

On this Fourth of July Weekend, celebrating the 230th Anniversary of the birth of our nation, it seems fitting to spend some time in historical reflection. (Less, this morning, on our personal journeys of faith.) To what, or Whom, does our nation owe our abundant good fortune? What were the intentions, the hopes, the driving convictions of those who pledged “their lives, their fortunes, their sacred honor” so long ago in order that Americans from that day to this might enjoy the freedoms and prosperity which still today call out to the deepest aspirations and highest hopes of tens of millions of persons around the globe?

John Adams was a great American—our second president. Like the other founders (whose personal religious beliefs varied from Deists to staunch Bible Calvinists) he was convinced our nation needed to remain a religious people in order to survive. Adams was born into a poor farming family but received a scholarship to Harvard, which he entered at age 15 assuming he would become a pastor. (He soon learned God had a different life-assignment for him.)

There Adams discovered the world of books and ideas, and he never looked back. He also knew he was a spiritual pilgrim from early on. [His diary recorded his early awareness of how important to him was his spiritual condition: “Oh! That I could wear out of my mind every mean and base affection, [and] conquer my natural pride and conceit!”] In 1756, when he was 20 yrs old, Adams wrote, “I am resolved to rise with the sun and to study the Scriptures on Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday mornings.” [The other days he promised to read other authors.] (He didn’t quite manage “to study some portion of the Scriptures each day...”—but 4 out of 7 days, anyway.) “I will strive with all my soul to be something more than persons who have had less advantages than myself.”

In August, 1756, reflecting upon a sermon he had just heard, he observed that the night sky was an “amazing conclave of Heaven sprinkled and glittering with stars” that inspired him “into a kind of transport” such that he surely knew such wonders to be gifts of God. “But all the provisions that [God] has made for the gratifications of our senses are much inferior to the provision He has made for the nobler power of intelligence and reason. He has given us reason to find out the truth, and the real design and true end of our existence.” (That is, God has given us the gifts of intelligence and reason in order to discern the purpose and goal of our lives.)

John Adams offered his life freely to God; fortunately God’s “vocatio” for him was service to his fledgling country—regardless of the cost or risk. The Colonists were fighting against the strongest military superpower on earth, and no colony had ever successfully revolted against England. The Colonies had no money; there was not a single bank in North America in 1776. Adams was asked to go to France to rally support and financing to help our American cause. He and his son John Quincy, 10, took off Feb. 13, 1777. They stayed about a year in France.

We casually read such historical accounts without a second thought. But what did it involve at the time? Why would a sane man take such a risk? The temperature was probably in the mid-20’s, the blustery skies steel gray when they arrived at the crude boat just outside Braintree—no bargain for outdoor travel even today, when we have down jackets and high-tech weather-proof fibers and portable heaters. Adams had never been

on a boat in his life. But the trip would take weeks of freezing cold and seasickness at best, maybe months. Outside the harbor cruised the British warships, patrolling to intercept boats just like this one, trying to make a break for it to obtain foreign help. Had Adams been caught, he knew he'd have been taken back to England in chains and hanged in the Tower of London for treason against the crown.

Their boat made it thru, but still a lot went wrong. They were hit by a hurricane. They did run into an enemy ship, and they had to battle it. They were becalmed for quite a while. Eventually, of course, they made it.

Adams kept answering the call to serve his nation, sacrificing his comfort and his financial well-being; jeopardizing his life. Have you ever ridden one mile on horseback? Adams, well into middle age, routinely rode 400 miles in the dead of winter to get to Congress. He spent over ten years, all told, separated from his beloved Abigail. Why did he keep doing such things? Why did the original patriots, the signers of the Declaration of Independence, show such courage? (You may remember: of the 56, 5 were captured by the British and tortured before they died; 12 had their homes ransacked and burned to the ground; 2 lost their sons in the War; 9 died from wounds suffered in the war.)

Another signer was Dr. John Witherspoon, President of the College of New Jersey (now known as Princeton University), already “up and going” to train Presbyterian clergy. In their wisdom and faithfulness, the Continental Congress had called upon all the people (not just church people or Christians—all the Colonists) to solemnly participate in the second national day of fasting, humiliation, and prayer: May 17, 1775. (The national leaders were concerned, following an unsuccessful American military campaign into Canada, that national pride and self-confidence were replacing trust in God, Who alone, they knew, could deliver them from the British in the war to come. Hence their call for the nation to submit once again, individually and collectively, before God.)

Witherspoon's sermon on that day included these words: “While we give praise to God, the supreme disposer of all events, for His [intervention] on our behalf, let us guard against the dangerous error of trusting in, or boasting, an arm of flesh...I look upon [self] confidence...to be a sort of outrage [against] Providence, and when it infuses itself into the spirit of a people, it is a forerunner of destruction...What follows from this? That he is the best friend to American liberty, who is most sincere and active in promoting true and undefiled religion...Whoever is an avowed enemy of God, I [hesitate] not to call him an enemy to his country.” [*The Light and the Glory*, Peter Marshall, p 296]

(By the way, the first national day of fasting [July 20] had caused General George Washington to order the day to “be religiously observed by the forces under his command, exactly [as directed] by the Continental Congress. It is therefore strictly [incumbent] on all officers and soldiers to attend [Worship] Service. It is expected that all who go to worship do take their arms...and ammunition...[to be] prepared for immediate action, if called upon.”) [from a letter of William Emerson, pastor of the church on Harvard Square, in whose home Washington had stayed.]

(It's not as if the Commander-in-Chief had been pressured into this order concerning his army—Washington always knew he answered to God, and often made decisions which caused powerful men to oppose and then try to undermine him. Washington issued this order the second day of his appointment over the Continental Army (summer, 1775): “The General most earnestly requires and expects...of all officers and soldiers not engaged in actual duty, a punctual attendance of [Worship] Services, to

implore the blessing of Heaven upon the means used for our safety and defense.” [from *George Washington*, by William Johnson; quoted in *The Light and the Glory*, p 289]

This background brings us up to the 1st of July, 1776—260 years ago yesterday. The delegates had been deliberating independence in Philadelphia; the outcome was no foregone conclusion. The residents of the Colonies were divided about evenly: a third were willing to fight for independence from Britain, a third wanted to remain loyal to Britain (they felt they were the true patriots) and, naturally, a third were waiting to see who was going to win. Even that day as the delegates entered the final phase of “the Great Debate”—following months of meeting, speeches, polling their people back home—the delegations of four of the thirteen colonies were not able to vote “yes” on American Independence (Pennsylvania and South Carolina voted “no,” the Delaware delegation was split, one apiece, and New York abstained.) What happened in the next three days and nights, and how God worked out the details, is amazing drama—but too long to go into this morning.

To that still divided Congress on July 1st the Quaker John Dickinson of Pennsylvania spoke eloquently and long against Independence. When he finished there was a respectful silence. John Adams waited, hoping someone less “obnoxious than himself” would rise to respond. No one did, so he did. [In the recollection of one witness, he spoke...] “Before God, I believe the hour has come. My judgment approves this measure, and my whole heart is in it. All that I have, all that I am, all that I hope in this life, I am now read here to stake upon it. And I leave off as I began, that live or die, survive or perish, I am for the Declaration. It is my living sentiment, and by the blessing of God it shall be my dying sentiment: Independence now, and Independence for ever.” [p 308, *TL&TG*; quoted from *America’s Promise*, Dan Smoot, p 6] [Most of these references to Adams are taken from a speech given by two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning historian David McCullough, delivered March 31, 2006 at Hillsdale College in Michigan. Copies of his lecture are available if you’re interested.]

It all raises the question: why would such intelligent men, such educated and prominent men with so much to lose—why would John Adams, for instance—be willing to risk his life, his family, everything he had, on such a risky venture as American Independence? Obviously Adams and his peers were guided by the conviction that some purposes are more noble than self-preservation. Adams and the great majority of those delegates believed God has plans bigger and more important and enduring than the temporal life of any one of His servants.

In those crucible days, when women and men were shaped by the tenets of the gospel of Jesus Christ, (if not every one by personal allegiance to Him) many were faithful to answer the divine call to risk their lives and everything else in order to establish the United States as a new experiment under God upon the face of the earth. Tens, hundreds of millions of us have been reaping the benefits of religious and other freedoms ever since—because so many, like John and Abigail Adams, were faithful to step up and respond.

Not that the United States is the Kingdom of God on earth—far from it. Not that we have lived up to our God-given potential in that original or in any succeeding generation. Not that we are more important or more valuable than those citizens of other nations, though more richly blessed than they. Not that the United States is today

necessarily “a Christian nation,” though about 85% of us self-identify as “Christian.” Not that we have treated everyone equally among us as a child of God. Not that we are not without our national sins of arrogance, racism, materialism, and plenty of others. (Not that the particular tragedy recently witnessed by one of our church members during recent jury duty doesn’t play out all too often across the land and right here in Orange County: a young man born to a poor mother in a blighted community, grows up surrounded by gangs and unhealthy elements—with no father around, limited English skills, no healthy church influences. He starts carrying a handgun for “protection,” starts making money with petty burglaries, and then once, getting caught, uses his gun and winds up on trial for attempted murder. Perhaps a sweet young man, not unlike many of our own young people enjoying Summer Links these summer Wednesday evenings.)

Not that we as a nation have overcome the same tendency that concerned the Continental Congress which understood the root American problem back in 1775 when they established that national day of prayer, humiliation and fasting: a nation is in trouble which trusts in its own strength and righteousness and rightness rather than in Almighty God and His ways.

This theme hasn’t changed much in 260 years, nor in 2,919 years, back when “His son Asa succeeded Abijah, who slept with his ancestors.” Asa, great-great grandson of King David, an early king of Judah, understood it was God who brought peace and prosperity to the land—not the plottings or treaties or armies of human beings. He used his influence to try to steer his people back to faith in the living God, the LORD, the God of their ancestors. The people and the leaders had gotten complacent; they had come to assume that God somehow owed them their security and their standard of living. That they were “special.” They got sloppy in their religious practice: they probably assumed that all religions are about the same. This god, that god, the LORD God, no god—mix ‘n match gods; what could a golden calf hurt anybody? But Asa knew better—he ripped down the altars to foreign idols, and the sacred pagan poles and pillars which had been springing up throughout the land. According to the author of 2 Chronicles, as a result, “we have sought the LORD and He has given us peace on every side.”

If we are to be faithful Christians and responsible Americans, it is imperative we understand how and where the two do and do not overlap. We are careful not to equate the people Israel, and the chronicles of the Old Testament, with the people or fortunes of the United States. The Church of Jesus Christ is entered into thru by repentance, by being “born from above”—not by a national ID card or a driver’s license. The Kingdom of God is here, around us, within us, inaugurated in Christ; experienced as He is acknowledged and obeyed. The Kingdom is entered into more immediately in the life to come, though we, Christ’s Church, are called to keep working toward it, to live in it, here on earth. (Every now and then we experience heart-piercing glimpses of it here below.)

We Christians are ourselves the colonists, in Paul’s image—citizens of heaven; living here on earth on foreign soil for a time as special agents and ambassadors of our True Sovereign; worshiping and obeying, and working and taking risks for the Rightful King, the High King of heaven.

When I read about the supreme price our patriot forebears were willing to pay, or the price literally hundreds of thousands of Christian martyrs around the world are paying in prisons and torture cells for their faith even this day, I am all the more grateful for this

land in which freedom freely to worship God, or not, as one chooses, has been fought for and safeguarded. Freedom to worship, or not to worship, is by no means guaranteed by every religion, by every nation. You know what the world map today looks like. Sometimes I ask myself how much I would be willing to sacrifice for the freedoms I enjoy...

Surely I am not the only one around here to fear something is going terribly awry with our American Experiment when these same heroes—people like John Adams, George Washington, Patrick Henry, John Witherspoon, James Madison, Benjamin Franklin, to name a few—persons who prayed publicly, who so extolled the role of religion in the public fabric of our national life—could not be hired to teach American History in our public schools. They would be muzzled—and disciplined and perhaps sued—for expressing their convictions, or praying or mentioning the name of God—at virtually every public High School Graduation across the land. We’ve come quite a ways.

John Adams and the founders were wise to resist establishing a national Church—allowing government sanction and support to one denomination or religion alone. [When we see the vitiated fates of the government-established national religions in France and Germany and other northern European nations, we appreciate their collective wisdom in not entangling our Government with a national Church.] At the same time they assumed that our nation could not function without the moderating and uplifting moral influences which the Christian faith provides. Adams himself, for example, [Oct 11, 1798] observed in a speech to assembled military leaders “Our Constitution was made for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate for the govern[ing] of any other [kind of people].”

As much as Adams, Jefferson, and the others valued education and reason and democracy and “freedom,” they also understood that the foundations of reason and “personal freedom” alone cannot long sustain a liberal democracy. Those European nations now secular owe much to their common Christian heritage. (Time will tell how they fare as they keep distancing themselves from Christ.) How many nations around the globe have tried to import a constitution like ours—and sadly, rather than personal freedoms, it’s one coup, one tyranny, after the next. The developments in Iraq are teaching us again: human freedoms are not so transferable.

Many intellectuals believe our freedoms will somehow increase as our culture backpedals away from our Christian roots and discourages people away from Jesus today. I believe history has taught the opposite: separating ourselves from a trust in, and dependence upon, God in Christ does not make people or nations more free: it jeopardizes personal freedoms.

John Adams was a very wise man who believed an irreligious nation could only spiral downward. But Jesus also had something to say about all this. His claim was not that human beings are born free, start out free, but that we all start out in sin, in bondage to our own human nature and to the evil one, and therefore to all sorts of other influences within and without ourselves. We do *not* start out free: we need to be *set* free, *made* free. [John 8:30-31, *The Message*]: “Then Jesus said to [those] who had claimed to believe in Him, “If you stick with this, living out what I tell you, you are My disciples. Then you will experience for yourselves the truth, and the truth will free you.” Sure, reason and logic and good science reveal truth, but Jesus also is the living, embodied Truth. We are

free from our sin and its control over us in our obedient relationship with Him thru the power of His Holy Spirit,.

John Adams, in a letter to Abigail dated 260 years ago this Tuesday, immediately following the successful 12-0 vote (New York abstained) of the colonies for Independence from Britain (and essentially dependence upon God) peered into the American future and predicted that our annual Fourth of July celebration would “be the most memorable...in the history of America. I...believe it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival. It ought to be commemorated, as the Day of Deliverance, by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty...[also with “pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires]...from one end of this continent to the other, from this time forward forevermore...I am well aware of the toil and blood and treasure that it will cost to maintain this Declaration, and support and defend these States. Yet through all the gloom I can see the rays of ravishing light and glory...that the end is worth more than all the means.” [p 310, *TL&TG*]

You all know: personal and even national liberty does not “grow on trees.” It is our high privilege and duty to offer our lives, our fortune, our sacred honor to our rightful Lord, Jesus, and to give thanks for this nation for which so many valiant women and men have, and do, greatly sacrifice.

Where there is great sacrifice, there can be great faithfulness.

2 Chronicles 17:1-7

So Abijah slept with his ancestors, and they buried him in the city of David. His son Asa succeeded him. In his days the land had rest for ten years. Asa did what was good and right in the sight of the LORD his God. He took away the foreign altars and the high places, broke down the pillars, hewed down the sacred poles, and commanded Judah to seek the LORD, the God of their ancestors, and to keep the law and the commandment. He also removed from all the cities of Judah the high places and the incense altars. And the kingdom had rest under him. He built fortified cities in Judah while the land had rest. He had no war in those years, for the LORD gave him peace.

He said to Judah, "Let us build these cities, and surround them with walls and towers, gates and bars; the land is still ours because we have sought the LORD our God; we have sought him, and he has given us peace on every side." So they built and prospered.