

Old Testament lesson – 2 Chronicles 7:11-22

New Testament lesson- Matthew 11:16-30

“The Man on His Knees”

I don't remember exactly when I first heard someone quote 2 Chronicles 7:14 from our OT lesson, but I know it was a long time ago. It might have been around the time of the bicentennial in 1976. I liked the idea, but I realized that, taken in its context, that verse was not intended for America. We have a unique religious heritage in that we have long been a blended mixture of various religions.

There is definitely a Christian flavor to America, but it is technically incorrect to call ourselves a Christian nation. And while it may bother some people to hear me say that, I think it is a good thing for the church. I have traveled in Europe, lived in the UK for a year as a pastor, and attended church services in several other countries. Most of them at one time in the past were officially Christian countries, with a formal relationship between the church and the state.

I am sure there are many reasons for the decline of the Christian Church in Europe, but that official relationship between Church and state did not do the Church any real favors. Christians who did not belong to the established Church were often persecuted, even executed as heretics. Sometimes the Catholics did it, sometimes the Protestants. It is not possible to label one side “good guys” and the other side “bad guys.”

One of the reasons some people came to the New World was to live in religious freedom. The mistakes and flaws and tyranny of the established churches of the old world helped form our legal tradition of religious freedom. Part of the genius of the founding fathers was to keep the church separate from the state. However, people misunderstand when they think it was to protect the state from religious influence. On the contrary, it was to protect the various churches from the interference and even oppression by a government tied too closely to one particular religion. And in those days, one particular religion meant simply one particular type of Christian faith as opposed to other types of Christian faith.

Of course, this also meant other religions were protected as well. Many Europeans brought their antisemitism with them, but once the United States Constitution was established as the law of the land, the ideal was that all legitimate religions, including Judaism, would be protected by law.

It was quite obviously different in our OT lesson. This passage occurs after Solomon has completed the construction of the first Temple in Jerusalem. They had quite a celebration. They sacrificed 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep. I can't even imagine how long that must have taken. Even if they had a thousand teams of priests working on it, that would have been 142 animals per team.

At the beginning of the lesson it says that fire came down and consumed the sacrifices. That's a little disappointing. It seems like the perfect opportunity for the largest barbecue the world has ever seen. But if the fire *consumed* all the sacrifices, all that meat was just gone. My wife is a very good cook, but I am always amused by the old joke that someone's wife treats him like a god, giving him burnt offerings every day. But in our lesson, it would seem there is not even an overcooked lamb chop to eat.

But here is the context of that overused verse. The first Temple of the LORD has been dedicated. The feast was over. All the people had gone home, filled and happy, no doubt. And then the LORD appeared to Solomon in the night.

Solomon had given a long and thorough prayer at the dedication, making pledges to God and admitting that no building could truly contain God. Then that fire came down, consumed the sacrifices, the people praised and glorified God and then they had a week-long celebration. After all that, God came to Solomon in the night and spoke to him.

That famous verse, 7:14, comes after God warns of the dire consequences that will occur if his people abandon their covenant with him, failing to follow the Law he has given. He

further promises to respond to the people's prayers when he finds it necessary to discipline the nation through drought or pestilence.

So there is the context of the verse. It is God's statement to his chosen people with regard to specific types of situations and in relation to his covenant with them.

America has no such covenant. Neither does any other nation. However, during the 17th and 18th centuries, European monarchies developed a doctrine called the divine right of kings. They thought God had put them in their positions as kings, and therefore, the only authority they had to answer to was God himself.

Of course, even a rather superficial reading of the NT will tell you that this was partly correct. All authority and positions derive ultimately from God. But if someone supposes that God has put him or her in that position for any reason other than God's own purpose, they are sorely mistaken. It is that sort of misunderstanding of God-given power that leads to misuse and abuse of such authority.

And that's why we just celebrated a birthday yesterday. The founders of our country saw power being abused by the British crown and decided to do something about it. Yesterday was the real "no kings" celebration, which we observe every year.

Numerous books have been written about America as a nation. The way we came to exist was not the normal, natural way that countries had come to exist for thousands of years. Most countries came to exist as the land areas ruled by one individual or family who proved to be the best fighters in an area, or who gathered the largest army, or something similar. But they were generally ruled by an individual.

There were exceptions, but they were long ago and far away from Britain and western Europe. The idea of America was different. The revolution was started by a group of men who rebelled against the idea that kings ruled by divine right. The right to govern a people should be by the consent of those governed.

From the moment the war started, it was a high-risk, low-odds gamble. The British army was perhaps the most powerful in the world. Britain was in the process of consolidating their world-wide empire. The colonies did not have an organized army.

Friday night Annette and I went to see the movie "Young Washington." It was an excellent movie. It does not simply depict him as a larger-than-life military genius. In fact, it depicts the historical fact that his ineffective leadership at the Battle of Fort Mifflin probably triggered the French and Indian War in 1754.

But later at the Battle of Fort Mifflin, something extraordinary happened. Washington no longer held the rank he had earlier, thanks to his failure. But he somehow managed to rally a mixture of British regulars and Virginia militia to reverse what looked like a certain defeat, and win a surprising victory.

In the course of doing this, he rode and ran among the troops in a daring and dangerous way. The feat was embellished through the years, perhaps, but Washington himself reported that he had two horses shot from under him and his coat had four bullet holes. Yet Washington himself escaped without a wound.

In the movie, this is actually downplayed. Only one horse is shot, and one of the bullet holes is in a tip of his large tri-cornered hat, a more believable miss than in the coat right next to his body. Later, he is confronted by an Indian who was fighting with the French, claiming that he was sure he and his warriors had shot Washington. He says Washington must be protected by the Great Spirit to avoid being killed in this battle.

Historians believe that unnamed chief was a later embellishment to boost Washington's reputation. But Washington's own report was not bragging, nor was he claiming any sort of status as a great, heroic leader. He considered himself lucky to be alive, perhaps somehow guarded by Providence.

At the time of his report, of course, he had no way of knowing what lay 20-30 years down the road. He could not foresee the winter of 1777-1778 at Valley Forge. Some people claim that American patriotism has exaggerated how bad the conditions were in that camp. But 2000 lives were lost to disease that winter, so they could not have been very good. The success of the war for independence was still in doubt.

A Prussian military leader named Baron von Steuben was there, helping to train the amateur soldiers and turn them into a more professional force. France was already helping the colonists secretly, but in 1778 they would sign a treaty and assist the colonies officially. But during that winter, Washington knew there was really only one way to seek dependable help: prayer.

There are many depictions of Washington at Valley Forge – some on horseback, some standing with other soldiers or leaders. But this one – not of a great general or soldier, but of the man on his knees – is the one that should speak more to us than any others. It is in this picture that we see George Washington at his strongest, his greatest moment as a leader.

I sometimes hear Europeans disparage America as a young country. And yet our government has been around since the Constitution was ratified in 1789, long before most countries in the world today shaped their current forms of government. Many of them had very different boundaries. Their *cultures* are older, but our *country* is older.

However, we face significant challenges today. The situation in our NT lesson reminds me of what we face. We are faced with a question of what direction we will go as a country. As I said, we are not a Christian country, and I would not even want us to become a country with an established Church. It would eventually become very unhealthy for the Christian Church.

Because we do not have an established Church in this country, Christians have been free to practice their faith according to a variety of versions. Each one probably has its own

strengths and its own weaknesses. Yes, we have seen some decline in the American Church recently. So we need to heed the call of Christ in our NT lesson.

He invites us to share his yoke. We can look around us and be troubled in our souls. Certainly, there are things that trouble me. But we can share the burden of this with Jesus. You might ask, how do we do that? In a word, prayer.

We face a time in our country's life that is no less dangerous than what Washington faced. As Ronald Reagan said, "Freedom is a fragile thing and it's never more than one generation away from extinction."

Just as Washington looked to God for help in establishing this beacon of freedom, we need to do the same to keep the beacon lit.

We face two great threats to that freedom today. One is Islam. The other is Communism.

I thought after the breakup of the Soviet union that communism would fade away as a threat to American freedom. As an external threat, it is not very dangerous. But the threat has moved into American politics. Several candidates recently won primaries using the label of "Democratic Socialists." If you dig into their background, you will find that they espouse communist ideology. Some of them have expressed their support of violent revolution if necessary.

At the same time I never thought Islam would ever find much welcome in America, at least not in its violent form, certainly not after 9/11. And yet it has. In various cities, you can find Muslims who believe that we should apply Sharia law for all citizens.

Now one might think that our greatest weapon against these incursions is the process of elections. That is important. But for a burden this great, we need to be yoked with Jesus, not a political party. We each need to be the man on his knees, praying for our country.

Several years ago there was a revival that began at Asbury University. It began as a prayer meeting that just kept going and going and going,

as if the Energizer bunny was in charge. The school administration eventually called a halt to it so the school could resume its normal schedule. But God had started something.

In the years since then I have seen reports of a general revival on college campuses. It is not reported in the mainstream media. Such things seldom are, once they really pick up steam, because secular media simply don't have a clue what is happening.

But our country has had such revivals of faith before. There was one that influenced the revolution. There was another that helped end slavery and brought about other positive changes in the country. My prayer is that this current one will result in a positive change in college campuses and a positive impact on our country for the next several decades.

This is our time to be on our knees for our country. Some of us, of course, may need to

avoid kneeling for reasons of health. But we can certainly be in prayer for our country, sharing that yoke with Jesus.

I don't pray for our country go to war or to oppress anyone. On the contrary, I want people to experience freedom and peace. I do not pray for our government to become entangled with the church or any other religion. But I do pray for Christians to be faithful in preaching and living the gospel so that others will come to Christ.

America has so much to offer to the world. We can help assure that it continues as a land of freedom by praying for our future, even as Washington did at Valley Forge almost 250 years ago. And even though we are not Israel, and we are not a nation called by God's name, we are a people called by Christ's name. I believe God will hear our prayers, and he will heal our land, and he will bless America, if we who *are* called by Christ's name will humble ourselves and pray. Amen.