

The Re-Visioning of a Dream

200th Anniversary of the Constitution of the United States of America

Text: Exodus 2:23-24

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

As we celebrate our nation's independence and the foundation of her freedom on the 200th anniversary of the Constitution, we must re-vision the dream that came to birth, rooted in God's purpose for the whole human family.

To remember is to find the basis of hope, for in remembering our past, we discover anew who we are and what we are destined to be. On this Independence Day weekend, I would point you back, not only to 1776 and the Declaration of Independence, but also back to 1787 and the signing of the Constitution which has been the charter of the freedom we have enjoyed for two centuries. In doing so, I am not simply observing a national holiday, suspending for one Sunday our custom of listening to the biblical word. Rather, I am seeking to place what has happened in the American experience within the larger context of the biblical word, for I am convinced the measure of freedom, dignity and justice that has been achieved in our nation's history is reflective of God's revealed will for all God's children. My purpose then is not simply to celebrate the past, but to remember the past in order to find the pattern and the inspiration to bring the blessings we have enjoyed to an ever-wider circle of earth's children.

In May 1787, 55 delegates from twelve of the thirteen states gathered in Philadelphia for a Constitutional Convention. The heady days of 1776 and newly won independence had finally been ratified in the Peace of Paris in 1783, but that newly won independence was by now severely strained. The new nation was a confederacy of sovereign states - thirteen sovereign states - not altogether unlike the present European Confederation bound together for purposes of trade. A confederacy is a weak instrument and the respective state legislatures wanted it to stay that way. States rights were the first concern, especially among the more numerous small states that feared being swallowed up by the larger states of Virginia, Massachusetts, New York and Pennsylvania. Each state was jealous of its own sovereignty and, without a common enemy to fight, Americans seemed incapable of preserving their union. "Lycurgus," a pseudonymous writer in the *New Haven Gazette* complained that the union under the Articles of

Confederation "is not a union of sentiment - it is not a union of interest; - it is not a union to be seen - or felt - or in any manner perceived." Antifederalists believed that the preservation of republican liberties won by the Revolution depended on maintaining the sovereignty and independence of the States. John Francis Mercer spoke for the Antifederalists when he declared that he was "persuaded that the People of so large a Continent, so different in interests, so distinct in habits," could not be adequately represented in a single legislature. Patrick Henry, the great orator of the Revolution, would have nothing to do with a central government; Virginia was doing just fine.

There were other voices, however, representing a larger vision. George Washington came out of retirement to participate in the Convention, becoming its chairman; James Madison clearly articulated the urgency and critical importance of a strong federal government, warning that, without it, the 13 states simply would not survive. Indeed, in Europe there was little confidence that the fledgling nation would survive and Britain, France and Spain were simply waiting in the wings to move in.

The initial years of independence were a sorry tale of weakness and incapacity to govern. Only that authority freely given by the States to the Confederate government could be exercised. There was no power to enact legislation or impose taxes.

In the summer of 1786 farmers in Western Massachusetts determined to shut down the courts that were threatening foreclosure on their lands due to unpaid taxes. Shays' rebellion, as it was called, shocked the nation. The impossibility of governing under the present structure was recognized and a Constitutional Convention was called for May of 1787. One month before the Convention, Madison said the hurdles confronting any reform (of the Articles of Confederation) were so great that they "would inspire despair in any case where the alternative was less formidable."

The Convention was called for May 14; it actually began May 25 and serious discussion got underway on May 29. With only one recess, the Convention met for six days a week from 4 to 8 hours a day until September 17, when the document was signed. It was a steamy, hot, humid summer in Philadelphia. One breath followed another with difficulty. Windows had to be kept closed because of the swarms of stinging flies.

Madison arrived eleven days early, drafting the Virginia Plan which became the Convention agenda. The smaller states were threatened and unyielding. On June 14, William Paterson of New Jersey submitted the New Jersey Plan as an alternative to the Virginia Plan, more to the liking of the small states. The Convention deadlocked. A committee was appointed to work out a compromise which was offered on July 5, debated until July 14 and finally affirmed on July 16. The compromise was approved by a five to four vote. From then on it was a

matter of working out the details. By September 17 our Constitution was signed, ready to be ratified by the respective states.

Madison was disappointed. He felt he had lost on critical issues. It fell to Ben Franklin, 81, the wise elder statesman, to present the document for signing. He said,

When you assemble a number of men to have the advantage of their joint wisdom, you inevitably assemble with those men, all their prejudice, their passions, their errors of opinion, their local interests, and their selfish views. From such an assembly, can a perfect production be expected? It therefore astonishes me, Sir, to find this system approaching so near to perfection as it does; and I think it will astonish our enemies, who are waiting with confidence to hear that our councils are confounded like those of the Builders of Babel ... Thus I consent, Sir, to this Constitution, because I expect no better, and because I am not sure that it is not the best.

Franklin had himself made compromise. He asked that "every member of the Convention who may still have objections to it would, with me on this occasion, doubt a little of his own infallibility."

The Constitution of the United States is an amazing document that has served us well and has become a model for nations around the globe. Someone has said it is our most important export. What this document, hammered out in the oppressive heat of a Philadelphia Summer, has created and enabled is the highest achievement of human government and for our priceless heritage we offer thanks to the providence of Almighty God.

The freedom envisioned, the human dignity recognized, the imperative of justice decreed is a reflection of the intention of the God we worship, our Creator and our redeemer through Jesus Christ. To support that contention, I point you to the Scripture lesson from the Old Testament, the Book of Exodus.

The story is familiar. Israel is in the bondage of slavery in Egypt. In the oppressive situation of unbearable servitude, Israel cries to the Lord. In our text we hear that God hears, God understands, God is aware and God responds to a people in bondage and in darkness. God responds to that situation of His people in bondage because He is a God Who wills the freedom and the dignity of all His children. Consequently, He moves in a redemptive way to bring His people out of Egypt, and we hear that clarion call "Set my people free!" *God is a God of freedom Who wills freedom for His people.* God is the God of freedom Who wills that there will be justice in human relationships. God is the God Who is on the side of the marginalized against those who would oppress them, for God would have all God's children free, living with dignity, with justice for all.

In the story of the Exodus, we have the God of Israel, the God of freedom, the God of justice pitted against the Egyptian gods who were the gods of the empire. Egypt was a mighty empire. It had its Pharaoh, and the Pharaoh had his gods. Perhaps you've seen the old Cecil B. DeMille rendition of the *Ten Commandments*, and remember that story dramatized by Hollywood. Pharaoh had his gods, and the gods of Egypt, as the gods of all the great empires, are captive to the empire. The gods of that kind of given natural system of things conceive of a connection between the throne and the altar. The gods baptize the status quo. Pharaoh co-opted his gods. Pharaoh used his gods to keep order. The people of Egypt, under the tutelage of the gods of Egypt, became the compliant servants of the order of Egypt. And Pharaoh wanted to keep it that way. Things were going very well; the budget was being met and the bricks were being produced. And then, as so often happens in human affairs, Pharaoh becomes obsessed with the question of security and his greed demands greater productivity. He looks at the Israelites and he begins to imagine a threat there. He said to his advisors, "Let's put them down. They're valuable to us. They could become dangerous to us. If we are to maintain rule, authority and order in the land, the Israelites must be oppressed."

Well, you know the story, one of the most familiar of all the scriptures. Pharaoh didn't recognize that his state cult gods were no match for the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God Who revealed Himself to Moses as the God Who said, "I am Who I am," or "I will be Who I will be," or simply, "I will be there!" The God of Israel, the Creator God, the Redeeming God, the God Who was for human freedom, Who was the advocate of human justice and compassion, overcame the gods of the Egyptians, and finally the mighty Pharaoh was brought to his knees, and Israel was set free!

The early founding vision of our nation finds rootage in the God of the scriptures. The dream that was born here 200 years ago is a dream that was inspired by the God of the Bible. Don't hear me as saying that all of our founding fathers were great Christian evangelical believers. But they were rooted in the biblical tradition of the God Who creates and Who ensures human dignity and stands for human freedom. And consequently, our founding reflected a dream nurtured in the revelation of the biblical God.

Now, I suggest to you this morning that *200 years later it's time to re-vision the dream*. It's not enough to celebrate the past. It's not enough to give gratitude for the great blessings we have received. It is time for us, as the people of God, within this nation highly blessed, to recognize that we are called to be the gadflies in society, to raise the prophetic voice in the midst of our own nation, to remind Washington, the President, the Cabinet and the Congress that now the players have reversed their roles. Now we, as citizens of this nation, represent the established and entrenched power structure of the world. Now it is to us that the God of freedom would say, "As your dream was born 200 years ago, a dream nurtured in My Will for all My children, so now remember when you have come

of age and now that you are in power that I am as concerned for the freedoms, the human dignity and the justice of the Black in South Africa and the Latino in South America and Central America as ever I was for the slaves in America or the patriots of the Revolution of 1776. Now, America, that you have climbed to the place of power in the world, my challenge to you," says Almighty God, "is to use your power for the humanization of all of society and the liberation of all My children. It is for you, United States of America, on this your 200th anniversary of that great document, to become the liberator, not the oppressor. To move for the continuing change within society throughout the whole world, not the maintenance of the status quo."

As I was reflecting on this, I thought about our Dutch Reformed cousins in South Africa who believe in the Old Testament and the New Testament, and who must wince when they read the story of the Exodus and they hear old Pharaoh say, "Look, folks, those people are becoming more than we. If we don't hold them down, one day they may rise up and take our place." And from pulpits in that land the doctrine of *Apartheid* has been advocated, although maybe there's just a little chink in the armor now. I think about those who are living in fear and poverty and darkness in Latin America. As one thinks of people around the world striving for freedom and human dignity, one realizes that we Christians in America have forgotten that there is a higher claim upon us than to be responsible citizens of a nation. There is a higher call, a prior claim; it is a claim to be a people of God in the midst of a nation concerned for the wellbeing of the whole world.

Martin Luther King said it, "I have a dream!" The prophets were those who had dreams. Moses was one who could imagine something different. Do you think that in Egypt the average Israelite could even imagine anything different? He cried in his grief, but there was needed someone to speak the word of freedom and human dignity, to speak in the name of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Who would set them free. The prophets were those who dreamed a dream, who created a vision and who stirred people to respond to the compelling call of the liberating God!

So today, as well. How easily we get co-opted into believing that the ultimate questions are questions of national security or national preservation or national aggrandizement, or being No. 1 in the world, and we forget that the call to us as a people of God is to be responsible to Caesar and totally obedient to God Who is interested in all His children, black or white, Gentile or Jew, Protestant or Catholic, American or Russian; to know that we are called to be a people who continue to dream the dream nurtured in the Scriptures that reveals the God of freedom Who wills freedom for all His people.

There is a group in this country spreading across the states in a network of concern called, "A World Beyond War." Can you even imagine it? If you had been in that hot, humid, fly-infested, steamy Summer of Philadelphia in 1787, you

would have gone to that convention convinced that it was impossible. Again, even James Madison said that the hurdles confronting any reform were so great that they "would inspire despair in any case where the alternative was less formidable." But, someone had a dream, and the dream became reality.

We get too used to thinking in traditional ways; we get buried in a rut; we can't even dream anymore. But I tell you God calls us, as His people, to dream dreams and to see visions. Can you imagine a world beyond war? Can you imagine a world where all God's children could stand together in human dignity with justice for all?

It's time, friends, to shed the posture of self-preservation, to stop worrying about our security, to become once again a pilgrim people under the Lordship of the Eternal God Who faithfully, as with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Moses and our Lord Jesus Christ, would lead all His children to freedom. It's time to re-vision the dream, to dream it all over again in all its radical newness! Amen.