

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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July 4, 2010
14th Sunday in Ordinary Time
2 Kings 5:1-15a

In God We Trust Without Reservation

Everyone here today is to be congratulated for including this time of worship in your celebration of our country's 234th birthday. As we learned in our earliest years of schooling, our nation, the United States of America, was founded by immigrants who had left their own countries to be in a place where they could worship as they please, without the interference of the state. As those pilgrims became more settled and established, freedom of worship and freedom from worship, continued to be centerpieces of all the documents and covenants and articles that were precursors to the establishment of the U.S. Constitution in 1787. And when the First Amendment was adopted by Congress in 1791, part of that Bill of Rights guarantees freedom of religion among a number of other basic rights preserved in that document. To this very day we continue to adhere to a strict intolerance of anything that smacks of governmental interference with religious worship and practice. So while we here today can congratulate one another for celebrating Independence Day in this house of worship, our country's constitution also preserves the rights of those in our nation who choose religious exercise outside of our Christian tradition or even for those who choose to exercise no religion at all. Sometimes I think that we can get swept up in the rhetoric that suggests that the United States is a Christian nation. And while it's true that Christianity is the dominant religion in our nation, and that most of our founding fathers were believers in the God of Christianity, we can see over the last few decades that there are dozens of other religions practiced by our fellow Americans along with the growing number of our fellow citizens who do not adhere to any particular established religion. At times you will hear some Christians decrying the loss of dominance and of influence of Christianity in our nation's affairs. I for one celebrate the rich diversity of religious expression in our nation while I am also always eager to see that Christianity is well represented in the dialogue.

The overlap and intersection of religion and of governance has long been a point of contention and conflict in the history of the world. If we look back at the history of Israel as it unfolds in the Old Testament, we find this issue arising again and again early on. After God's people are established in the Promised Land given to them by God as a place to live and prosper as the people of God, it didn't take the Hebrews long to begin to look with jealousy at the neighboring nations all around them that had at their head a king—a monarch who provided protection as well as status in the arena of the world's nations. The people of God increasingly over time became more and more demanding of God that they too be allowed to have a king over their national affairs. And whenever God's prophets would respond on God's behalf that they indeed had a king—God is their king, the people of God demanded that they have a human king too. Well eventually a human king was indeed put in place over Israel and for a time there seemed to be a harmonious relationship between religion and government, in this case a theocracy. But this harmony was very short-lived and before long the human kings who were ruling God's people were informed and inspired less by their faith and more and more by self-interest.

It's in the long line of corrupt kings that we have found ourselves this summer as we have been focusing on the stories in the Bible about the prophet Elijah, earlier last

month, and then beginning last Sunday, on Elijah's successor, the prophet Elisha. When we began our focus on Elijah, King Ahab and his wife Queen Jezebel were in power and they were the worst of the worst. The gist of the conflict regarding Elijah is that Queen Jezebel was not a Hebrew and therefore not part of the people of God. Rather she was a worshiper of the Canaanite god known as Ba'al, an agricultural god who was attributed with the power to bring nourishing rain to the earth. Jezebel was determined to convert the Hebrew people from their worship of Yahweh, the true God of Abraham and Sarah and their descendants, and bring them into the cult of Ba'al. As that story unfolded Elijah persevered and managed to keep God's people faithful to Yahweh. In the end King Ahab perishes as he is defeated in battle and goes down in the history of Israel as the worst of its kings.

As Elisha picks up Elijah's mantle as his successor as God's prophet, the king of Israel is now Jehoram, the second son of Ahab and Jezebel, after his older brother Ahaziah had died without a son to succeed him. According to the writer of 2 Kings he was only slightly less evil in the sight of the Lord than his parents and brother, "for he removed the pillar of Ba'al that his father had made." (2 Kings 3:2) One of the contributing factors to the evil of this series of kings is their inability to put their full trust in God, without reservation. One king of Israel after another looks to sources of security in addition to the security that is promised by God. Some look to establish alliances with neighboring nations. Others look to hedging their bets that other gods of other nations might provide an added level of security and stability. Still others are interested in little more than their own personal power and strength.

Throughout it all God, through one prophet after another, tirelessly puts before the kings and his subjects evidence and proof that Yahweh is the one true God who can provide the security and stability that they so desperately desire. God's case is even made by demonstrating healing power to one who is clearly outside the fold. Naaman is an army commander for the king of Aram, a rival nation of Israel. As we read Naaman is afflicted with what is described as leprosy. Biblical scholars have suggested that this is not what is today called Hansen's disease that is elsewhere mentioned in the Bible as a disease that resulted in those afflicted being shunned and kept apart as unclean. In any case Naaman has some sort of ailment of the skin that is more than a passing annoyance. It is a condition that rendered him debilitated and unable to function fully. A young Hebrew girl who was captured and put into service as a servant of Naaman's wife became aware of Naaman's medical situation. Because of her faithfulness to God, she is certain that God has the power to cure Naaman of his affliction. So she tells Naaman's wife that she is sure that the prophet Elisha could cure Naaman of his leprosy. Once this word gets to Naaman, he goes to his king, the king of Aram, who when he hears of this possible cure sends Naaman and his entourage off to King Jehoram in Israel with an offering and a request that Naaman be cured. So insecure is King Jehoram that when this request comes to him he can only see it as a trick and therefore a threat. His own faith in God is so weak that he cannot even fathom that it might be possible that Elisha could cure Naaman through the power of God. It's only when word gets to Elisha himself that Naaman is seeking a cure that he convinces King Jehoram to allow Naaman to come to him after all, which is what he does. Now just to make that point that arrogance of those with human power and authority is not limited to the powerful in Israel, we find that when Naaman arrives at

Elisha's and Elisha himself does not personally meet Naaman, rather opting to send a messenger with instructions for a cure, Naaman is insulted that he doesn't command the respect of a personal examination and demonstration of power. He is further angered that Elisha's instructions are simply to go and wash in the Jordan River seven times in order to be cured and made clean. He's insulted that he gets no personal attention, that the instructions are that he merely wash, and that the washing be done in waters that are clearly inferior to those of the rivers in his own country. He expects better treatment and as a result is about to take a pass on these humiliating instructions. But just as the captive servant girl in the beginning of the story has the faith to encourage Naaman, this time it is Naaman's own servants who prevail on him to follow Elisha's instructions. So Naaman humbles himself, swallows his pride, risking humiliation, relents and does what Elisha has told him. He is cured and "his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean." (2 Kings 5:14) The story's climax is that not only is Naaman's physical affliction cured, he is convinced by the power of God that the God of Israel is the only true God.

Those in power in Israel represented by the king, although in what is accurately described as a theocracy, where God rules, continue to fail to faithfully follow God. Time and again the prophets like Elisha provide one example after another of God's consistent and reliable care that knows no human-contrived boundary. And in the case of Naaman, God's healing grace and mercy go beyond the Hebrews, the people of God.

How often do we want to place limits and boundaries on who are the beneficiaries of God's love and care today. Even in our own country which by the way is not a theocracy, but rather a secular democracy, we can get swept up in making declarations about the limits of God's love and care. And like so many other nations before us and even sometimes contemporaneous to us we can begin to say and believe that God is on our side. We in effect say that we trust in God *with reservations*, meaning that we believe that God is reserved for us and for those like us.

The amazing good news that comes to us over and over again throughout the scriptures, Old and New Testaments alike, is that the God in whom we trust is the God we trust without reservation. What that means to us on this day of our nation's founding is that like our forebears, the God in whom we trust is the God who goes beyond any particular time, any particular place and any particular people. It is for us who are part of God's people to declare that truth in every way possible.

So as you watch the fireworks exploding overhead this evening, remember that they not only symbolize the rockets of war and conflict that have raged across our nation's history since its founding, let them also symbolize the far reaching freedom that we affirm as central to our nation that allows those of us who are Christians to proclaim to our own nation and to all nations that it is in God we trust without reservation.