



## Sermon of July 4, 1999



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### **“THIS NATION, UNDER GOD”**

II Samuel 7:1-9

Galatians 5:13-23

The sermon for this Sunday is taken from the Book of II Samuel. If you want to look it up, it's right after I Samuel. The two together comprise one of the first histories ever written, written around 1000 years before Christ, so this is important historical stuff.

It is political history, written by someone to record the reign of David. It is thought to have been written by Abiathar, who was David's companion during the wars, and when David was made king he made Abiathar his high priest. That would be equivalent today to a high ranking cabinet minister, after a president's term, writing a biography of the president.

But it is also great literature. The books bear Samuel's name, but Samuel has only a bit part in this story. It begins with King Saul, the first king of Israel, who chose David, the shepherd boy,

to be his armor bearer, and then later to sing for him and play the harp to ease his migraine headaches.

Samuel contains stories that are familiar to all of you. The wonderful story of David and Goliath. The beautiful story of David's friendship with Jonathan, King Saul's son. The sordid story of David and Bathsheba. And, the tragic story of David's family's disintegration, ending with the rebellion of his son, Abaslom, against his father, and then the death of Abaslom, and David crying in lament, "O Abaslom, Abaslom, my son, my son, would that I had died instead of you."

It's all there. All the passion and adventure, the tenderness and tragedy of the human drama, written with literary skill that is rarely matched, over 3000 years ago. So it is both one of the earliest written histories, and one of the classics of literature. You ought to read it if you are going to be a literate person.

But that is not why we read it in church. We read it in church because we believe that the Word of God can speak to us through these words, through words addressed to our situation, and our needs, in the 20th century. We do that by holding up our life to the story of the Bible. This morning we will hold up the story of our nation's beginning to the story of David. You will be impressed with the parallels.

On this holiday we celebrate the birth of the nation, the thirteen colonies coming together to form a "more perfect union." And our text for this morning marks that time when David brought together the twelve tribes of Israel to form one nation, with the capital at Jerusalem. So David was to Israel what George Washington was to America. Both of them, incidentally, were legendary military heroes. And both of them, after the wars, were elevated by acclamation of the people to be leaders.

But more significantly the signers of the Declaration of Independence, and the framers of the Constitution, saw the parallels between America and Israel, and borrowed language from the Bible to describe what was happening in America. Such as, "A city set upon a hill," or, "A light to the nations." Or, and most especially, the images taken out of the Book of Exodus. They were used repeatedly. For instance, Jefferson, in his second inaugural address, said, "I shall need, too, the favor of the being in whose hands we are, who led our forefathers, as Israel of old, from their native land, and planted them in a country flowing with all the necessities and comforts of life." America had come to this land, they believed, as Israel had come to the Promised Land, 3000 years before.

Benjamin Franklin proposed that the seal of the United States show Moses with his rod raised to part the Red Sea. Thomas Jefferson suggested that the seal of America should show the children of Israel walking across the desert with a cloud leading them by day, and a pillar of fire by night. All of this directly out of the imagery used in telling the story of Israel.

But the parallel that I want us to look at this morning is the phrase in our Pledge of Allegiance of "One nation, under God," and to look at what the Bible means by that phrase.

You can see that meaning especially clearly in the story of David. David's history is written specifically to say that to live under God, means to remember that you live by grace. So be

humble, and remember that God is God, and you are not. That is what it means, “One nation, under God.”

Our text opens with these words.

Now when the king dwelt in his house, and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies round about...

What a wonderful phrase, “Rest from all his enemies round about.” That means David is on top now. He is at the summit of his career. Later, of course, will come the decline of his power and the disintegration of his family in tragedy, but now he is on top of the world. His enemies are defeated. The last, the most tenacious of the native peoples, the Philistines, have at last been defeated under the sword of King David. He has no rivals now. He had done what nobody else in Israel had been able to do before him, not even the mighty King Saul. He had united the twelve tribes of Israel. He is a legend. Even as a young man he was a legend. He was the “giant killer.” Now he has won all of his victories, “and the Lord has given him rest from all his enemies round about.”

Can we not also see contemporary America in that same description? We are, at least for the time being, the lone superpower in the world today, and we have rest from all our enemies round about.

It is the first time in my lifetime that we could say such a thing. It is not necessarily that we are at peace with all of our neighbors, but we have the power now, like David had the power. We are superior now militarily to any other nation, so we have little to fear from any other nation. We have never been able to say that before.

And we have prosperity. Never has there been so much money in America. Never before in our history has so much wealth been passed on from one generation to the next generation, as will happen in this generation. So we are, for the first time, on the brink of establishing a privileged and wealthy class, maintained not by work, as all our ancestors were, but by privilege and by inheritance.

The same thing happened in Israel when the Lord gave the nation rest from all its enemies round about. The result of David’s great military victories was incredible wealth, for “to the victor goes the spoils.” David took great advantage of that. And moving from a nomadic existence, where they had practically no possessions, and must by necessity live from hand to mouth, they now live in an agrarian society where you can accumulate wealth.

And they had the advantages of international trade. They were located on the most profitable trade route from east to west. They were on what is called “the fertile crescent.” It was a great highway of commerce. So Israel became wealthy under King David.

The wealth can be seen in the description of David’s house. He built for himself a house fit for a king, a royal palace, constructed with the finest and most expensive material in the world, the cedars of Lebanon.

Situated in his fine house, a house fit for a king, David notices that there is no temple for the worship of God. The center of worship for the Jews to that point was the Ark of the Covenant, which was just a box, really. That's all it was. They carried the Ark of the Covenant around with them as they roamed the country, beating up all the tribes in Canaan. It was a symbol of God's presence, so they took it with them wherever they went.

It was just a box. That's where God dwelt. It used to be all right. I mean, it is all right for a nomadic people. In fact it is the most practical thing. If you've got to carry the presence of God around with you, then it is best that God be in a box. That will work just fine.

But Israel is now settled in a rich agricultural land. And they have a beautiful king, who lives in a beautiful house. They want to be sophisticated. They want to be like other nations. Other nations all have grand temples for their gods. Look at the beautiful temples of Greece. Here is Israel's God, living in a box.

David's conscience begins to bother him. He lives in a palace made of cedar. God lives in a box, parked in the palace driveway. You would think that if David's conscience really bothered him, David might say, "I will move out of the palace into more humble dwellings."

But that is not the way he thought. He had a different idea. He calls Nathan, the prophet, to propose that God ought to dwell in quarters as grand as the king. This means the construction of a magnificent temple in the middle of Jerusalem, the capital city. He calls Nathan, his prophet, to get his blessing.

Now you've got to know about prophets in those days. Prophets in those days were advisers to the kings. You were not a king without a prophet. They were called prophets, but we would probably call them seers, because they looked into the future, and they could see God's plan for the future. So they were important to kings to know what they should do and what they should not do. So if you were a prophet, and you wanted to work for a king, you were advised to tell the king what he wanted to hear.

But David chose Nathan to be his prophet, which is amazing. Nathan is not like any of the other prophets. He is the first of a new breed of prophet who stands against the king. From Nathan on, prophets will not be those who stand with the king, and say, "Yes." They will be those who stand over against the king, and say, "No."

David summons Nathan. "Tell God what I am about to do for him. I know that he will be pleased." Nathan says, "I'll get back to you."

The next day Nathan appears before David. "Thus says the Lord: Would you build me a house to dwell in?" I don't live in houses. All these years I have been moving around in an ark, living in a tiny box, in a tent. And I will continue to live that way, for I cannot be confined. I cannot be possessed. I cannot be domesticated. I will not be Israel's God. I won't be anybody's God. I won't even be America's God. I don't live in temples built with human hands. I don't live in national shrines.

Then, this wonderful line. "You cannot build a house for me, but I will build a house for you."

That is a wonderful example of the irony of biblical revelation. God is sovereign over all, so God cannot be grasped, cannot be held on to, or possessed. But God is the giver of all good things. God is the God of grace, who in this instance reminds David that he is king, because of God's grace alone. "You cannot build me a house, but I have built you a house." That is to say, a dynasty. I don't need your support. You need my grace. I don't need you to defend me. You need me to support you. So be humble, and remember who is God, and who is not.

Interestingly, David's son, Solomon, as soon as David dies, will ignore all of this and build the Temple in Jerusalem. As a result, according to the biblical historians, the nation will split in two, and each half be alienated from the other permanently, and each will be in jeopardy once again from their enemies round about. Eventually both nations, Israel and Judah, be taken away in captivity.

The author of II Samuel is convinced that the downfall of David's house, the division in the nation, and the invasion of foreign armies, is because they forgot their humble origins, that they depended on grace for their existence, and began to think that they had all of this power and prosperity by their own effort and virtue. So they now believed that they could do what they wished with what was given to them.

So after the Bathsheba incident in David's life, Nathan returns once again to the king, and condemns him for this arrogant use of power, and predicts what is going to happen. From Nathan on, the prophets, not the kings, will become the most important figures in the history of Israel. After Nathan, none of the prophets will work for a king, nor will any king ever hire one after Nathan. But they will come to the capital, at least one prophet in every generation, for 400 years, to roar like a lion, "Thus says the Lord: Remember who you are, and who God is, and live humbly."

This is what the prophets said to the nation:

You have received mercy, so be merciful.

You have received a bountiful land, so be generous.

You have been freed from slavery, so see to it that all people are free.

You were once foreigners, refugees, sojourners in other people's lands, so be hospitable to all who come to your land, especially to the oppressed and to the poor.

Later the author of Deuteronomy will summarize the message of the prophets, by saying, "Beware, lest in your hearts you think 'My power, and the strength of my hand, have gotten me this wealth.' You shall remember the Lord your God. It is he who gives you power to get wealth."

So on this day, as we hold up the story of our nation to the story of David, I want to suggest to you that the Fourth of July celebrates not only an event, it celebrates an idea, a vision. For in a very real sense that is all that America is. All America is is the idea that people can live happily, and prosperously, and in peace with one another.

The founding fathers of this nation chose biblical images to express that idea because they saw

that what had happened to them had happened before to Israel. A small group of refugees, given freedom, and placed in a bountiful land, and called by the God who gave those things to them to use them now to make a difference in this world. That is where all this business about “a city set upon a hill” and “a light to the nations” came from, as well as that slogan that is on your dollar bill, *novus ordo seclorum*, a new order for all the ages.

The story of David is told to explain what happened. This great dream, this band of refugees, in a couple of centuries became a great nation, with great wealth. Instead of using what had been given to them to make life better for everyone, it was seen as something that they had earned themselves, to use as they pleased.

It began within the king’s house itself. You could see the first crack in a sordid affair in the king’s house. Followed then by warring factions, the fragile bond that held this diverse people together fell apart, and the wonderful kingdom of David was no more.

David’s Israel is gone. But the idea remains that there might some day be a time when all people can live happily and prosperously, and in peace with one another. That was Israel’s dream first. That is where we first read about it.

But it is the dream in the heart of all people everywhere. And it was embodied into our Constitution 200 years ago, waiting for that time when the nation, like David’s Israel, would be at last at rest from its enemies round about, and reap the harvest of a good land, and be strong and wealthy beyond anyone’s imagination. And then that people would remember that it was the Lord who gave us all this power. So we must use it humbly to make it possible for all people to live happily, and prosperously, and in peace with one another.

*Help us to be masters of ourselves,  
that we might be servants of others,  
through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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