp. 248-250]

Friends, what Douglass was calling for, Christians call the work of the God the Spirit, Who frees us both to confess our evil and to act in bold hope, sure that the vision and the path toward the lofty height of equality for all is made clear in our eye and beneath our feet by our God, shown to us in Christ.

Now, much as many Americans claim Christ, nevertheless, to confess our evil and to strike out for justice' peak is simply not the way our people mostly actually behave. Soon we will be surrounded by policies propounded by politicians who fear to give to others as Christ bids us freely give. But never fear. In the courage and commitment of which we speak today is found the heart of all that deeply animates a love for Jesus, even in those who are afraid to give anything of their own to strangers in their midst. So swing your loving wing for the Holy Spirit dove. May there come not to this nation any end shorter or smaller than the arm of the Lord, who waits for the day when there shall be peace on all God's holy mountain.

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The Riverside Church  
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