

Independence Day
July 4, 2015
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“By faith...”

Faith is defined in most dictionaries as “a confident belief ... that does not rest on logical proof or material evidence.” The word itself comes from the Latin word “fidere,” meaning “to trust.” The same root word is used in fidelity, loyalty, and infidel, non-believer. Trust, belief, faith are all the same really.

St. Origen wrote that “only God knows the author of the Letter to the Hebrews.” In Hebrews, we read the biblical definition of faith in the first verses of chapter 11: *“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen ... By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible...”*

The author goes on to tell us about Abraham and many others who are examples of faithfulness, examples of those who trust confidently in God. So every year on this Independence Day, we read from the letter to the Hebrews; we hear of Abraham who sets out to follow God “*by faith ...*” We give thanks for those founders of this nation, for those who set out to follow God by faith and declared this nation independent from Great Britain. This day is our national birthday, celebrating freedom. July 4th is also a celebration of faith. Freedom and faith are linked as we remember Jesus’ words in St. John’s Gospel: *“The truth shall make you free ...”* (8:32)

So, too, we always read the Gospel on this day from St. Matthew’s account of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus’ great teaching, great encouragement for faith, for freedom. Our hope is that faith and freedom will help us, teach us to love others, to forgive others, to work for reconciliation, to work for justice, to work for peace. It is hard to practice love and forgiveness in a world of terror, in a world of hate and racism, in a world of selfishness and greed.

Perhaps this is why this challenge to know that *“perfect love casts out fear,”* leads us constantly back to the Sermon on the Mount – a teaching Dietrich Bonhoeffer referred to as “the Cost of Discipleship.” Also, we need to return to the Letter to the Hebrews so that we, too, like those in the late first century might find encouragement to press on, have confidence for the future. There’s no going back to some “good old days ...”

“We must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it ...” (Hebrews 2:1). We need *“to hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering ... encouraging one another.”* (10:23, 25)

I imagine Ben Franklin, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson knew both the Letter to the Hebrews and the Sermon on the Mount. The biblical concepts of faith and freedom surely inspired Jefferson to translate them from scripture to a political Declaration of Independence. The founders had faith in a loving God and faith in a political system, democracy. Faith and freedom became realities in helping to birth this nation.

I'm not sure my ancestors who came to this country ever read the Bible much; I can't be sure they were inspired by Hebrews or the Sermon on the Mount. But I do know they believed in God and found faith in the pursuit of freedom.

In the spring of 1629, Hugh Hiller left Somerset, England, and sailed to the Massachusetts Bay Colony. He landed in Salem, Massachusetts, a couple of months later and lived there for 10 years before following other Quakers south to Yarmouth on Cape Cod, where he died shortly after his son, Samuel, was born. For generations the Hillers practiced the Quaker faith, farmed the land and lived by the sea. They lived by faith.

In the 1920s, my Grandfather Malm realized he had to seek freedom for himself, his wife and infant son. His native land, Estonia, was caught between Russia and Germany, both seeking control of the Baltic Sea. So almost 300 years after the first Hiller arrived in America, Edward Malm's young wife and infant son, my Dad, arrived on Ellis Island in New York. Ed was serving in the Estonian Navy and would have to come later. By faith they joined the millions who came as immigrants to America; by faith, seeking freedom, trusting in God, trusting in democracy.

July 4th is right up there with all my favorite holidays – Easter, Christmas, Thanksgiving. In many ways it is a personal, historical celebration for me and my family. For many years my grandfather Hiller would host a huge clambake by the seas in Massachusetts. I grew up knowing the history of my mother's and father's families.

Of course, July 4th has always been a national holiday, whether or not our personal histories have been shaped by faith, by the pursuit of freedom.

And July 4th, Independence Day, is for us in the Episcopal Church a religious holiday, a Holy Day in the Church calendar, because we know this nation was founded “under God” by faith and with the hope for “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” for all.

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