

“We Hold These Truths”

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

1 Peter 3:8-12

July 5, 2026

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Saint Paul, Minnesota

I’m sure like many of you, as we’ve approached this semisesquicentennial of the nation’s founding, I’ve been taking in the coverage by newspapers, magazines, podcasts, and broadcasts. I’ve even been reading a book on the global scope of the Revolution. How, for instance, the British taxes that precipitated the Boston Tea Party were the result of a drought in India and new trade policies of the Chinese emperor. Fascinating to see our story as part of a much larger global story.

I’m a subscriber to *The Atlantic* and *The New York Times* and both have been publishing excellent material for months in the lead up to this anniversary. It was a feature in each publication that helped to birth my thoughts on how to organize our worship today.

The *Times* published a feature entitled “America, One Line at a Time.” Since the nation had been written into existence with the Declaration of Independence, they focused on its most famous sentence and 5 other sentences from American history to aide in telling our story. Of course, I thought of other sentences they didn’t include. But acknowledging the power of words—written, spoken, and sung—in helping to create, define, and shape our nation seems appropriate to me.

The other piece was an essay in *The Atlantic* about “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” which they called the “second national anthem.” I know some Southerners who would balk at that description. But the essay discussed the origin of the hymn, how it related to other songs of its day, and the song’s lasting influence upon popular culture and political rhetoric, including that “the last sentence of the last speech [Martin Luther King, Jr] gave before his assassination was this: ‘Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.’”

Julia Ward Howe wrote the song on a night she had watched soldiers marching off to battle in the Civil War. *The Atlantic* essay concluded, “Those men were only vaguely aware of the horrors that awaited them, but the commitment they expressed, in song, on foot, is the wellspring of the hymn’s enduring effect—its faith in American promise, its exhortation to persevere. Julia Ward Howe cast their commitment in the eternal language of a sacred text in order to create a sacred text of her own, and our own.”

How to mark this occasion in our worship life without sliding into civil religion or, even worse, something like the Christian nationalism that is currently plaguing the country. America is a diverse and pluralistic people of many faiths and no faith, who have worked together in the great American project. No one faith has a monopoly on this celebration.

How, also, to be true to the worship of God from our Reformed tradition while marking the occasion. Our Reformed tradition has always been concerned with how our faith is lived out in the public square. As the Confession of 1967 states, “God’s redeeming work in Jesus Christ embraces the whole of [humanity’s] life: social and cultural, economic and political, scientific and technological, individual and corporate.” And so, “with an urgency born of . . . hope, the church applies itself to present tasks and strives for a better world.”

So, today, in our songs, our writing, and our proclamation, we turn our attention to words and sentences that have shaped our national identity. Words that often are inflected with images and references to the Bible and Christian tradition. Words that both inspire and critique. Words that call to us, again and again, to live up to our aspirations and the noble truths we hold dear. And words which can inform how we, as followers of Jesus Christ, choose to show up in the public square, advocating for justice, freedom, and virtue.

In 1630, John Winthrop imagined that the new Massachusetts Bay colony would be like a city set upon a hill, borrowing language from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. The eyes of the world would be upon this new endeavor, to see how it lived up to its values:

Wee must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberality. Wee must delight in each other; make other's conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labour and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

Winthrop's image of the city on the hill has been borrowed again and again in the rhetoric of the United States. A reminder that as a people we realize that we are judged by our success or failure at living up to our values and forming a true community that cares for one another.

When the Declaration of Independence was passed, those stirring truths about life, liberty, and happiness and the core idea that a government could be overthrown that did not uphold the safety and happiness of its people were radical ideas. An experiment yet to be tried. But one the world was watching to see if it worked.

Those core truths, expressed in the Declaration, have always been an aspiration. Even as those words were adopted, all men were not being treated as equal in the colonies that would become the United States. Our original sins of slavery and genocide of the indigenous population marred the high ideals.

In many ways, the Declaration and its values remain an aspiration. Something we have never yet fully lived into. A goal we sometimes draw closer to and sometimes fall back from. As even this week, young trans women have been denied equal protection under the law.

In his great 1852 speech, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" Frederick Douglass, drawing upon the words and style of Hebrew prophets like Amos and Micah, proclaimed,

O! had I the ability, and could I reach the nation's ear, I would, to-day, pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke. For it is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake. The feeling of the nation must be quickened; the conscience of the nation must be roused; the propriety of the nation must be startled; the hypocrisy of the nation must be exposed; and its crimes against God and man must be proclaimed and denounced.

What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciations of tyrants, brass-fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade, and solemnity, are, to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy - a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages.

I have a good friend who rereads Douglass's speech every fourth of July. A reminder of both the nation's values and how we have fallen short.

Even in that searing speech, in which he scolded those abolitionists gathered in the room to hear him, Douglass reminded us of what was of value in the Declaration:

I have said that the Declaration of Independence is the ring-bolt to the chain of your nation's destiny; so, indeed, I regard it. The principles contained in that instrument are saving principles. Stand by those principles, be true to them on all occasions, in all places, against all foes, and at whatever cost.

Like King would later preach about the promissory note yet to be cashed, Douglass reminds us that we will be saved when we live into and fully embody the principles we have espoused. In the great call to liberty lies the way of salvation from much that has plagued humanity.

Douglass spoke as the slavery debate rocked the nation and less than a decade later led to civil war. Julia Ward Howe wrote her great hymn in the midst of that conflagration. Drawing upon imagery from Revelation and Isaiah, she turned the marching anthem “John Brown’s Body” into a new sacred hymn about the fight for freedom. Reminding us that God has loosed vengeance upon us for the grave sin of slavery. Humanity is being sifted. You can be on the right side, on God’s side, on freedom’s side, or face the judgment seat.

And just like Jesus lived and died that humanity might be saved, we followers of Christ are also being called to be like Jesus. We struggle not for eternal salvation but for the freedom of humanity. Empowered in our cause by the God who marches with us.

For all its military bombast, this is not a song of patriotic fervor. Rather, it is a searing hymn about sin, evil, judgement, and salvation. And a call to be transfigured into a glorious new people.

Near the close of the Civil War, Lincoln invited us to become a new people--"With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in—to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

Every time I’m in D.C. and visit the Lincoln Memorial, I read those words, and I weep. They still call to our better angels. Imploring us to seek unity in the bonds of peace. A message that should resonate with us followers of the Gospel. As Jesus and the apostles repeatedly inspire us, as in today’s epistle lesson, to seek unity and peace.

Katherine Lee Bates, thirty years after the Civil War, lived in another uncertain and anxious time, as industrialism, technology, and expansion; Indian Wars, imperialism, and immigration were changing the country. The Social Gospel Movement was underway, as many Christians began to realize that Christian salvation was not something merely for the afterlife, but had real world consequences here and now. Those social gospel Christians began to work for a better society, alleviating poverty and injustice, and grappling with the issues of their time.

Bates was influenced by all of the turmoil in society and the theological ferment of the church, when she took a trip to the American West, and saw the beauty of the landscape, and wrote the first version of her magnificent poem after an excursion to the top of Pike’s Peak.

Of her hymn, one commentator wrote, “‘America the Beautiful’ is part anthem and part prayer, a mix of celebration and supplication, which is really a way to challenge Americans.” The hymn celebrates our values while again challenging us to remember the ways we have fallen short.

The hymn prays for God to mend our every flaw, a clear acknowledgment that there are flaws to mend. The lyrics imagine a brilliant future, where our alabaster cities gleam, “undimmed by human tears.” When we sing this anthem, we implore God to shed God’s grace upon us, precisely because we stand in need of that grace. A message we Reformed Protestants deeply understand.

Americans have prayed for God’s presence and guidance through all our long history—of wars, depressions, and civil rights struggles. We’ve struggled against fascists and dictators, totalitarians and terrorists.

But we’ve also struggled with the sinful nature of the human condition. With our greed. Our selfishness. Our fear. Our fragility. Our sense of privilege. With our angers and our resentments. With our cruelty and inhumanity. With all the ways our own visions have been too constrained.

As a Reformed Protestant people, we deeply understand the need to examine our own consciences with honesty, to confess our sins, to make amends and reparations, and then to work in covenant with others

to do better. Our repentance opens us to God's grace, which is, we believe, the only way to fully achieve the unity and peace and high values we aspire too.

The truths we hold from the Declaration on, have over 250 years, called to our better selves, imploring us to turn away from evil and do good. To commit ourselves to one another.

Maybe no song better acknowledges that complicated history while still rousing our hearts as that with which we opened worship today, "Lift Every Voice and Sing." Adopted in 1919 by the NAACP as the Black National Anthem and now ubiquitous in Christian hymnals. This hymn stirs the soul. I can never sing "stony the road we trod" without a little march in my step.

James Weldon Johnson's great lyric reminds us that God has brought us this far, through a dark, difficult, and blood-stained history, even as we now implore God to keep us on the path and lead us into the light.

Many of us, I believe, come to this semisecular centennial wanting to celebrate all that we love and hold dear about this nation, its people, and its history. Yet the celebratory spirit is clouded by this divided, anxious, troubled, and violent time in which we live. We are unsure of how we, as people of faith, beloved children of God, and followers of Jesus Christ, should mark this occasion.

Maybe we can let these lyrics of James Weldon Johnson guide us:

Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
Let us march on till victory is won.

As we honor our history, let us also take this moment to imagine the future and all that we might yet be 50 years hence. Each day is a new day, born in hope.

We hold these truths. Not just to be self-evident, but as dearly beloved calls to our best selves. Truths that continue to convict us and inspire us.

In today's epistle reading, the apostle Peter teaches us that if we desire life and to see good days, then we must turn from evil and do good. We must seek peace and pursue it, through sympathy, love, a tender heart, and a humble mind.

On this 250th anniversary of the American experiment, may we followers of Jesus Christ recommit ourselves to this vision of the common good. And pray for God to be with us in the work.