

"A Messenger of Satan"

Ezekiel 2:1-5, 2 Corinthians 12:2-10, Mark 6:1-13

July 5, 2009

Well - - I hope you all had a safe and exciting weekend. I suspect that many of you have marked the July 4th holiday with some appropriate activities, gathering with family - special festive meals - fireworks - mowing the lawn - I suspect that there are many ways that people can celebrate this holiday that we call Independence Day. Is it worth celebrating and remembering even though it is really one of those holidays that we perhaps spend more time with the fireworks than really reflecting on what it is that we are celebrating.

As I was doing some reading this week someone noted that we should be clear that when we celebrate on July 4th, it is not really the anniversary of our independence but actually it is the 'declaration of our independence' that we celebrate. There would be years of struggle that would follow that declaration that was made on July 4th, 1776. It took 7 years of struggle before a constitution would be signed setting up the operating principles for the new nation. But that first bold step had to be taken. This weekend we celebrate the fact that a group of people stood up - they took a stand and stood behind the stand they took.

I have always been taken by the slogan on the New Hampshire license plates. It is a slogan, made famous by Revolutionary War general John Stark - "live free or die.". It reminds me a bit of another saying that I have heard that says, "It is better to die on your feet than to live on your knees!" Take a stand for freedom and life - fight for what you believe in. These are the kind of sentiments that we celebrate this weekend. At a point in our history there were those who were willing to stand up and fight for the life that they longed for. It is not easy. And we remember with thankfulness those who, not only in 1776 but over the centuries have stood up for what they believed in so that we might live free.

The great irony behind the New Hampshire license plates and their bold slogan is the fact that the license plates are made by inmates in the state prison. They can not leave their prison, but have to stamp those word on each license plate while living in prison - live free or die. We long for all of the things that we celebrate on July 4th - freedom is certainly one of the words most prized in our nation. But it is still hard to stand up when we need to - not because we have prison bars standing in our way - but we do struggle with our own prisons of so many different kinds.

Think with me a bit about our scriptures today. Ezekiel is called by God to speak to the people of God who are living in exile - a nation that had seen great years of prosperity and growth but now had been conquered by a foreign nation. The people were no longer free - even Ezekiel himself was a prisoner in exile. But God calls him to stand up. "Stand on your feet and I will speak to you!" The way the text reads, it seems clear that Ezekiel doesn't really even have the strength or the willingness to stand up. But the spirit

of God enters him and stands him on his feet. God tells Ezekiel that there is a job to be done - a word to speak from God to the people. The people may not listen - it will not be easy - but take the stand never-the-less.

Jesus stands up to proclaim what He believes and is rejected by his home town folks - they think He is crazy - they think He is nobody. But Jesus takes his stand. And He pushes forward on the mission God has given Him no matter how many reject Him in the beginning. He sends His disciples out to preach and heal - to give freedom and life. They are largely uneducated and ill equipped for the task He gives them. Jesus acknowledges that it will not be easy and yet demands that they take their stand. He demands that they take their stand, so firmly trusting God that they do not take any of the normal comforts with them - rely on God, not the money in your wallet or the clothing in your closet. Stand up - trust God.

The apostle Paul stands up for his new found faith in Jesus as the savior from God. In Jesus he has found a new life and freedom. And no matter how radical the change in his life - no matter how difficult it is to proclaim Jesus in the face of all of the other beliefs that were a part of his world, no matter what struggles he had to face personally, he was determined to stand up for what he believed. In the text he even points to the fact that he had some physical weakness that made the task all the more difficult. He refers to that weakness as a 'thorn in the flesh'. Over the years various people have suggested things as varied as epilepsy and a speech impediment of some kind. What ever the problem Paul stood up and forged forward trusting in the grace and strength of God. Interestingly, Paul referred to this physical problem he had as a 'messenger of Satan' that tormented him. It is a powerful image. This problem that could well have made Paul stop his outreach efforts - a vague ailment that he came to see as Satan's way of trying to get him to stop doing what God wanted him to do. But once he had identified his struggle as such - he stood up and charged forward all the more trusting God. I love what he said: "10Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong." Nothing was going to stand in his way or side track him for his life in Christ.

I have pondered deeply what sort of message God wants us to hear on this 4th of July weekend when our thoughts turn to relaxation, friends, cookouts and the like. What message might there be for us on this weekend when we mark the anniversary of a Declaration of Independence because of which there would be great struggle and hardship before the new nation would know the freedom it longed for. Each of our three scriptures finds the people of God sent out with the Good News of God's Word - in each situation it is not easy. But in every case there will be success in the mission because of the strength and grace of God.

I found myself thinking about how often we fail to live boldly in that new life that God has given us in Christ. There are obstacles in our way. Sometimes we are as imprisoned by a great variety of things - much like the whole world around us. Sometimes we can find all kinds of excuses. It seems to me that no matter what the excuse ... it is nothing more than a 'messenger from Satan' coming to lead us away from God and the mission that He sets before us.

Stand up - don't let any of the messages from Satan detour you. Declare your new life in Christ as you put your trust more and more firmly in God. There is an incredible freedom and life that God chooses to give you. I do truly believe that all of the excuses,

the struggles, the hardship, the prisons we erect and more all fall into that category of 'messengers of Satan' - all of which simply try to divert us from life and freedom in Christ. Stand up with Ezekiel and Paul - stand up with Jesus and the disciples - and celebrate your declaration of new life which God longs to give you freely.

AMEN