

**From Sea to Shining Sea:
*American Exceptionalism?***

What is our vision of leadership and government? We hear from the Old Testament prophet Zechariah, “Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey”. Unlike other rulers, there is no splendid sedan for God’s elected one, Jesus Christ our Lord. Unlike the ways of the nations, “He will cut off the chariot...and the war horse...and the battle bow shall be cut off... He shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea”—from ‘sea to shining sea;’—not just this land bounded by Atlantic and Pacific, but to the “ends of the earth”. And because of the bond God establishes with us through the flesh and blood covenant of the Son, “I will set your prisoners free”. In our day of feeling captive to doubt, confusion and fear, the words of Zechariah encourage us and the living Christ assures our freedom. Therefore, if we are going to be captive to anything, says the prophet, “Return to your stronghold,” be captivated by hope!

As Christians, that is our vision, our hope and our commitment; and we believe it is possible with God. Yet, as Paul writes to the church: “We do not understand our actions. For we do not do what we want”—in this case, at this time, strengthening the bonds of our commonwealth—“but, instead, do the very thing we hate”—engaging in contentious naming and blaming. “I can will what is

right”—desiring America to be in good shape—“but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want”—the challenges of rebuilding and making provision for commonweal feel overwhelming—“but the evil I do not want is what I do”—watching and listening to news, passively, waiting to hear that somebody did something to make it all better, as if these times are but a passing weather system that will move out on its own, and I’ll just be able to enjoy happy days again.

Paul continues his prayerful reasoning: Now, if I do nothing about the good, that’s like a vacuum that begins to takeover, to the extent that it is no longer I who do nothing but the sin that dwells within me. This vacuum becomes all-consuming. My fear and uncertainty start fanning our presumption. We concoct all kinds of grandiose methods for pumping a waterless well and thus throw ourselves into the very pit from which the prophet promised we’d be freed.

What is our presumption as a nation? The rhetoric that comes from all sides is that the United States is *exceptional*. For many, this has and continues to mean that the USA is the best example of democracy and of the prosperous society that can happen when individuals are free in this life to pursue happiness. For others, it has also included the belief that this land and people are exceptional because God has especially gifted and chosen America. Yes, as people of faith, you and I do believe that God gives people all sorts of gifts; and we believe that by virtue of God’s presence and grace we are empowered, chosen even, to do good with the

good we have been given. However, to exclusivize this exceptional opportunity into the manifest destiny of any one nation is a profound example of what the apostle Paul means when he writes, “When I want to do good, evil lies close at hand. The Law of God makes complete sense and is utterly compelling when I contemplate faith within my inmost self. But when I look around at the way things are in my life, in this nation and throughout the world, there’s another law at war with God’s. For when we feel or fear that our standing is slipping, that is when we start grabbing and grasping. It is a wretchedness that a people, a nation, then try to cover with a flag. A nation that is least sure of what it is doing is a nation that most often says how great it is. Whereas the good nation is too busy doing good things to talk about it. This is as true of groups as it is of individuals. The more we wrap ourselves in talk, the more our rhetoric becomes a winding sheet. “Who will rescue us...?” Paul asks. He answers, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

Jesus looks at us and says, “To what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces complaining and doing nothing but jockeying for position. John the Baptist came neither eating nor drinking and they discount him as having a demon. Jesus comes eating and drinking and they call him a glutton and drunkard –a suspect character. Yet, wisdom is not a character of these times. Back then Jesus said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth,

because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants...for such was your gracious will.” Perhaps this is our predicament, that our still young nation has grown weary with premature aging brought on by our obsession with greatness—from the athlete who chooses the steroid shortcut and the bookkeeper who finesses the finances, to the strategist who plots profit margins instead of planting crops ending hunger, to the faceless flight of the drone attack instead of the tireless entreaty to clear a path for talking and walking together.

Perhaps it is time for us once again to hear and heed the words we know, ascribed to our beacon of liberty. Those words? “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest.” These words of Jesus respond to our yearning to breathe free. Jesus says, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart.” Is such gentleness and humility at the heart of nationhood?

We cannot celebrate liberty without working to preserve and extend freedom to others. Christian liberty begins in thankful love of God for all we receive and continues and grows in the expression of that love between neighbors, united to one another with pure affection (Collect of the Day). This is the *exceptional* commonwealth to which God calls people the world over. To all people who respond to the call, Christ promises “you will find rest for your souls”.

“My yoke is easy, and my burden is light” says the Lord. But according to the “wisdom and intelligence” of the day, we don’t get it. When we regard our lives in terms of what is mine and are then preoccupied with plans for protecting the self’s assets, then giving over any portion of our hard-earned production will be perceived as taxing. However, not one of our enshrined truths can be self-evident if we do not freely give of ourselves for the common good. Make no mistake: God’s call asks much from us all. No one can claim an exemption—not the rich young man who questioned Jesus, not the widow with few coins of whom Jesus spoke in parable; neither the corporate jet owner, the worker whose gains are shrinking, nor the unemployed. We are all called to participate in rebuilding the city upon the hill, dwelling in harmony together.

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