

Independence Day
July 4, 2013
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Setting Out

A couple of weeks ago I started my summer reading. I'm beginning with a book I've wanted to read for a long time – the paper-back edition has sat in my book shelf for several years – the best-selling historical novel from 35 years ago, *Chesapeake*, written by James Michener. The book is more than 1000 pages and spans 400 years of American history. Michener divides his chapters into 14 different “voyages” starting with the voyage of a Native American who leaves his tribe in Pennsylvania and travels down the Susquehanna River to the Chesapeake Bay where he eventually settles. I just finished the section recording the events of 1776, and I'm not even half way through.

Independence Day, July 4th, gives us an opportunity to give thanks for the history, the journey we have experienced as a nation, as a people who seem to be always setting out, looking forward, voyaging, traveling through time, desiring a better country, a more perfect union, one nation under God.

In his novel Michener is quite graphic in describing the religious persecutions in 17th century America. Quakers in Boston are tortured and driven out of Massachusetts. Roman Catholics in Virginia are persecuted and unable to practice their religion. A greater religious tolerance prevailed in 18th century America, but, of course, by 1776 slavery had become an established institution and it would take another 87 years until President Lincoln finally signed the Emancipation Proclamation.

During the last three days, the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg has been celebrated. Many believe that Gettysburg was the turning point in the Civil War. Lee and the Confederate Army were turned back. They could never again mount such a strong offensive so far north. During the three days of fighting, 51,000 died.

Four months later, when the national cemetery at Gettysburg was consecrated, Lincoln proclaimed in his famous address

“It is for the living...to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far nobly advanced... dedicated to the great task remaining before us...the new birth of freedom...”

Remembering the Civil War matters because we know how much America has changed over the last 150 years so that all may enjoy “*life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.*” David Brooks, in the *New York Times*, wrote about those who fought in the Civil War, saying they had, “...*a greater covenanted consciousness, a belief that they were born in a state of indebtedness to an ongoing project, and they would be inevitably called upon to pay these debts, to come square with the country, even at the cost of their lives...*” (*New York Times*, “Why they Fought,” 7/1/2013)

This sense of setting out, with work to do, unfinished business, a “*greater covenanted consciousness*” is deeply rooted in our Judeo-Christian tradition. It all begins with Abraham. That’s why we hear about him today in the Letter to the Hebrews, a letter written in a time of persecution. Abraham heard God’s call. He set out. There would be no turning back. Vision, hope, faith compelled his wanderings in the wilderness. He knew God would lead him and the generations that followed. The history of Israel is one of setting out, moving through time and space to know and to love God.

This is Jesus’ call also in his Sermon on the Mount, a portion we hear today – we have unfinished business, work to do, we’re setting out on the pilgrimage of faith and of love. “*Thy will be done on earth as in heaven...*” Lincoln’s “*new birth of freedom*” was not realized until the battle of civil rights ended less than 50 years ago. Many of us remember those battles. And we still have “*unfinished business*” when it comes to rights and justice for all in the United States, not to mention so much of the world.

Last Saturday afternoon I took a break from our retreat at the Monastery of the Society of St. John the Evangelist in Cambridge, Massachusetts. We had a couple of free hours, so I rode the subway over to Boston and walked to the finish line of the Boston Marathon. I stood on both spots where the two bombs went off. I saw where my wife, Leslie, was knocked down 20 feet from where the second bomb exploded. There are no markers for the exact spots on the street, but it’s easy to locate them; old mail boxes attached to the sidewalks with bright, new, shiny bolts; newly painted street signs and light posts; sand-blasted, scrubbed pavements.

I’ve since wondered if the two young men who set off the bombs ever studied the history of our revolution? Did they ever read the Declaration of Independence? Did they know 750,000 people died in the Civil War so we could be one nation dedicated to the vision and hope of freedom and justice for all? Did they know about Lincoln and his Gettysburg Address?

They certainly had no knowledge or respect for Jesus’ teaching. And what, if anything, did they make of Abraham’s faith and his journey? Tonight I hope to watch on TV the Boston Pops and the celebration of this Independence Day by the Charles River less than a mile from where those two bombs went off last April on Patriots Day.

Those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it. The journey continues. Vision and hope lead us in faith to realize that perfect love casts out fear. We pray that “*all the people of this land may have grace to maintain these liberties in righteousness and peace...*”

Hebrews 11:8-16
Matthew 5:43-48