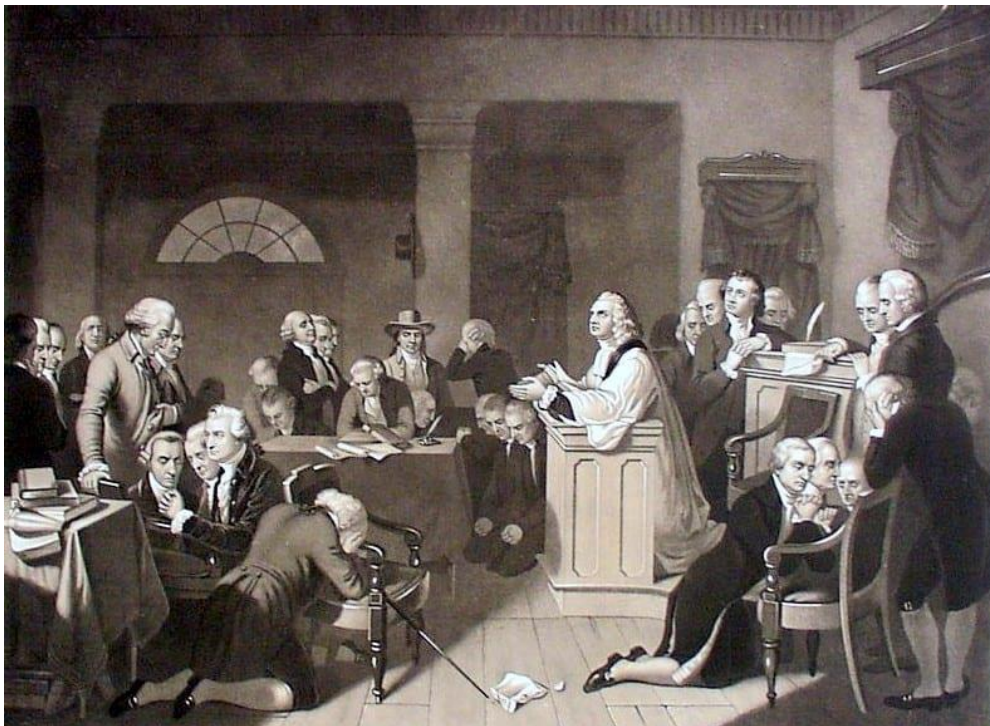




SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, JULY 6, 2025
ISAIAH 66:10-14; PSALM 66:1-8; GALATIANS 6:3-17; LUKE 10:1-11, 16-20

THE JOYS AND SORROWS OF THE AMERICAN EXPERIMENT



July 6, 1775...

250 years ago today the Continental Congress published a *Declaration of the Causes and Necessity to Take Up Arms*. Drafted by Thomas

Jefferson and Thomas Dickinson, it outlined the reasons why the Thirteen American Colonies had taken up arms against Great Britain. The first skirmishes of Lexington and Concord were

just three months past; George Washington had assumed command of the fledgling Colonial Army on July 3rd, and the colonists mustered the courage to lean fully into rebellion, having tried unsuccessfully for a decade to appeal to the British government for relief from oppressive taxation and restrictions on trade.

This Declaration was a precursor for the one claiming Independence that would come one year later. It is also the grounding document for what would become the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution sixteen years later, stating that “A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.” The challenges of gun violence in our nation today teeter on the interpretive fulcrum of that short sentence, so this is more than historical artifact; it is a part of the story we continue to live today.

Each year around the Fourth of July, when some orient to fireworks or boating or barbecues, I find myself reading from the corpus of American historical literature, searching for new insight that might inform who we are today and where we are heading. And lest this seem out of place here this morning, let us remember that the Episcopal Church, founded alongside and within the nascent United States, holds Independence Day as a Principal Feast Day of the Church.

For all its goodness and its shortcomings, the American experiment bears witness to the reality that Archbishop Cranmer claimed three

centuries earlier in the first Book of Common Prayer: “there was never any thing by the wit of man so well devised, or so surely established, which in the continuance of time hath not been corrupted.”

And so, for example, in 1852, abolitionist Frederick Douglass shared a scathing indictment of the nation in his Independence Day speech, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” “This freedom gained is yours,” he said, “this Fourth of July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn.”

There are several references to rejoicing in today’s scriptures—Isaiah, the psalm, the gospel all orient to rejoicing. And yet these scriptures were each written against a backdrop of oppression and suffering, each in different eras of history for God’s people, and so this is not some invitation to blissful ignorance or denial of reality.

Hugo Rahner (the lesser known brother of Karl Rahner) was a theologian in his own right whose best known work, *Man at Play*, teases out this tension of joy and sorrow in theological terms.

Existence is a joyful thing, because it is secure in God; . . . it is also a tragic thing, because freedom must always involve peril. . . . It is a mixture of joy and sorrow...

He goes on to say that we can have a “spiritual elegance” in our rejoicing even while the gentle ironies of life fill our eyes with tears of sorrow which serve as prism through which we see the

“tragically ridiculous masks” of life, and the shortcomings of human existence.¹

A nation is no different really, and as people of faith who are citizens too, our work, it seems to me, includes an informed critique of love of country whereby we learn, remember and repent of the sins as a means of building a better future. Henri Nouwen said the Church is to be a “living reminder” to the nation, of what is good and where we fall short.

Some years ago, while reading from the oeuvre of American history, I came upon an op-ed piece from 1951 in the Daily Oklahoman written by Elmer Patterson. He attributes this statement to a 19th Century Scotsman:

"A democracy ... can only exist until the majority [of its citizens] discovers it can vote itself largess out of the public treasury. After that, the majority always votes for the candidate promising the most benefits with the result the democracy collapses ...always to be followed by a dictatorship, then a monarchy."²

The Tytler Cycle, as it has come to be known, suggests that democratic republics like ours follow a predictable pattern. As you listen to me describe the sequential pattern, consider the American experience:

When faced with the experience of 1) Bondage, the people oppose the conditions, leading to a

common narrative of 2) Faith guided by deeply held moral convictions that foster unity of purpose, giving rise to 3) Courage with which the people rise up to fight for their freedom, which brings 4) Liberty and Prosperity, or what we Americans would call the pursuit of happiness.

This leads to an era of 5) Abundance and growth, which fosters the people orienting to material and wealth acquisition. Selfishness develops as folks lose the common faith and orient to self-interest, leading to entitlement and 6) Complacency, and ultimately 7) Apathy, which is when the government “of the people, by the people, for the people” gives way to dependence and back to bondage.³

Now lest you hear that as cynicism or resignation to some ill-fated horizon, let me remind you that these postulations were shared into the public discourse at least 75 years ago, and we are still here. So I would caution against too quickly declaring the demise of our democracy. What is clear is that we have work to do, friends, as citizens and as people of faith.

Here on this holiday weekend, this Feast Day weekend, when we are reminded of the origins of a nation, we are obliged to remember all that is cause to rejoice, while also mourning where we have fallen short, and continue to do so. And we are called to be a living reminder of both, so that we might orient toward building a more perfect

¹ As quoted by Martin Marty. [The Christian Century, Dec.1, 1999.](#)

² As cited: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Fraser_Tytler,_Lord_Woodhouselee

³ Ibid. The quote “of the people, by the people, for the people” is Abraham Lincoln’s.

union, a more healed future, with liberty and justice for all.

I will end with William Sloane Coffin's admonition. He said there are three kinds of patriots, two bad, one good. "The bad patriots are the uncritical lovers and the loveless critics of

their country. The good patriots are those who carry on a lover's quarrel with their country, a reflection of God's eternal lover's quarrel with the world."⁴

God has not seen fit to give up on us yet; we should not give up either.

Psalm 66:1-8

*1 Be joyful in God, all you lands; *
sing the glory of his Name;
sing the glory of his praise.*

*2 Say to God, "How awesome are your deeds! *
because of your great strength your enemies cringe before you.*

*3 All the earth bows down before you, *
sings to you, sings out your Name."*

*4 Come now and see the works of God, *
how wonderful he is in his doing toward all people.*

*5 He turned the sea into dry land,
so that they went through the water on foot, *
and there we rejoiced in him.*

*6 In his might he rules for ever;
his eyes keep watch over the nations; *
let no rebel rise up against him.*

*7 Bless our God, you peoples; *
make the voice of his praise to be heard;*

*8 Who holds our souls in life, *
and will not allow our feet to slip.*

⁴ As cited by Peter Marty, The Christian Century, July 2025, pg. 1.