



Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

July 4th, 2010

Daniel 2 (*selected verses*)

See a Nation Blessed by the Lord

Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. Amen. (2 Peter 1:2)

Dear people of the God of heaven, the God of gods, the Lord of kings, the revealer of mysteries,

“The United States of America is, at its very core and essence, a *Christian nation*. It was founded over two hundred years ago on Christian principles, by Christians, for Christians. Its presidents take their solemn oath of office on the Holy Bible, the Ten Commandments set our laws, and even our nickels and dimes proclaim our trust in God. No other nation could ever so rightfully make the boast, ‘One nation, Under God.’”

“The United States is *far* from being a *Christian nation*. The authors of its Constitution were more *deists* than *Christians*, it was created to be a land where religion was a point of personal piety, not state slogans, and the country itself was born in a revolution against the God-given authorities. No other nation on earth has been so consumed with its own greed, reckless in using its resources, slow to discipline its children and care for its elderly, or quick to turn our jobs and our houses into idols. America’s true love and trust isn’t in God himself, but the dollar his name is stamped on.”

Maybe you’ve heard people describe America in either of those two ways. Which America do you see when you look at her? The gleaming beacon of Christ’s light to the world? The shimmering idol of mankind’s greed gone wild? Or is the answer not as self-evident as we’d hoped it would be?

With a piece of parchment and a few strokes of a pen, our founding fathers formed a new country. We give thanks to God for that nation today. We sing, “God Bless our Native Land! Firm may she ever stand.” But if that’s all we do, our understanding of God’s true blessings and our true role in this country will fade just as quickly as the red glare of rockets bursting in air. Because by God’s grace, he’s called us to be his people living in this earthly nation. And by God’s grace, he’s made us people of a heavenly Kingdom. As we look to God in his Word this morning, may he lift up our eyes to **See a Nation Blessed by the Lord**.

There was once a nation that could rightfully lay claim to the title, “God’s people.” *In God We Trust* wasn’t just a slogan stamped on their coins; it was the very reason for their existence. The nation of Israel was the only true *theocracy* this world has ever seen – God himself formed them into a nation, handed them their laws, disciplined them when they went astray, and made his home among them. Growing up as a boy six hundred years before Christ was born, young Daniel could lift up his eyes and see his country’s capitol building: God’s temple, the presence of God himself, with his people. He could lift up his eyes and see his family served by priests who carried out the services and the sacrifices that pointed to the coming Savior. Daniel was living in a Christian nation, a beacon of Christ’s light.

Now, a prisoner in the nation of Babylon, Daniel could lift up his eyes and see King Nebuchadnezzar, the man who took all that away from him. Babylon was far from a Christian nation – full of shimmering idols to mankind’s greed and rebellion. Yet in this foreign country, far from home and temple, Daniel saw the same thing God gives us: great blessings from God, and a chance to serve his Savior.

There’s something so dangerously distracting about the focus on whether or not we have a *Christian nation*, or how *Christian* our leaders are, isn’t there? The question God wants us to be concerned about isn’t how outwardly Christian our government is. The question God asks is: How are you *as a Christian* living under the government I’ve given?

One night God sent King Nebuchadnezzar a dream that troubled him. A colossal statue made of strong and precious metals stood towering before Nebuchadnezzar in his dream – but not for long. As the King watched, a giant boulder came barreling towards it and smashed it into a million pieces. Then the rock did something that rocks don’t normally do. It grew bigger and bigger – larger than the statue itself ever was – until it covered the entire earth. The dream, God gave to Nebuchadnezzar; the meaning, God gave to Daniel, and still gives to you and me.

Daniel said to Nebuchadnezzar: “**You, O King, are the king of kings. The God of heaven has given you dominion and power and might and glory; in your hands he has placed mankind and the beasts of the field and the birds of the air. Wherever they live, he has made you ruler over them all. You are that head of gold.**” When Daniel looked at the man who killed his countrymen, ripped him from his home and brought him to the land of idols, he saw something that seems odd to us: God’s representative. God was blessing Daniel, even through a pagan king.

As a nation, it seems to be a point of pride, at times, to see how far we can tear down our leaders. They don’t always make it hard. How many have left office in disgrace in the last few years alone? How many have wound up in court? How many of them have had your prayers? How often have God’s people been too quick to speak badly about our leaders instead of speaking to God on their behalf and seeing them as his representatives? Even in an unchristian nation with an unchristian king, Daniel saw God’s power at work. As we celebrate our freedoms – perhaps greater than any the world has ever known, given through politicians good and bad, guarded by soldiers Christian and otherwise, may we see the same thing: a nation blessed by God.

But that wasn't all of God's message in the dream. Even though Nebuchadnezzar and his nation were the statue's head of gold, they weren't going to be around forever. Like a tolling funeral bell, Nebuchadnezzar heard Daniel explain, "**after you another kingdom will rise... next, a third kingdom... finally, there will be a fourth kingdom.**" You see, just like floods wash away belongings, fires burn down houses and sicknesses claim our loved ones, so too even Nebuchadnezzar's great kingdom would come and go. With prophetic precision, Daniel described how three other great kingdoms would come after Babylon – the Medo-Persians, the Greeks, and finally the Roman empire, strong as iron, that would crush and break everything in its path.

Can you imagine how Nebuchadnezzar heard those words? For all his power and might, he would end up little more than a footnote in history. For all his glory, his day would come and he would pass away. If he put his trust in himself, his power, his kingdom, he would watch it all crumble into dust. No lasting strength, no lasting blessing would come from his own power.

Even as we celebrate and give thanks for our nation and the blessings God gives us through it, that's a message we need to remember today, too. Who will carry you through the problems of this life? Who will keep your family safe under their sheets? Who will carry the message of the Christian Church to the next generation? Will it be the strength of a Christian nation? The policy of pious politicians? If those are where we place our hope, it will last no longer than the gleaming statue Nebuchadnezzar saw. Even kingdoms come and go. Should this world go on long enough, even our country will. Even you and I will, too.

But I almost forgot. That's wasn't the end of Nebuchadnezzar's dream. There was another Kingdom God wanted us to know about: "**In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever. This is the meaning of the vision of the rock cut out of a mountain, but not by human hands--a rock that broke the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver and the gold to pieces.**"

Brothers and sisters in Christ, you are part of a nation whose history is marked by faith and by failings, by great promise and great problem. But you're also part of a Kingdom. It wasn't created by the wars of man or the scheming of kings. God made it. In the time of the Roman kings, God brought a child into the world. The shepherds saw him and worshiped; the wise men gave him their gifts. But Jesus didn't create his kingdom by being served; he did it by serving. Even though he came with the power of the Lord God Almighty, he showed us true Christian humility and respect as he placed himself under the governing authorities – even under their whips. Even though the crown of heaven should have been on his brow, he served his people as king by wearing the thorny crown fit for rebels, the crown meant for you and me. Even though every nation belonged to him, he gave himself for the sins of every nation – he gave himself into death for you, and was placed cold into a tomb. But then the rock rolled. When the rock rolled away from Christ's tomb, he made himself known as the King he is – the King who reigns by forgiving, who rules by loving, who gives – gives! – his people a kingdom that will never fade away.

That Jesus is not America's mascot. His power doesn't come from having his name on our coins or spoken in our pledge. He is not content to simply be "America's God." He is King. He rules and blesses this world through far greater stuff than laws or pledges – he rules through his Word made known to you, and he blesses every nation through you, your service and your prayers. Raise his banner high! Raise high the banner of the Almighty God that he placed in your hands at your baptism as you daily turn from your sin to serve your Savior. Raise it high as you honor and serve your government as faithful Daniel once did – even as did Christ himself. Raise it high as with your words and gifts you make his name known to others. Raise it high by understanding that as much of a blessing it can be to pass laws that honor those things God tells us are true, making laws will never change hearts – sharing the gospel with others will change hearts. Raise it high as you serve God Most High by serving your country – and in this land where Christians have such freedom to do so, lift up your eyes and see a nation blessed by the Lord!

In 1776, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson gave America the Declaration of Independence. Years later, Adams asked Jefferson who he thought would be the one to write the history of the revolution. Jefferson's answer was simple: *Nobody*. Historians can record facts and dates, he said, but no one could truly communicate the sacrifices that took place, and what they all really meant. He was close. It's hard for anyone to put into words the service that so many people throughout our country give every day. But there is one who writes the meaning, one who knows the history. He's given this country to be a blessing to you as you serve him on earth. More than that, he's made you part of his eternal kingdom, and gives you to be a blessing to this country. As you celebrate that this weekend, you'll see an America full of problems and promises alike. By God's grace, may we see more than that. With Daniel, lift up your eyes and see a nation blessed by the Lord! Amen.

Now may the God of peace himself give you true peace at all times and in every way. Amen.