

My Country, Right or Wrong...

Independence Day Weekend

I Kings 22:1

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

The title of my Independence Day sermon is "My Country, Right or Wrong..." and I suppose there are some of you wondering whether or not I have had a conversion in the middle of the night that I should suddenly be an advocate of that statement, "My country, right or wrong," becoming perhaps a chauvinist overnight. Nicholas Chauvin was a French soldier attached to Napoleon I who in 1815 was so fanatical and unreasonable and irrational about the lost cause of the Napoleonic Empire that he gained notoriety through his bellicose proclamations and ever since he has given to us the word *chauvinism*, which means to be fanatical and unreasonable about one's nation or the opposite sex or whatever. Well, I do want to say to you I have not become chauvinist. "My country, right or wrong," is a phrase which is often quoted and quoted as though it can stand alone. But the title of this sermon as it is printed has three dots after it, and the sermon is about those three dots.

Forrest Church, in a very fine book entitled *The American Creed*, which he wrote post-9/11, tells about a day when he was rummaging through the attic of his grandparents and he came across a very attractive wooden plaque that had a picture of a World War I soldier in his broad-brimmed helmet, and on burnished brass on the front of the helmet were embossed those words, "My country, right or wrong." Obviously, coming across that in his grandparents' attic, Forrest Church must have had his curiosity piqued because he did some research to find out that "My country, right or wrong," is a phrase lifted from a larger statement that was made in 1899 by a Senator from Missouri, Charles Schurz, and the complete statement is "*My country, right or wrong. If right, keep it right. If wrong, set it right.*"

Now, I cannot imagine how you could take five words out of context and make them say entirely the opposite of the original intention, how you could do it any more successfully than was done with that little phrase. It had nothing to do with the kind of chauvinistic attitude, "My country, right or wrong." Indeed, it was saying the opposite; it was saying if you are committed to your nation, if you love it dearly and deeply, then you will do what is necessary to love it when it is strong

and to confront it when it is wrong. Those who truly love their nation will not stand idly by while it goes in any number of directions, but will continue to judge its course in terms of the founding principles that have given it life and liberty and the marvelous national experience that we have had.

My country, right or wrong? No. My country affirmed in its rightness, critiqued in its wrongness, judged by its own creed, a creed which is summed up no more concisely than in that marvelous Preamble to the Declaration of Independence, that Preamble finding echoes down through the centuries as our commitment to democracy, to freedom, to liberty, to justice for all. It is the person who truly loves his or her nation who will be thoughtful, mindful, aware, and engaged in the affairs of that nation, concerned about its course and its direction, holding it always to its highest and noblest vision. That has always been the task of a free press and also of the pulpit. Whether by the pen of the journalist or the word of the pulpit, there has been a tradition of self-criticism that has marked us at our best. We have just gone through a period when it has been a very dangerous and delicate matter to call in question the direction and the policies of this nation. That is nothing new. It always happens. Those who are in power do not appreciate the critique of those who would hold them accountable to their noblest principles and vision. That is what the scripture lesson was about.

Israel was born as a tribal confederacy and they were well aware of the fact that God was king. In our terminology, Israel was a theocracy, and in those early days of inhabiting the Promised Land, there would be a crisis on occasion, and a leader would be lifted up who would lead the nation again through the crisis. One of the greatest of those charismatic leaders was Samuel, called a judge. During the ministry of Samuel, there was a call on the part of the people for a king so that they could be like other nations. Samuel resisted and reminded Israel that God was their king. Still they persisted. They wanted to be like other nations round about them. Samuel said, "You will pay taxes, you will have to give your sons and daughters to the army, the king will oppress you, dominate you." Nonetheless, they wanted a king, so eventually they got a king. Samuel anointed Saul, but in the very anointing of Saul, it was a symbolic action which said to the king, "You are a king under the aegis of God. You are not autonomous or absolute, for you are accountable for your reign before the face of God."

With the rise of the monarchy in Israel's history came the office of the prophet, and the prophet was the one who spoke the word of God to power. The prophet spoke truth to power. The thing that made Israel unique in the context of its own history was the fact that, contrary to those nations 'round about where the king was absolute, in Israel when the prophet spoke, the King trembled. There was respect for the prophet as the spokesperson for God. And so, we have the story this morning of King Ahab, infamous king of the Northern Kingdom, who is visited by Jehoshaphat, the king of the Southern Kingdom. Very likely, the stronger Ahab had summoned Jehoshaphat who said, "You know, Ramoth-gilead, over on the Transjordan is in the hands of Aram and it really belongs to us

and we simply haven't done anything about it. Will you join us in going on a military venture in order to reclaim Ramoth-gilead?" Jehoshaphat said, "Look, King, my people are as your people, my horses are as your horses, let's go. But wait, *first* of all, let us engage in that which was characteristic of Israel both in the north and in the south. Let us hear the word of the Lord from the prophet."

So, Ahab set up their thrones, they got their robes on, they had a public place, they had the whole thing choreographed, probably as marvelous as many of the Fourth of July celebrations in the past week, and there they sat. Ahab summoned 400 prophets, and 400 prophets came with their ecstatic utterance, and Ahab raised the question, "Shall we go to war or shall we refrain?" The word from the 400 was like a chorus, "Go up to Ramoth-gilead and triumph."

Well, Jehoshaphat was really a pretty good king and a rather pious man and he must have sensed that this whole scenario was staged somehow. He said, "Isn't there anybody else?"

Ahab said, "Yes, there is one other guy. I hate him. He never says anything favorable, always speaks about disaster for me."

Jehoshaphat said, "Don't talk that way."

So, Ahab summoned an officer to go and get Micaiah and the officer came to Micaiah and said, "The king has summoned you and, incidentally, 400-strong the prophets are in one accord. They have given the counsel to the king to go up and triumph, so watch your script."

When Micaiah came, Ahab said, "Shall we go up or shall we refrain?"

Micaiah said, "Go up and triumph," to which Ahab replied, "How many times do I have to tell you, tell me nothing but the truth of the word of God?"

Micaiah said, "It's going to be disaster."

Ahab looked at Jehoshaphat and said, "See what I told you? He never says anything but disaster."

Ahab summoned his officer again and said, "Take Micaiah home and tell the governor to throw him in prison. Give him rations of bread and water, reduced, until I come in peace."

Micaiah said, "Return in peace? Then the Lord has not spoken through me."

Some of you have chuckled a little bit to hear the story because there is wonderful humor there. What is a poor prophet to do? He is sternly charged to speak the word of God as that word has come to him, and when he does, he is thrown in jail. I could, of course, go almost anywhere in the Hebrew scriptures, Jeremiah,

for example, having been accused of being a traitor because he saw the imminent invasion of Babylon, accused of undermining the morale of the people, having been put in prison, but the king once again scared to death sneaks to Jeremiah at night and says, "Is there any word from the Lord?" Jeremiah says, "Yeah, it's not good," and he ended up in the slime pit.

Or, there was Amos, moved by God to address the royal house of Israel. He had the audacity to suggest that God has a plumb line and that that plumb line was going to measure the degree to which Israel conformed to that straightness. The royal priest, the chaplain, once again on the king's payroll, came out and said, "Amos, don't ever do that again. This is the king's court. Go prophesy and earn your bread some other place."

As I said, it is all over the Hebrew scriptures. This was the great tradition of Israel. What Israel gave to the world was this sense of the prophetic voice that addressed, that spoke truth to power, always a dangerous and delicate and lonely task, but nonetheless, a task which reflected the greatness of the founding vision of that people, always calling Israel back to that justice and that righteousness and that compassion which was in its founding documents in the Mosaic covenant. All of that legislation in the book of Leviticus and Exodus that you go over when you are reading through the scriptures, all of that boring legislation, all of those prescriptions, all of those things concerned with the poor and the widow and the orphan, about the doing of justice and the loving of mercy - all of that was the fodder of the prophets as they addressed the respective monarchies in the history of Israel and Judah. An important task, a task which if any nation loses, the nation loses.

You know in the 20th century my great spiritual hero was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. There is a film out on Bonhoeffer now which I am anxious to see, but I have already seen, as some of you have with me, a video of Bonhoeffer's life, and on that video where there is actual tape of some of those Nazi rallies where the bishops of the church were literally co-opted into the Nazi cause, it is chilling when you see the degree to which the church had been co-opted by the cause of a demonic regime. In 1939 when Bonhoeffer was given a study grant at Union Seminary in New York City, arranged by Reinhold Niebuhr and John Bennett and some of those greats, he came to this country and he found himself restless because things were heating up in Europe, and in spite of the fact that he had this marvelous opportunity, that he had safety and security and he could pursue his studies and he was a brilliant student, a brilliant theologian; nonetheless, he turned his back on it all and got on the last possible ship for Europe. When others asked him, "Why?" he said, "Because I cannot be in peace and safety here while there is turmoil in my nation."

He was so German, German to the core of his being and he loved his nation so greatly, and he said, "I must go back there and be with my people now if I am going to have any part in their future." And then he said, "I must will the defeat of

my own nation in order to preserve western civilization. Should I will the success of my nation, it would be the ruination of western civilization."

It was a wrenching and painful decision that he had to make. He who was a pacifist in his own heart, nonetheless, saw the darkness in such stark terms that he joined a conspiracy to assassinate Hitler, joining himself to a violent response, going against everything that was in him, but recognizing how high the stakes were. It is that kind of a prophetic witness, Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth coming out of that state church, forming the confessing church whose creed, the Barman Confession, begins by saying, "God alone, the word of God alone rules. "No political entity, no potentate or king, nothing can take allegiance over that loyalty to God who transcends, of course, every nation and every civilization. The country that loses that prophetic witness is on a road to disaster. One of the great things about this nation is that we have an American creed with its principles that created a structure which allows for, demands, self-criticism, self-critique, and the interchange of diverse opinions and ideas, and the free exchange that can only result in a healthy body politic.

We are at a critical point in our nation today when we have to judge the direction in which we are being taken. It is interesting that the social gospel of which I spoke last week was made up of those liberal, Protestant leaders who saw a vision of this whole nation becoming the land of the free, and then looked beyond the nation to the globe, and they started that World Missionary Movement and were thinking about world evangelization, and some of the greatest voices envisioned the whole globe evangelized with the gospel and with this marvelous democratic spirit that we had discovered and were living.

Then, in the 20th century, all of those grand schemes were dashed on the rocks of the violence of that last century - World War I, World War II, the Cold War, the nuclear standoff, and there continued to be those who advocated an internationalist approach. Coming out of the ashes of the Second World War, the United Nations was founded, largely at the impetus of our own nation. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a leader in that movement, an internationalism that believed that security could be found only through collective agreements, alliances, and a willingness of all states not to do anything they could do, but to comply with international law.

It hasn't worked very well. There were realists in the wake of all of the violence of last century, and the realist position was to keep the competing powers in a kind of balance. That was our experience during the Cold War. It was a balance of terror. It was the possibility of mutual total annihilation. The realist looks at the human situation and says the only thing that can keep some kind of peace is by competing powers being more or less level. But, today, there is no level playing field. Today it is the unipolar world.

A few months ago when I suggested the idea of an American empire, there were those of you who said, "Well, why haven't we ever heard of it?" Now everybody's

heard of it. Now it is a given. Now it is a cliché, that we are it. The question is how are we going to respond in this situation? I hope there will always be from pen and pulpit those voices that will call the nation to its highest and its best. What we tend to be moving toward now is a kind of nationalism back up by militarism.

There is a fascinating article in the July/August *Atlantic Monthly* by Robert Kaplan, where he suggests that we simply ought to take "the stealth approach to supremacy."

I think of the idealism of our past and I am unwilling to give up that vision that was present at our founding and has been echoed through the centuries. In an address to Congress, Franklin Delano Roosevelt gave his famous Four Freedoms speech, the freedom of speech or the press, freedom to worship God according to the dictates of one's own conscience, freedom from want that involved economic structures, and freedom from fear which involved the reduction of armaments world-wide. And in the final draft of that speech, he added a phrase after each one of his freedoms, freedom of speech everywhere in the world, freedom to worship everywhere in the world, freedom from want everywhere in the world, and freedom from fear everywhere in the world.

He invited his advisors to take a look at his speech, and one of his principal advisors, Harry Hopkins, said to him, "Mr. President, "everywhere in the world"- that's a lot of territory. I don't know if the American people care that much about Java," to which FDR replied, "I think, Harry, that the globe is getting so small that we will have to be concerned about Java, because they are becoming our neighbors." A prophetic insight into the way the world was going, and we are there. And we are the lone superpower of the world, and who will rule? The realists with a smidgen of cynicism, or the mushy-headed, simple- hearted idealists in which I would still like to believe?

Judge Learned Hand, a rather well-known figure of our recent history, defined the spirit of liberty this way: The spirit of liberty. I cannot define it. I can only tell you my own faith. The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right. The spirit of liberty is the spirit which seeks to understand the minds of other men and women. The spirit of liberty is the spirit which weighs their interest alongside its own without bias. The spirit of liberty remembers that not even a sparrow falls to earth unheeded. The spirit of liberty is the spirit of him who, near 2000 years ago, taught mankind that lesson it has never learned, but has never quite forgotten, that there may be a kingdom where the least shall be heard and considered, side-by-side with the greatest. I believe it is my task to keep that vision alive, and I would consider this sermon a success, not if you agreed with me, but if you agreed that I am doing what I ought to be doing.

My country, right or wrong. If right, then keep it right. If wrong, set it right.