

"A GENUINE PATRIOTISM"

A Sermon By

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### INTRODUCTION

Back in 1976 a group of South Dakota high school students typed out the Declaration of Independence as a Bicentennial project. They stripped it of its 18th Century appearance, typed it up to appear as a modern petition and circulated it around the town. Fifty percent of those who were asked to sign it refused to do so.

A class in Miami did the same thing. Only they got even fewer signatures. They asked one man if he would display the document in his store window. He said,

"Well, the boss decides those things. But I can tell you right now that he's not going to like what's written here."

### DEVELOPMENT

America was built on a vision of what this world might become. You can trace that vision back farther than the 18th Century, clear back into the pages of the Old Testament. That Old Testament dream was put into 18th Century political language in the Declaration of Independence, but it goes back much farther than that...almost 3,000 years to the founding of our heritage in the Bible. Today we're not sure that we believe what the Declaration of Independence says. In fact, we're not even sure we want to know what it says. It may require something of us.

There's a story about one of those first colonies along the New England coast. It was settled by people who had fled oppressions in Europe, risking their lives, crossing 3000 miles across the Atlantic Ocean in fragile boats, braving the hardships of those first years in the wilderness in America. In the next generation in that village on the coast, the decision was made to build a road from the settlement five miles westward into the wilderness. And when the project was finished some of the people stood up in a town meeting and spoke out against the waste of public funds. They said, "Who will ever travel the road? Who will ever want to go five miles away from the coast?"

And that's what happens to visions and to dreams! The first generation has the dream and is willing to take risks and sacrifices in order to secure the dream for their children. The children in the next generation want to forget the dream, because it still requires risks and insecurity and sacrifice to be kept alive. We always want to settle down and enjoy what we have received, rather than make the effort to keep what we have received alive that it might go on to the next generation. Is that happening to America? The fore-fathers sacrificing everything so that their children can live in freedom; the children sacrificing freedom so that they can live in security?

"Would you display this document in your store window?"

"Well, the boss decides those things, but I can tell you right now...he's not going to like what's written there!"

### PATRIOTIC RITUALS

There are those in our country who have lost some of their enthusiasm for participation in patriot rituals, because they feel and say that some events in the recent history in America have revealed that we are a nation just like any other nation...nothing special about America. We are just as corrupt, just as dishonest, just as guilty of the abuse of power as any other nation.

John Gardner has called these people "the unloving critics of America". But he said that there are also in America today the "uncritical lovers" - those who are apt to say, "It's my country right or wrong", and who believe that those who criticize the country in any way are guilty of disloyalty, if not treason. Gardner has suggested that our nation today is divided between "unloving critics" and "uncritical lovers". One wonder: is there a better way? Is there, what I would like to call, a more genuine patriotism? Let's think about it together.

#### THE COVENANT

Yes, I believe there is, and I believe it is found in that phrase, "This nation under God", and I should like to think that we who are a part of the religious community in America have a responsibility to exemplify this genuine patriotism, because we can understand what it means.

It comes out of our Biblical heritage. It didn't just materialize back there in the 18th century. It came to New England some 150 years before that with the Puritans, who believed that they were being sent here on a special errand in the wilderness. That was their term, and it meant a special mission called by God. They got that vision from the Bible, especially the Old Testament - the story of Israel chosen by God...not for privilege, but for responsibility. Chosen by God to be a special people in this world. And when they talked in those days about this nation "under God" - that's what they meant. They believed that just as God had raised Israel and freed her from oppression in Egypt and led Her across the Red Sea and across the wilderness into a Promised Land, so they believed God had led them from Europe and across the Atlantic Ocean, which they called the Red Sea, and into the Promised Land of America - the Promised Land of freedom!

They also believed God had established a covenant with them, the same covenant God had established with Israel some 3,000 years before. We heard it read as our Old Testament Lesson and for those first Americans, this awesome document that God gave to Israel was the "constitution" of this nation, the basis for existence in the new world. Hear it once again.

"See I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the Lord, Your God....then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord, your God, will bless you in the land which you are entering to take possession of it. But, if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other Gods and serve them, I declare to you this day, that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land which you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess."

That's the Covenant. That's the covenant that God made with Israel. And the first Americans believed that we as Americans are bound by the same covenant. In fact, they believed that because of God's sovereign righteousness over all nations and all history, all nations are bound by that covenant. They read that passage in the Old Testament and they said, "That's addressed to us". And if you read the documents of our heritage in the 18th Century, you will see that the "founding fathers" had the same idea of the covenant. Even into the 18th century they talked about it. They used a little different language, but it's the covenant they are talking about. The responsibility placed upon the people of this nation to live righteously in order to honor the covenant made with God. They believed that if we do that then God will prosper the people. But if not, then America can expect trouble in its internal life.

If one wants to know what genuine patriotism looks like, try that. It's a patriotism that "taps" the very roots of our heritage. It's not just slogans and empty gestures. It's not "unloving criticism" - we know that, but neither is it "uncritical loving" of our nation. It's faithfulness to the covenant on which this nation was established. The covenant is still a part of our patriotic language. "In God we trust" we say. "This nation under God". By and large, I tend to think that those are empty slogans for a lot of Americans. But at the beginning they had every specific meaning. "This nation under God" means this nation exists with a covenant. It has been given a good land and it will live in it and prosper in it as long as it is righteous.

"But if your heart turns away and worships other gods  
and serves them, I declare to you this day you shall perish".

That's a covenant, and I think being a patriot means to believe it, and to work to get this nation to order its life accordingly.

#### OLD TESTAMENT

In the Old Testament the writers told stories over and over again to illustrate what this covenant means. The stories of the Kings, the Books of I and II Kings and the Chronicles of the Kings are all stories told to illustrate what the covenant looks like in the history of a nation. Like the wonderful story of King David. The Kings prospered as long as they ruled righteously. If they abused their power, if they took advantage of other people, if they made unholy alliances with other nations, then the days of their reign came to an end. That's the way Israel understood the covenant. If they as a nation behaved in a way that was not pleasing to God, God would stand in their way and make it hard for them.

And the Puritans looked upon their live in this new world in exactly the same way. They believed if there are problems in a society, if there is violence, crime and turmoil within the nation or community, it's because the people had forgotten that covenant. Those things are never ends in themselves. Those things are symptoms of something that is wrong with our relationship with God, the ruler of all history.

Lincoln had the courage to interpret the Civil War through the same vision of the covenant. He said that the war was God's judgement upon both sides of the conflict - on the south because of slavery and on the north because of their greed and corruption. In the familiar words of that song or hymn that we know, "He is tramping out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored." That's an image directly out of the Old Testament. The image of God's judgement upon Israel, pressing down upon her like a wine press, because Israel would not keep the covenant.

Do you believe that genuine patriotism is keeping to the covenant? We refer to it all the time. "In God We Trust". "This nation under God". I feel you and I believe that; we read the Bible and we know what that means. It means "yes - there is a covenant", and if there is, then righteousness in this world is not a matter of idealism, not a matter of moralism, but a matter of survival.

#### A FINAL WORD

This final word. The covenant meant that the nation had a mission to perform. In time, Israel came to see that she was chosen not for privilege, but for mission. Israel was chosen, as they finally understood through the latter prophets, to be the servant of the world.

The first Americans knew from the start that Americans were not chosen to be privileged and protected; they were chosen to carry a special mission in this world. They believed that mission was to be an example that human beings could live in freedom, and that this nation would prosper if all people are free. That mission, they believed, was to be an example to the whole world.

And listen to the men who along with Washington had much to do with creating the Republic in 1776 and 1789. "America has lighted a candle to the whole world" (Patrick Henry). "The Revolution was fought for future millions and millions of millions" (John Adams). "The birthday of a new world is at hand" (Tom Paine). And Benjamin Rush, after signing the Declaration of Independence, said: "I was animated constantly by a belief that I was acting for the benefit of the whole world and for the future of the ages."

All of this is captured in a motto that is inscribed on the dollar bill that you carry in your wallet. "Novus ordo seculorum". "A new order for the ages." A new way of living in the world. The "fathers" of the Revolution believed that they had established a new age for all mankind, and the world will never be the same again - because of America.

We need to regain and hold on to that feeling that America has a special mission in the world, a mission for all mankind. Belief and faith in that mission is tied directly to that covenant - in the dream and responsibility that has been given to us. We are stewards of that dream. It stretches back to the time when God freed a people from tyranny in Egypt and led them to a Promised Land. And it stretches clear forward into the future to that time the Prophets foresaw, when all would live in peace and the Kingdom of God would be there. We don't own that dream; it owns us. And it judges our life. It either guides us as a people or it judges us as a people.

"I have set before you this day life and death; therefore chose life, that your descendants may prosper in the land."

#### CLOSING

In the early days of the Tennessee Valley Authority, the rising waters behind the newly constructed dam threatened to engulf an old log homestead. A new home had already been built for the family, but they refused to move out of the old log cabin. That happens every time there is "progress" with freeways, dams and things like that. There are always a few folks who won't go. The social workers went out there, discovered the strange reason why the man wouldn't move. Because he wouldn't leave the fire in the cabin hearth. He said:

"My grandpa built that fire over a hundred years ago, and he never let it go out because he had no matches, and the nearest neighbor was so far away. So my grandfather never let it go out. My father tended the same fire. When he died, I tended it. I am not going anywhere and let my grandpa's fire go out."

So the social workers got a large iron kettle in to which they scooped up live coals and carried them over to the new house where they then poured the coals on to the new hearth, new kindling was brought in, and the fire was restored once again. So the family was able to move and take with them the fire of their fathers.

A PARABLE

It's a parable. Patriotism is knowing about the fire that inspired the ancestors in the land. And no matter where history takes us, patriotism is keeping the fire alive in services like this, that we may remember and reaffirm that dream and vision that brought people here, that covenant relationship with God, the Father of all mankind. We do this that our descendants may live long in this land.

CLOSING PRAYER

Almighty God, we make our earnest prayer that Thou wilt keep the United States in Thy holy protection; that Thou wilt incline the hearts of the citizens to cultivate a spirit of subordination and obedience to government; to entertain a brotherly affection and love for one another and for their fellow citizens of the United States.

And finally that Thou wilt most graciously be pleased to dispose us all to do justice, to love mercy, and to demean ourselves with that charity and humility and pacific temper of mind, which were the characteristics of the Divine Author of our blessed religion, and without an humble imitation of whose example in these things we can never hope to be a happy nation. Grant our supplication, we beseech Thee, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen

READING OF THE NAMES

I would now invite the Chaplain of the Sons of the Revolution to join me here in the chancel - at the Lectern - to read the names of the members of this Society who have departed this life during the past year.

Rev. Ralph J. Cogswell.

Following this, we shall stand for the playing of the taps and the closing Memorial Prayer