

**BLESSED IS THE NATION WHOSE GOD IS THE LORD**  
***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, July 3, 2016***  
***Based on Psalm 33:12-20 and Proverbs 14:34***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, “Bless You,” during which we are considering what it means to be blessed by God. Our focus this morning is on the idea of a nation being blessed, as expressed in that verse we heard from the Psalms, Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord.” (Psalm 33:12) Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

In the opening sermon of this series, we considered the promise that God made to Abraham, which is foundational for the whole Biblical idea of blessedness, where God said, “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you.” (Genesis 12:2)

Centuries later, as the people of Israel were delivered from slavery in Egypt and were entering into the Promised Land, they remembered these words, and they understood themselves to be a nation blessed by God. Many centuries after that, as this nation was being formed and finally gained independence, our nation’s founders saw America as a kind of new Israel. Like the ancient Israelites, we had gained deliverance from bondage to tyranny, we were settling into a new Promised Land, and we were, in many ways, blessed by God.

But what does it mean for a nation to be blessed by God? We noted earlier in this sermon series how people have often wanted to think that to be blessed means to have lots of great stuff and good fortune. So a nation blessed by God would be nation that is prosperous and powerful, a nation that would be king of the hill among its neighbors. People in Israel often yearned for that kind of status, and they actually achieved such a status under King Solomon, but that ended up being not such a great time, because Solomon forgot God, and the whole nation started a downhill slide.

The actual Biblical idea of blessedness, we noted previously in this series, is that to be blessed is to live in harmony with God and to be a part of God’s purposes; so a nation that is blessed will be a nation that is godly and good. These themes appear prominently in the Bible. The Psalmist was pointing to the importance of godliness with the words, “Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord.” Blessedness begins with a connection to God, and so the people of Israel were urged to remember that it was only by trusting in God that they would find national well-being. “Some trust in chariots, and some in horses,” the Psalmist would say, “but we remember the name of the Lord our God.” (Psalm 20:7) Today we could look in all sorts of directions in the quest for national well-being, but we are again reminded to look above all to God. The founders of our country were quite convinced of this truth. Benjamin Rush, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, declared, “The only foundation for the republic is to be laid in Religion. Without this there can be no virtue, and without virtue there can be no liberty.” [Benjamin

Rush, Surgeon General], and likewise George Washington wrote, “True religion affords to government its surest support.” [Letter to John Armstrong, 1792]

During our nation’s toughest times, Americans have often called to mind this truth: that we need the strength and guidance of God. It was in 1864, as the Civil War continued to drag on, that Congress first put “In God we trust” on the nation’s coins—an expression of what many in the country were feeling, that we needed God to get us through this mess. And it was in 1956, in the midst of the Cold War, that Congress permanently affixed on the nation’s coinage and currency the phrase “In God we trust”—affirming in the face of Soviet expansionism and the threat of nuclear war that we needed to be looking to a higher power. Surely we need to be looking to God today.

But of course, saying we trust in God, and even sticking the words on our coins, means nothing unless it shapes how we live in the world. Genuine faith will lead to goodness. In the Scriptures we read over and over about the sort of nation that God was calling the Israelites to be—that God was calling them not so much to be rich or prestigious or powerful; God was calling them to be good. “Righteousness exalts a nation,” say the Proverbs (Proverbs 14:34). And the Bible gives us a very clear picture of what a righteous society—a society in harmony with God and God’s aims—will look like. God called the people of Israel to care for the needy and the poor [*You shall open wide your hand to the needy and the poor in your land. Deuteronomy 15:11*]. God called the people to welcome the stranger in their land with equity and love, reminding them that they also had once been strangers in the land of Egypt. [*The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born; love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. Leviticus 19:34*] God called the people to stand up for those in the society who were powerless and to advocate for them, which especially in that day meant helping orphans and widows. [*Learn to do good. Seek justice. Reprove the ruthless. Defend the orphan. Plead for the widow. Isaiah 1:17*]. God called the people overall to “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.” (Amos 5:24)

It has often happened throughout history that nations and groups have wanted God . . . without the goodness part. People have wanted God to advance their side in a self-centered war or to grant them dominance and glory. The latest most glaring example of people wanting religion without goodness is of course the Islamic state. But the Scripture is clear when it declares, “Anyone who says, “I love God,” and hates his neighbor is a liar.” (1 John 4:20) We only have an authentic relationship with God if we are living with compassion.

So our nation is called to be both godly and good. George Washington put it well: “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality [godliness and goodness] are indispensable.”

But what can we do as individual followers of Jesus if our nation at times seems to be less than godly and not so good? We don’t want to try to force religious faith on society—to do so makes religion inauthentic—and when it comes to the goodness of

society, it may seem that we are far too small to have much of an effect. But Jesus offers a very helpful image in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount with the Beatitudes—a set of eight sayings about the blessed life which we have begun considering in this sermon series, and we will continue that next Sunday. Then, after describing in the Beatitudes what the blessed life looks like, the very next thing Jesus says is, “You are the salt of the earth.” (Matthew 5:13)

Salt is small. We use it in little grains. Yet a little bit of it has a big effect, and it permeates all that it touches.

We may be small, but as we act in the world under the empowerment of Jesus Christ, witnessing to God’s truth and reaching out in God’s love, we can have a major effect. We are called to be the salt for our society—living in such a way that the Spirit of God can be at work through us, permeating our society, and so we can be instruments of God’s blessing in our time.

And this connects directly with God’s promise to Abraham. God had said, “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you,” and then God continued, “so that you will be a blessing.” (Genesis 12:2) People are truly blessed when they become a blessing. May we look to God in faith today and join in the movement of God’s Spirit, so that as individuals, and as a nation, we may indeed bring blessing to today’s world.