

Beyond Nation
Psalm 33:8-15; Acts 4:23-31
West Valley Presbyterian
July 2, 2023

1. As Americans, we are right to celebrate the founding of America on July 4, 1776, when the Continental Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence, severing our relationship as colonies of Great Britain. We are right to pray for our nation, on the 4th of July and any day of the year. There are plenty of examples of that in Psalms. Let's look at Psalm 33, vv 8-15 as an example:

8 Let all the earth fear the Lord;
let all the people of the world revere him.
9 For he spoke, and it came to be;
he commanded, and it stood firm.
10 The Lord foils the plans of the nations;
he thwarts the purposes of the peoples.
11 But the plans of the Lord stand firm forever,
the purposes of his heart through all generations.
12 Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord,
the people he chose for his inheritance.
13 From heaven the Lord looks down
and sees all mankind;
14 from his dwelling place he watches
all who live on earth—
15 he who forms the hearts of all,
who considers everything they do.

2. The Psalms teach us that yes, we should pray for our nation; and also, that God does not automatically bless what a nation does. In 33:10 we read, "The Lord foils the plans of the nations; he thwarts the purposes of the peoples." Why is that? Because "the plans of the Lord stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations." God's plans outrank the plans that people might have for their nation. God is far greater than any people, or any nation, or any planet. A nation's hope lies not in claiming God as their own. A nation's hope lies in allowing God to claim them as his own.

3. The first Christians were certainly aware that the power of God is infinitely greater than the power of the state.

A. Earlier in Acts 4, two weeks ago, we talked about how Peter and John were brought before the Sanhedrin, the highest Jewish legal body within Judea; and about how God not only healed the man crippled from birth, but also gave Peter and John the courage to defy the Sanhedrin's order to quit talking about Jesus.

B. Today, we're going to see what happens when Peter and John return to their own people and tell them what the Sanhedrin said – namely, "quit talking to people in Jesus' name".

C. Today we'll be studying Acts 4:23-31. Hear now the word of God.

SLIDES 5 - 9

²³ On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. ²⁴ When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. ²⁵ You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David:

"Why do the nations rage
and the peoples plot in vain?
²⁶ The kings of the earth rise up
and the rulers band together
against the Lord
and against his anointed one.^{[a]'}^[b]

²⁷ Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. ²⁸ They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. ²⁹ Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. ³⁰ Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus."

³¹ After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly." Here ends the reading of God's Holy Word. Thanks be to God.

4. This is not Peter and John praying. This is the congregation praying. And what they are praying isn't what we might have expected them to do. Let's try a thought experiment. Suppose that here in West Valley, Christians were not allowed to talk to non-Christians about Jesus. We do of course have freedom of religion. But suppose we didn't. Suppose I got arrested, and the judge told me, "You are just causing too much trouble with all this Jesus talk. Stop it. And if you don't, then next time I'm sending you to prison." How would you as a congregation pray for me when I came back? How would you pray for yourselves? What would you say? // Maybe something along the lines of, "Oh God, keep us all safe, we don't want to get into trouble?"

5. That was NOT what the early Christian congregation prayed for, was it? The congregation was led by the Holy Spirit to pray not for safety, but for boldness. And it was the congregation's prayer, wasn't it? Peter and John didn't lead them in that prayer for boldness; the Holy Spirit did. So let's look more carefully at the prayer that the Holy Spirit led them to pray.

SLIDE 10

A. First, they start by addressing God as Sovereign Lord – the one who created all things and rules over all things: heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them.

B. Then they declare God's sovereignty over all nations and governments, by quoting Scripture. Specifically, they quote the first 2 verses of Psalm 2 – but by quoting part of the psalm, they are intending to include all of it. Like if I quoted, "We hold these truths to be self-evident", you would know immediately what I was quoting from, and you could probably complete the sentence. The Jewish people of Peter's day knew the psalms by heart, so if the congregation quotes 2 verses of Psalm 2, they would rightly assume that everyone who heard them could complete the psalm in their minds. Just to fill us in on the rest of the quotation, here are the whole of the first 6 verses:

- ¹ Why do the nations conspire^[a]
and the peoples plot in vain?
- ² The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together
against the LORD and against his anointed, saying,
- ³ "Let us break their chains
and throw off their shackles."
- ⁴ The One enthroned in heaven laughs;
the Lord scoffs at them.
- ⁵ He rebukes them in his anger
and terrifies them in his wrath, saying,
- ⁶ "I have installed my king
on Zion, my holy mountain."

Psalm 2 is a Messianic psalm, widely understood as referring to God's Messiah.

C. The congregation understands this Scripture as having been fulfilled in Jesus' death and resurrection, in accordance with God's will. In their prayer, they say, "Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen." Jesus' death and resurrection make sense to them. Now they can see and understand what God is doing right there in their midst, right in front of them. They are witnesses to nothing less than the turning point of all of human history and the redemption of humanity. And they are overcome with awe. They want nothing more than to be part of what God is doing.

D. I just want to emphasize here that this is not Peter and John's prayer. This is the congregation's prayer, and the congregation is praying, out loud, inspired by the Holy Spirit. And that's why, BTW, I try really hard to get members of the congregation to lead the prayers of the people. Of course I can lead prayers. But that's not the point. The Holy Spirit can and does talk to the congregation too. So the congregation can and should lead prayers too.

E. And what does the congregation pray for? Do they pray for safety? Do they pray for rescue? Do they pray for someone else to do God's work? NO. Remember, they want nothing

more than to be part of what God is doing. And so they pray for great boldness for themselves, so that they can be part of God's work. They say, "Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness." And then they ask God to continue to do miracles through the name of Jesus, so that they would have something to talk with great boldness about. And then, the name of Jesus would be proclaimed everywhere and people would come to faith in him.

F. Let's just pause there and think for a minute. Have you ever prayed for great boldness, at any point in your life? If you have, why were you praying that particular prayer? What did you need boldness for? And what happened when you prayed for boldness? If you haven't ever prayed for great boldness, why not? Maybe you've never needed to, because you've never been in a situation that required it? Or maybe you've never wanted to be bold, because it was just too scary?

6. And what happened when the whole congregation prayed to be able to speak about Jesus with great boldness? Their request was granted. The place where they were meeting – presumably a very large room since we're told back in verse 4 of this chapter that there were now 5000 believers – was shaken as a sign of God's power present in their midst. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit, just as the 120 disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. And they all spoke the word of God boldly.

7. Today, we have already prayed for our nation, as it is right for us to do. We are fortunate to have been born and raised as Americans; and since our country isn't perfect, we should be praying – together with our fellow citizens - that God would cleanse us of wrongdoing and lead us in righteousness. And, the example of the early church shows us, that it's much more important for us to pray that God would allow us to be part of what he is doing: in our midst, in this church, right here and right now. It's a lot more important to actually pray boldly, ourselves, as a congregation, and ask God to allow us to speak his word with great boldness. It's even more important to pray boldly, and ask that God would show us what he is doing in our midst. It's even more important to ask God what he wants us to do, so that we can cooperate with what he is already doing in our midst. It's even more important to ask for the grace to speak God's word with great boldness.

8. So here's what we're going to do. We're going to spend some time in prayer. I'll start us off, and then I'll sit down and be quiet. And it will be your turn. As the congregation did the praying back then, so I ask the congregation to do some praying now. Either out loud or silently, it doesn't matter. And let's just see what the Holy Spirit might do when we pray for boldness! The church planters are hoping to come before Christmas. Maybe we can help get God's word to whoever needs to hear it. Maybe we can speak with great boldness too! After some minutes, as the Spirit leads, I will close our prayer; we will move into communion with our Lord Jesus, and we will sing "I Surrender All".

Let's pray.