

Blessed and Tested 2012

Isaiah 60:1-6

Cradock Presbyterian Church

July 1, 2012

The background was slavery. Totally beaten by Babylon, the people were sent into exile in that strange land. They didn't have the Temple; they didn't have the places of their history; they didn't have anything but themselves. In that ancient world, conquering nations were more than a little unkind to the nations they'd beaten; the religions of the conquered peoples were belittled, and the exiles were often forced to practice the conqueror's religion – or die. The Book of Daniel was written in response to this, or to illustrate this, and to show the courage of Israel in defying Babylon, and remaining true to God.

As you look at this passage from Isaiah, you see a pattern: The prophet announces that there will be a light and glory to come. The people are now in darkness, the whole *earth* is now in darkness, but God will lift up the people – that's what "arise upon you" means – and nations and rulers will come to the glory and light of God that accompanies that rising. The rest of this prophecy expands upon the nations coming to that brightness, and what it will mean. Sons and daughters will come from far away, bringing even their infants; that means they're coming to stay, they're immigrants. **They're coming because they want to belong!** They're bringing great wealth. You'll become powerful, Israel, says God – that's what this business of "a multitude of camels" means. And those that come will praise God for their coming. **They'll praise God for the wonders of belonging to God's nation!** For a people lost in the darkness of slavery, these were incredible words of hope.

As I consider those words of Isaiah, and the pattern I see, I also see the pattern of the history of America in them. Am I being a bit “ethnocentric”, a bit too full of nationalistic pride? Maybe. But is there another nation to which others yearn so much to belong? Well?

This country’s history began in a couple of hallowed places, in Jamestown and at Plymouth Rock. They came to establish trade, sure, but both groups also came escape slavery, of a sort: persecution for their religious beliefs. As the colonies grew in wealth and number of people, the crown became more oppressive in its efforts to control *everything*; it got so bad, and the oppression increasingly violent, that in 1774, the War for Independence, the Revolutionary War, broke out. I think you could almost parallel the War for Independence with Israel’s battles on the way to the promised land! This was formative stuff, the making of a people. After the war, there was the Constitution, a modern “giving of the law”; then there was the westward expansion, almost like a wandering in the wilderness. But we’re getting ahead of ourselves. We could find many parallels in our history and Israel’s but let’s stay right here at the beginning. The colonists were enslaved – there’s no other way to put it. The efforts of King George to teach those colonists a lesson led to the Declaration of Independence, and an amazing victory for the revolutionaries, and the birth of an unbelievable nation, whose light still shines and draws people today.

And you know how it all started? It started with a modern prophecy, written by men convened in Philadelphia in the late Spring and early Summer of 1776, men we

might now have to call modern prophets. I say that because they foresaw freedom – and the rush towards its light that was bound to happen, that did in fact happen, that happens still today. When Jefferson and his committee said, “...all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” – when they wrote those words, they caused light to come forth into darkness. Never before in the history of the world had the leaders of a nation, even one being born, said, “Each person has worth.” Only God says things like that! I say these men were prophets because we now know their prophecy of a nation founded on those principles has been fulfilled. That nation is our nation. And our nation, in the relatively short span, in historical terms, of a little more than 200 years, has seen the rushing of people to its light. I know there’s been a lot of talk about immigration lately; the politicians spew lots of heated words about it because, hey, it’s an election year! But I know what it means. Because we really do believe in “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” which includes jobs but really isn’t limited to that, *people want to come to our light*. Let me put it to you another way: do you see any lines of people waiting to *get out*? As long as we hold to the very godly idea that all men – and women! – are created equal, I’m convinced we’ll continue to see people stream to our light.

But we have to be careful! at the same time; we are being tested in how we conduct ourselves as the world’s lone superpower, as the light to which people come. Yes, the world does indeed come to our light. Yes, they do come to us from far away,

and America is still the place people want to come, and live. We are enriched, and made wealthy in *all* ways, by their coming. But the last line of the Isaiah's prophecy is the one that ought to give us pause: "they *shall* proclaim the praise of the Lord." "Shall" means "requirement." Are we as a people doing things in such a way as to lead others to praise God? Do our leaders conduct our nation's affairs and represent us so that other nations will look at us and say, "their God is amazing, and we must worship that God?" If we can't answer "yes" to both of those questions, then we *have to* start working to make changes.

As I look out on the political scene during this campaign year, I'm fearful that we don't have much God in our national debates, at least not in an honest, non-partisan, undistorted way. And all the negative advertising, all the accusations, all the fear-mongering tactics of BOTH sides in the campaigns dim our light, and might give people pause about coming to it. When the intentions of our leaders and those seeking to lead are constantly belittled and even lied about; when the work of making laws and running our country is so infused with "win at any cost" that hurting people are hurt some more; when the intelligence and good sense of average Americans like you and me is ignored or even discounted – then our light is dimmed greatly, and we stand in danger of having our light dimmed - just as Israel saw its light snuffed out by God, and off they went to Babylon.

Yet, we have holidays like the one we celebrate every year on the fourth of July. And they remind us of the very things that have led us to be blessed with the light.

Those holidays can inspire us to get back to our roots, to our fundamentals, to the things that make us who we are. My hope and prayer for you all, and for all Americans, for that matter, is that *this* fourth of July will be different somehow; that it will inspire you to stand up and insist on renewing our blessing.

I think we owe that to all those who have gone before us, who've made this country what it is, and guaranteed us the right to come here and praise God. Think about that as you celebrate on Wednesday. Isaiah was prophesying about the return of Israel to its place as the people of God. In Jesus Christ, we already *know* we're the people of God, our status as Americans being clearly secondary. And yet we know that Jesus wanted us to "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." What we owe to our country is our full devotion as its citizens – our full efforts to make it what it should be. We should work to build up and make even brighter the light God has entrusted to us. Think about that as you celebrate – and resolve to do what it takes to make it happen. Then give thanks to God for the blessing of living in this land.