



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

Let Us Walk in the Light of the Lord

SERMON BY REV. STEVEN GRANT ■ JULY 1, 2018

The prophet Isaiah shared these wonderful and beautiful words from Almighty God in Isaiah 2:1-5 (ESV):

The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

²It shall come to pass in the latter days
that the mountain of the house of the LORD
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be lifted up above the hills;
and all the nations shall flow to it,

³ and many peoples shall come, and say:
“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob,
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.”

For out of Zion shall go forth the law,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

⁴ He shall judge between the nations,
and shall decide disputes for many peoples;
and they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war anymore.

⁵ O house of Jacob,
come, let us walk in the light of the LORD.

What magnificent words of hope for all of us. It has been said that these words from the prophet Isaiah reveal the triumph of God’s purpose which would come to pass if nations would just learn God’s

way as the only and the best way. They also give encouragement to all Christians because the vision that Isaiah gives us is, in fact, what we are to expect when Christ returns as He promised He will. When He returns, He will make all things right. In the meantime, these words are a call to live out this vision. That is what he means when he says, "Let us walk in the light of the Lord."

This vision can be observed in God's people as they "walk in the light," living by His ways. Of course, the struggle that people have had since the Garden of Eden is that His ways are not naturally ours. As fallen beings, we tend to go our own way with our own agendas guided by a different priority. There are times when God's way may seem the harder way, but what Isaiah is trying to teach is that the world can get a glimpse of what to expect over the horizon of history by what they observe in us. Notice that Isaiah's wording is not wishful thinking. Isaiah does not say, "Oh, gee, wouldn't it be nice if..." or "Don't we wish that..." Instead, his working is in the form of a promise: this is what **is** going to happen. That should be encouraging to us to persevere in walking in the ways of the Lord.

Some of you may be thinking, and in fact I have already heard this morning, "What is the matter with you? Why didn't you wear a patriotic tie like you usually do? Dr. Pratt wore one, the sanctuary is filled with American flags, we have the awesome brass quartet here, and this is our Fourth of July service. Why didn't you wear your patriotic tie?" Oh, but I did! This tie, as a matter-of-fact, is very patriotic. This tie is in the pattern of the flag that always flew outside of George Washington's headquarters, including Valley Forge (or Valley of the Forge, as Washington referred to it). Wherever you saw the flag, whether at the headquarters building or a tent, you knew that Washington was there. The flag had thirteen six-pointed stars on a field of blue.

People wonder how we went from the six-pointed star on Washington's flag, to the five-pointed star that graces our modern flag. The reason is not symbolic, but very simple. A five-pointed star is easier to make. Legend has it that there was a conversation with Betsy Ross

about the number of stars and flags that would be needed. Making six-pointed stars required a lot of work, but one could fold a piece of material a certain way and with one snip, create a five-pointed star. I wore this tie representing Washington's flag with the six-pointed stars for a very specific reason and for a very specific time of remembrance.

Sometimes George Washington is lifted up for his greatness as the Father of our Country more because of what he did **not** do than for what he **did** do. First, he did **not** accept the crown when it was offered to him. Who does that? Throughout the history of humanity, when a victorious general won a war, he immediately became the emperor or the king or the potentate of the country. When this was offered to George Washington, his response was, "I did not fight a revolution against George III to become George II!" Rather, his goal was to return to his beloved Mount Vernon and live out his life as a farmer. The second thing that he did **not** do was he did not quit at Valley Forge even though he could have. In fact, he was advised to quit, but he refused to give up.

My friends, as we celebrate Independence Day, it is very natural and appropriate for us to remember key Founding Fathers and there are the usual handful that we remember, like Franklin and Adams and Jefferson and Washington. But there are so many more; there are scores of them that we should remember but oftentimes never mention. Most notably for us, we must remember our good friend John Witherspoon whose picture hangs in the Lightner Conference Room. He was the only clergyman—a Presbyterian, by the way—who signed the Declaration of Independence. There are others, like Gouverneur Morris, Roger Sherman, Richard Henry Lee, James Wilson, Charles Thompson, and scores more who made a profound impact on the forming of America. Their achievements were great, and they established enduring principles that inspired not only Americans but the world.

Today I invite you to remember our Revolutionary story, perhaps in a different way. Recently I had the privilege of once again

assisting Dr. Peter Lillback in leading a tour for 55 people at Valley Forge (or Valley of the Forge). It is always an amazing experience to reflect on what happened there and what it meant. The part that always affects me most is standing in front of the reproductions of the soldiers' huts. These reproductions are much nicer than the ones that were originally there. I lament that this part of the tour is frequently passed by quickly. As I stand there, I think about the men who were in those huts. When the Army arrived, nothing was there. They had just suffered defeat at Brandywine and Germantown and a massacre at Paoli, and now they were coming into winter quarters where they first had to build their own huts.

As already noted, one of the great things about Washington was that he did not quit. But think about the young man in that hut. He did not quit either. I do not know his name. He is buried somewhere in America, maybe no one knows where. When Washington looked over in the freezing cold, that young man was there, steadfast at his duty. When it was time to move out, Washington looked over and that young man was there with a musket in his hand. When I stand in front of those huts, I know he was there because this nation exists! If he had not been there, if he had not done his duty, there would be no America. That young man was a true Founding Father! Though we may not know his name, he must always be remembered with a profound sense of gratitude.

Think about what he could have done. He had just come from battles where he saw many of his friends and colleagues maimed and killed. They did not have shoes and their clothes were inadequate for the winter. George Washington used to say that you could always follow the trail of his troops, not because of the footprints in the sand, but because of the blood of their feet. They were in those little huts with perhaps 10 or 12 other guys who also had not bathed in a month; they were freezing, there was no food, disease was rampant throughout the camp, and a German guy, Baron von Steuben, wanted them to drill on a daily basis.

The enemy, meanwhile, was well-fortified with all the ammunition and the cannons they needed, occupying Philadelphia, and living in nice homes. We can imagine that the young man was sitting in his hut, thinking about his own family, wondering if they were okay. If they were, there would have been a roaring fire in their house with Mama's best recipes cooking on the hearth. The man could very easily have said, "The heck with this! I'm going home!" He could have gone home if he wanted to, especially if his enlistment papers had expired. A few did go home; some went home and came back, but many left and never came back. The young man that I want you remember did not leave; he stayed. He endured, so that you and I could live as we do. We can afford to fuss over our day-to-day activities and annoyances; we can spend our lives pursuing and satisfying our ambitions, our sense of calling, even our self-indulgence, because that young man did his duty. He was faithful, perhaps even unto death.

If you look at Washington's headquarters, you might think in contrast that he got to spend his time in a beautiful house with all the comforts of home, but you would be wrong. Washington did not enter that house until every single one of his men were under roof. He stayed in his tent until every single one of them had a place. Even then, at any one time the house had as many as 20-35 men operating out of it 24/7! At the time they were at Valley Forge, Congress was on the run and the country was basically being run by George Washington. His headquarters served as not only the president's house and the general's house, it also served as the Congress, the Pentagon, and the CIA. Every agency necessary to run a country was operating out of this house, each with the appropriate staff. Washington did not have all the comforts of home as he was living in the midst of all these other men.

One consolation was that Martha Washington joined him during the winter months when the war was on "pause" (because they did not battle during the winter months). She used to say that she arrived after the last bullet was fired and left before the first one came

in the spring. (That is why crossing the Delaware and the battles of Trenton and Princeton were so profound; they happened in the middle of winter when no one expected it.) It was touching that Martha came, because when George Washington accepted the commission from Congress to be the head of the armies he promised Martha that he would return by Christmas Eve. The problem was he did not inform her of the year. True to form, he walked through the front door of his beloved Mount Vernon on Christmas Eve eight years later. Not once did he set foot on his property for eight long years!

What I find amazing is that through his profound leadership ability, Gen. Washington was able to keep an army intact in the midst of all the things that I have just described, and how because of his leadership that young man in the hut did not quit. Washington managed to inspire [within his men] a devotion to a cause greater than themselves and to make the sacrifice to sustain that inspiration over an eight-year period. They did not quit.

I would like to think that if I had been there, I would have been like that young man. How do I really know? How does anyone really know how they will act in a given situation? No one really knows until he is in that situation. The one clue we have is that in that moment, a person will draw on what is already inside himself. Jesus once said, "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34), meaning that whatever comes out of us is already inside. It begs the question: Before a crisis comes, with what have we filled our inner spiritual and moral reservoirs? With what are we feeding our souls? What is within us? From what fount do we draw in moments of crisis or challenge? The **real self** is going to come out in a moment of challenge. In that moment of crisis, what is already in you is what is going to come forward. That is how you know what you are made of. That is how you know what your values are and who you are. When we say someone "rises to the challenge," he or she is drawing from within. You cannot in an instant become someone you were not before. It behooves us to take good care of our souls before the crisis comes.

As much as I love America, and I do, I am called upon, as are we all, to love the Lord Jesus even more. I would like to think that, like the apostle Peter, I would be inclined to declare that “though they all fall away, because of you I will never fall away” (Matthew 26:33). You remember Jesus said to Peter that “this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times” (Matthew 26:34). Peter’s response in verse 35 was, “Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!” Of course, we know how that turned out. But Peter did eventually die for Him; he was martyred for his Lord Jesus. That is because after the resurrection, Peter was transformed from the inside out. His heart was fully and permanently changed so that when the moment of crisis came Peter did not forsake his Lord the second time.

Though the church has been built on the blood of martyrs, you and I may never be called to give the ultimate sacrifice for our Lord in part because of the sacrifice of that young man in the freezing hut at Valley Forge. But we are often called to make sacrifices for Him on a daily basis by the decisions we make every moment of every day. The inner struggle to live God’s way rather than our own way is a constant battle; it is a constant spiritual struggle. It can be about little, itty-bitty things or about very large, significant things.

Historians have said that there were a multitude of soldiers who would have followed the likes of Gen. Washington, Gen. Grant, or Gen. Patton to the ends of the earth. Their devotion to one gifted with such extraordinary leadership was unmistakable and unshakable. The challenge for us in the face of this is: To what extent are we equipped to follow our Lord Jesus in our own homes and communities and social situations? Yes, even here in the church. The battle for the Lord’s kingdom is going on all the time. You need not go very far to find the Lord’s battle. Every place on the planet is the Lord’s mission field. Every situation is an opportunity to further His purpose, and every encounter all day long can be either a witness or a denial. The battle for His kingdom is always right in front of us. Upon what reservoir are we drawing in every one of those instances?

Our weapons to build the kingdom are not guns or cannons or bombs though, unfortunately in human life, there are times when those things are necessary. We do not take delight in the destruction of an enemy, but sometimes to achieve a higher goal to stop evil and to protect the children of God and restore the possibility of peace, armed conflict may be necessary. It is not our choice. If we can achieve it in any other way, we will do so. That is why Ecclesiastes 3 says, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven" including "a time for war, and a time for peace."

In building the Kingdom of God, Almighty God gives us tools as taught and embodied by our Master. He taught us that if we love Him, we will keep His commandments. If we truly love Him, His ways become our ways; in this, others will know that we are His disciples. Do you follow how that works? If we love Him; if our love for Him is above any other love, then we will follow His commandments; we will do things His way. When we do things His way, others will see that we are His disciples and not the disciples of something else.

One of the most dramatic examples of this took place at the Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Perhaps you remember this. One evening back in 2015, a group of saints from the church gathered together for a Bible study, just like the many small groups here in this church that gather together for Bible study. After they began their meeting, a young Caucasian man by the name of Dylann Roof came into the church and joined the Bible study. He sat down next to one of the pastors to listen to the Bible study and was made to feel welcome. He was spoken to very kindly as they shared the gospel with each other and with him. Toward the end of that Bible session, Dylann Roof stood up, pulled out a weapon, and began firing on the Bible class. Five of them perished as a result of the attack. It is almost inconceivable the sorrow, the grief, yes, even the anger that those families and that church must have experienced after the incident. The saints of that church knew their Lord and their Master; and what is so profoundly moving is the way in which they chose to respond to this tragic event, even though

every molecule of their bodies must have wanted to lash out in anger and despair.

It reminds me of a scene from the wonderful musical "Fiddler on the Roof." The Cossacks had just destroyed the wedding celebration of Tevye's daughter. It is a serious moment as Tevye looks up to God and, with a bewildered gesture, seems to be asking, "Why?" What can one say in a moment such as this?

The day of the hearing when Dylann was officially charged, members of the church and particularly members of the victims' families were present. One by one they got up and spoke directly to Dylann saying, "As much as my heart hurts, as much as I grieve, in the name of the Lord Jesus, I forgive you." There were some of the church that could not bring themselves to do that, understandably, but most of them stood up and forgave him publicly. One man, the pastor's son, even got up and said, "Dylann, you need to come to know the Lord Jesus. He will change your life."

Some people were totally mystified by this; they could not understand it at all. Other people mocked them saying that the church members were cowards, that they had sold out or were in denial. It was similar to the reactions on Pentecost when the Christians were accused of being drunk. The impact of the church's reaction was felt throughout the community: there were no riots, no clashes with the police, no destruction of property or further killing. Instead, because of the witness of good faith by this church, a few days later on the Ashley River bridge, African-Americans and Caucasians were holding hands and singing hymns. They took this opportunity to bring the community together by sharing a redeeming witness of the grace and love of Jesus Christ. They brought reconciliation and healing to the community. They also reached out and ministered to Dylann's family.

This is very, very difficult. This is something that is not easily done. Upon what reservoir were they drawing? They could have chosen to let the natural attributes of fallen man come out. They could have lashed out in anger, but instead, in their most sorrowful moment, they witnessed to the Kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The truth is that it takes sacrifices. Perhaps not our mortal lives, but maybe the sacrifice of our perceived self-interest. Perhaps we must endure the mockery of those who do not yet know Him.

I submit to you this morning that not only for the sake of God's kingdom, but for the good of America both sacred and secular, Christians must lead the way by exemplifying what Americans have understood from the nation's founding: sacrificial devotion, virtue, and Christ-centered ethics and values must be at the core of our life if we are to thrive as a Republic. If we are to continue as an open society and a Republic, **we are dependent on one another to behave.** As John Adams said, "Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other." Benjamin Franklin was a great proponent of people going to church, as he thought it made better citizens. If we do not have a moral consensus in this country the authorities will have to impose more and more restrictions on us to keep order. Have you been in an airport lately? Do you remember what it was like going into an airport about 40 years ago? How different! It is not because maintaining a higher moral/ethical Christ-centered consensus is convenient (as it often is not), or because it satisfies our perceived self-serving personal advantage, but because it is the right thing to do; we are dependent on each other to do so.

Take heart when people resist or even mock Christian witness. Even the giants of our history were often portrayed in less than flattering ways. John Adams, for instance, was portrayed as an ambitious tyrannical potentate who wanted to be king. Thomas Jefferson was characterized as a godless pagan. There were many times when Abraham Lincoln, who, next to Washington, is often considered our greatest president, was portrayed as a grotesque baboon. Remember when John F. Kennedy was running for president and there was an accusation that he would be a puppet of the Roman pontiff? Ronald Reagan was often presented as one who deliberately withheld food from children and homeless people. Christians are not exempt from such treatment. In fact, we have been taught to expect it.

Jesus taught us in John 15:8, “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.” There is a word of hope in this because He assures us that when they reject us they are rejecting Him. Do you know what is so exciting about this? Despite that rejection, despite all that may go against the Kingdom of God, Jesus Christ has **already won the victory!** He has already died for our sins, was resurrected, and sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty and is still Sovereign of the universe! You must ask yourself whether you choose to follow Him or the ways of the fallen world.

This brings us back to Isaiah’s vision. As Washington inspired his men with a vision of a cause greater than themselves—the cause of this nation with freedom as its creed—so Jesus came ultimately to fulfill the promise that God revealed in the words of Isaiah when peace would fill the earth. We are taught that by following Him we would walk in the light of the Lord. In so doing, we witness to God’s goal by the way we engage in the battles of everyday life.

The statue of Washington at Valley Forge is very informative. Note the symbolism the artist uses in the statue. Washington is in his military uniform, however, what he is trying to show is that Washington’s attitude was that his military service was not an end in itself, but a means to a goal. In his hand is not the sword; it has been pushed way over to his side and is barely visible. He is holding the cane of a civilian gentleman. At his feet is a farmer’s implement, a plowshare. Going back to the passage in Isaiah 5:4, “...and they shall beat their swords into plowshares... neither shall they learn war anymore.”

As part of the statue, there is what looks like a pillar next to Washington. It is actually a bundle of rods that represented civil authority back in Roman times. The emperor would hold one rod in his hand indicating that all civil authority was in the palm of his hand. These rods are not in Washington’s hand; he is standing beside them. There are 13 of them bound together which, of course, gives them more strength.

Washington's goal in the eight years of military service was to finally bring us to the place of his favorite Bible passage, Micah 4:4, which says: "...but they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid, for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken."

His labors were not an end in themselves, but a means to a higher end. Sacrifice and devotion to virtue as defined by Almighty God has built the Church and this great nation. I pray, my friends, that our lives as American citizens, and more importantly as the citizens of the kingdom of God, will reflect that same sacrificial devotion to the greater cause of family, God, and country just like that nameless hero in a humble, freezing hut in the wilderness of Pennsylvania.

May God be glorified and praised, and may God always bless America. Amen.

