

When the Church Prays for the Nation  
Psalm 85:1-13

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*Lord, you were favorable to your land; . . . . Restore us again, O God of our salvation . . . . Let me hear what God the Lord will speak . . . .* Ps. 85:1a, 4a, 8a

Independence Day is a national holiday with a secular nature and purpose rather than a religious holiday with a sacred purpose. Still the church in the United States holds the Fourth of July in high esteem and uses the day to think about the nation according to the standards of faith.

This morning I am having us think about the church's prayers for the nation. As for the sermon's biblical basis I will draw upon a number of passages by way of illustration but not follow the lines of any one particular passage. The spirit of the whole is close to the 85<sup>th</sup> psalm. That old poet prayed for his nation and the first three stanzas of his prayer begin, successively, "Lord, you were favorable to your land; . . . . Restore us again, O God of our salvation . . . . Let me hear what God the Lord will speak . . . ." So the 85<sup>th</sup> psalm has a stanza of gratitude, a stanza of confession, and a stanza seeking guidance.

The church in America, when it is faithful to God, has the same three stanzas in its prayer for the nation.

*When the church in America prays for the nation it gives thanks.*

The U.S. church is particularly thankful to God for the religious freedom it enjoys. Others, even secularists, can be thankful for other things. They can sing,

I love thy rocks and rills,  
Thy woods and templed hills.<sup>1</sup>

The church is grateful for the natural beauty of this land, too, but it celebrates especially the freedom it has to speak its message without fear of censorship or reprisal. The church doesn't get its message from the State – never that! – but it is free to speak its God-given message in, too, and even against the State.

The prophet Amos did not have that freedom. His sermons were getting under the skin of the King of Israel because they were openly critical of the policies of the nation. Another religious figure, Amaziah was his name, was on the other side of the theological spectrum from Amos, and was supportive of the King. He tried to get Amos to quit his preaching and go away. He tried to censor Amos and said, "This is the king's sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom" (cf. Amos 7:10-12). The State wanted to control the message.

The Nazis tried the same thing in Germany in the 1930s and 40s. Hitler and his base wanted to control the church. They wanted to control who could preach the gospel and they

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel F. Smith, "My Country, 'Tis of Thee," *Pilgrim Hymnal* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1958), #437.

wanted to control the gospel that was preached. They issued threats against those who preaching a message contrary to the Third Reich, and they followed through on those terrible threats.<sup>2</sup>

The pulpit in the United States is not under the censorship that confronted Amos or the faithful pastors in Germany. The church in America is free to say what it thinks. It doesn't get its message from the State, but it is free to take its message to the State with holy boldness. It can point its finger at the empire the way Nathan pointed his finger at David (2 Samuel 12) and the way Elijah pointed his finger at Ahab (I Kings 18) and pass the judgment of God. The church is grateful it can speak its God-given message freely and openly.

The 85<sup>th</sup> psalmist had a stanza of gratitude, and so do we. When the church prays for the nation it is grateful for the freedom of speech and expression.

*When the church in America prays for the nation it asks for pardon.*

My son-in-law Chris alerted me the other day to a quotation from the writings of Thomas Jefferson. In a book written in the early 1780s, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson said, "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just."<sup>3</sup>

Job knew that God is just and he trembled for his ten kids. They were all grown and had homes of their own. They and their families got along together nicely. They regularly held parties at each other's houses. They were long parties with eating and drinking and dancing. Nobody wore a mask. Nobody practiced social distancing. When the parties were over, Job, knowing God is just, trembled for his kids. He got up early the next morning after every party, offered a sacrifice, and prayed that God forgive any of his family members who might have sinned (Job 1:1-5).

The Christian church in America, knowing that God is just, trembles for the nation and rises early to ask for forgiveness for our country's sins. I suppose this is where the real divide between the Christian right and the Christian left opens up. Liberals and conservatives are in agreement in their Calls to Worship and in their Prayers of Invocation. Where the right and the left differ sharply is in their Prayers of Confession. The one side thinks these sins need to be confessed; the other side confesses another set altogether.

Thomas Jefferson was thinking of the injustice of slavery when he wrote "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just." A church like ours, when it names and confesses America's sins is apt to pray we come to see and be forgiven for and repent of the sins of systemic racism, racial violence, white privilege, voter suppression, political corruption, economic disparity, and other evils we deplore but are often weakly resigned to.

The 85<sup>th</sup> psalmist had a stanza of confession, and so do we. When the church prays for the nation it asks God for pardon for our land.

*When the church in America prays for the nation it seeks guidance.*

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<sup>2</sup> *Preaching in Hitler's Shadow: Sermons of Resistance in the Third Reich*, ed. by Dean G. Stroud (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*. <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper/JEFFERSON/ch18.html>.

This is a distinctive contribution faith can make to life today. Everybody can be grateful. Everybody can be sorry for mistakes and be repentant. You don't have to be particularly religious to be grateful or sorry. But only faith seeks the guidance of God. Faith knows we do not have to be guided by the polls or by the fluctuations of the market or any such thing. Faith knows we seek and rely upon the guidance of God.

So the 85<sup>th</sup> psalmist, after there had been a stanza of gratitude and a stanza of confession, prayed, "Let me hear what God the Lord will speak . . . ."

One of our hymns prays in the same vein.  
O let me hear you speaking  
    in accents clear and still,  
above the storms of passion,  
    the murmurs of self-will!<sup>4</sup>

Of course, the church's prayer that God guide the nation is not simply a prayer asking God to guide. It is also a prayer asking that the nation be made teachable so it can recognize God's leadership when it comes. "Let me hear what God will speak . . . ."

God is speaking to us now. Let's pray we hear it. Let's pray that we hear God speaking in the science that can lead us through this virus. Let us pray that we hear God speaking in the experiences of people of color so that we can be led to realize what can begin to make for racial harmony. Let us pray we hear God speaking through the truth-tellers so we can be led to defeat corruption whenever it has the upper hand.

The 85<sup>th</sup> psalmist had a stanza asking for guidance, and so should we. Let us ask God to guide us and to make us brave enough to follow.

The secular world shoots off fireworks to celebrate the nation's birth. The church bows its head in prayer. The fireworks flame out fast and their ashes fall to the ground. The prayers of the faithful reach the throne of God where they are heard and answered.

Let us pray to God in stanzas of gratitude, confession, and the search for guidance; and then let us rest in the poet's trust

Steadfast love and righteousness will meet;  
    righteousness and peace will kiss each other.  
Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,  
    and righteousness will look down from the sky.  
The Lord will give what is good,  
    and our land will yield its increase.  
Righteousness will go before him,  
    and will make a path for his steps. (Ps. 85:10-13)

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<sup>4</sup> John E. Bode, "O Jesus, I Have Promised," *The New Century Hymnal* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1995), #493.