

Dependence Day
Luke 10:1-11, 16; Deuteronomy 30:11-20

Georgetown Presbyterian Church
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One of the difficulties that missionaries have frequently encountered, especially in certain cultures in Africa, is how to deal with the issue of polygamy. Well, one young missionary was especially zealous in denouncing polygamy, and he often told the natives among whom he worked that they are not to have multiple wives.

One day, the missionary discovered that a certain tribal leader had five wives. And so he went up to this tribesman and said to him, "You are violating a law of God. So you must go and tell four of these women that they can no longer live here, nor can they consider you their husband.

The tribesman thought for a moment, and then he said to the zealous missionary, "I have idea. I wait here. You go tell them."

Sometimes the Christian message, even though it's the truth, is something not everyone wants to hear. That's one of the things we find in our text from Luke's gospel this morning. Jesus sends out 72 followers, and the message they are to take throughout the region is a simple one: The kingdom of God is near.

It's simple, yet it's a message that is not always received with a warm welcome.

Often when dealing with this passage preachers will emphasize the lack of provisions that Jesus commands the disciples to take on their travels from town to town. Preachers will make this passage an example of what it means to trust in God's provision. But I want to focus on the simplicity of the message we are called to proclaim, and the choice we have when responding to that message.

The message Jesus sent the 72 to proclaim is remarkably simple: "The kingdom of God is near." Go, and tell the people that God's kingdom is near, and then let them see the proof through what I am empowering you to do.

The focus of our proclamation really hasn't changed over the centuries: "The kingdom of God is near." Maybe you've heard the message couched in slightly different terms. "Our God reigns!", or "Jesus Christ is Lord". It's still the same basic message, and it's a word that we are called to take with us wherever we go.

The kingdom of God is near. It's not an announcement of a temporal proximity of the kingdom of God, as if we can expect a royal procession to come down Front Street sometime in the next couple of days. Neither is it saying that there is a physical location for the kingdom of God somewhere around here, as if it were a highway road sign: Kingdom of God, next exit.

No, the tenor of the text, and the reality experienced by the followers of Jesus, is that the Kingdom of God is already upon us. In Christ the rule of God is a present reality, not simply a far-off dream yet to be fulfilled. God rules now. God rules permanently, sovereignly, and absolutely. Truly, the kingdom of God is near.

That's the reality.

But the question is, how do you respond to that word? Jesus indicates that there are only two responses to the announcement of God's kingdom. Either you welcome the kingdom of God, or you reject it.

And I think it's appropriate that we consider how we respond to the announcement of God's kingdom today, because on the day we celebrate our independence as a nation, we ought to take a close look at how we view our freedom. Biblically speaking, what does it mean for us to celebrate our independence? Remember at the beginning of the book of Exodus, the people of Israel were forced into slavery in Egypt. And God sent Moses to the Pharaoh with this message: "Let my people go, so that they may worship me." In other words, "Give my people their independence, so that they may declare their dependence on me."

Is that how we as a nation view our freedom and independence—as freedom to choose God as our Lord? Does America welcome the Kingdom, or do we reject God's rule? You see, to welcome God's kingdom is to recognize that God is in control. So often this world of ours seems out of control, at least beyond our control. But to welcome God's kingdom is to acknowledge that God is in control; indeed, it is to yield even our own personal control over to God. Do we do that? Are we, in our independence, still one nation, under God?

Americans are known for our fierce sense of independence, both as a nation and as individuals. We value the self-made person who has earned her own wealth through hard work and determination. We put a premium on a process that enables people to map out their own destiny. But if we take this value of freedom and independence to their absolutes, then we lock God out. As followers of Jesus Christ, our independence is given only so that we can freely choose to serve God and live under the rule of God's kingdom.

For preachers it is always a challenge to preach on a day like today, because the overwhelming sentiment of the day is, understandably, to emphasize patriotism. Patriotism in the pulpit can make some preachers uncomfortable, because we have to find a way to express pride for our nation without letting our patriotism supersede the glory and majesty of God. The truth is, our liberty as individuals and as a nation is a blessing from God. The question we need to ask ourselves is, have we used our freedom wisely and responsibly?

I really don't want to get into the argument of whether or not America is or should be a "Christian" nation, because when you start that argument you're going to get one idea of what a "Christian America" would look like from someone like Jeremiah Wright, and you're going to get a completely different idea of what a "Christian America" would look like from someone like Pat Robertson. But we do have to decide—are we Americans first who happen to be Christians, or are we first and foremost followers of Jesus Christ who are called to live out our citizenship in the kingdom of God within the borders of the United States of America? As disciples of Jesus Christ, and as Americans, how do we respond faithfully to the proclamation that the Kingdom of God is upon us?

In a nation that increasingly puts a premium on personal and individual rights in a pluralistic world, it's easy for us to set aside any claims to absolute or universal truth. In such a world the tough demands of the Kingdom of God as passed on through the Judeo-Christian tradition are often rejected as being too narrow and intolerant and exclusionary. A society that sees personal freedom increasingly as an open license to

define right or wrong on our own terms will eventually become numb to the demands of citizenship in the kingdom of God.

If we're going to take seriously such phrases as, "In God We Trust," or "One nation, under God," then we have to recognize that our freedom, our independence still falls under the sovereignty of God. When in our freedom we ignore the message of the disciples, "The kingdom of God is near," we do so at our own peril.

In a few moments we will share in the sacrament of Communion. As we pass the bread and the cup and thus share in the body and blood of Christ, we are called to confess our need for God's grace and mercy and salvation. To be sure, we are free to choose whether or not it is Jesus Christ in whom we put our faith as our Savior and to whom we submit as Lord. But use your freedom to choose Christ. Use your independence to choose to be dependent upon Christ for true life, for abundant life, for eternal life.

Moses said it so well in his last sermon to the people: "See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws... This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life..."

Choose life.

Today we celebrate as a free nation. Today we celebrate our independence. Let not our independence be for naught: The kingdom of God is near. Let us on this day of independence choose to declare our dependence on God.

The kingdom of God is near. Choose God. Choose life.

May God bless America. But even more important, may America glorify God. Amen.