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I grew up in a time period where science-fiction authors like Robert Heinlein were required reading for pre-teenage boys who wanted any kind of cool quotient. In 1961, Heinlein wrote a book entitled *Stranger in a Strange Land* which won the Hugo Award for the best science fiction publication that year. It was ravenously devoured by countless young men, who would smuggle it into classrooms inside the cover of text-books. I know for a fact that at least one of these pre-teens – the identity of whom you may well guess – would even read the book long into the

night, by the light of a flashlight under the covers in a darkened bedroom.

*Stranger in a Strange Land* tells the story of Valentine Michael Smith, a human raised by Martians on the planet Mars. This human boy returns to his native planet of Earth. The novel explores Valentine Michael Smith's interaction with earthlings, and recounts how Smith eventually transforms the human culture of this planet.

The lessons this morning, which are the primary readings listed in our Lectionary for the celebration of Independence Day, all talk about our being aliens in a new and different place. We ourselves, Scripture reminds us, are all strangers in a strange land. In this morning's Old Testament passage, Moses declares that Yahweh "defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. And you [Israelites] are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt." (Dt.10:19) And so through Moses, God commands the Children of Israel to show love to those who are not of their ancestry; they are to honor those who are strangers in the new Hebrew homeland of Canaan. For God reminds them that these same Israelites were once aliens themselves, in bondage to Pharaoh.

In our Epistle this morning, Paul instructs the Hebrews that they – and by divine proxy all those who are called to God's Kingdom – the entire company of believers all owe their pedigree of faith to a man who lived in the city of Ur on the Euphrates River some 4,000 years ago. And this Abraham followed the voice of God into the life of an alien in a strange country. That is the river-head, the source of the tradition of Jewish and Christian faith, an origin found in the life of an alien named Abraham, a man who lived as a stranger in a strange land.

It seems inescapable that these readings bind together the freedom enjoyed by God's children with a critical need for humility. We are warned that we must never forget the lowliness of our origins. Woe be unto that nation which begins to believe its exalted destiny is secure. In the lessons this morning, God seems to be instructing us that, if you want to really understand freedom, if you really want to maintain your independence, look not forward to a glorious future that you have planned, but instead look back into a humble past. And dwell not on the strength of your accomplishments, but reflect with a thankful and grateful heart on the abundant blessings of the Creator who has maintained and protected our freedom. For remember, my children, God says, you too were once aliens. And the unspoken message here is that, if we forget the mercies of an infinitely gracious God, we may indeed find that we are once again left as aliens, walking in a land we no longer recognize.

It is absolutely mind-boggling to me how our nation insists on attempting to separate the very existence of a divine Creator from ideals of human freedom. We are told that we must never admit the existence of God, or permit prayer to Him, if our schools, if our courts, if our civil government is to remain truly free. What an utter and complete abandonment of the perspectives held by our founding Fathers! Don't get me wrong, I completely support the sacred right of our citizenry to worship however we choose. But to insist that the freely expressed worship of the Almighty is contrary to elements of human freedom – to ban religious worship in our country – is so very against the ideals on which this country was founded. Listen to just a little documentary evidence:

(From the Declaration of Independence) "When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation...We hold these truths to be self-evident, that 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...And for the support of this declaration, and with a firm reliance on Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor."

(And just one more short passage, this one from Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address) “It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom.”

Examine the evidence of our history, and you will find that on those historic occasions when this country’s freedoms were being carved out and defended, the defenders of these freedoms always called upon the blessings of Almighty God. They knew that without this faith in a Divine Creator, there could be no real freedom.

But, it is my firm conviction that God has been locked out of the schoolrooms, and excluded from the ball-fields, and banned from the courthouse lawns of America NOT because of the actions of the radical left in this country’s political landscape. If we want to look for the real reason that God has now been so alienated from what this country considers a free, civil society, if we really want to find a party to blame for the secularization of America, I’m afraid we need to look squarely in the mirror. Because, we Christian believers have done such a poor job of proclaiming the freedom of the Gospel. In modern western society, Christianity has been misrepresented to the majority of Americans as a system of “thou shalt nots.” The Christian faith is misunderstood by most nonbelievers to be a system of prohibitions, things we are commanded not to do. As such, how is it possible to see Christianity as anything else but a constraint of freedom? And this is so tragic, since the key message of the Gospel is freedom, freedom from our human frailty, freedom from fear, freedom from selfishness, even freedom from death. The joyous message of Christ is glorious freedom, not gloomy restrictions.

So, in the final analysis, what is this freedom to which we Christians are all called? Well, it’s certainly not freedom as defined by our modern mass-media. If television is any indication, then freedom is wrapped up in driving a faster car, or wearing cooler clothes, or having a wrinkled free complexion. The real freedom to which we Christians are called is something greater even than individual freedom, with regard to life-styles, occupations, or interests, freedoms that this country rightly holds so dear. Yet, as a believer, you and I are called to an even bigger, brighter freedom. And we find this freedom clearly expressed in today’s Psalm and Gospel.

In the Gospel passage from Matthew Chapter 5, Jesus reminds us that God is merciful to both the righteous and the wicked, for the rain falls and the sun rises on both the good and the evil of this world. (Mt.5:45) And we likewise are to live out our earthly lives bestowing our own kindness on both those who love us and on those who do not. We are, Christ concludes at the end of the Gospel reading to “be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect.”... to be perfect, even as your heavenly father is perfect... (See v. 48) But how are we to do this? This seems to be an impossible standard, for who can be as perfect as God himself?!

The answer to that final puzzle lies in the words of the Psalmist this morning, who declares, “All your works praise you, O Lord, and your faithful servants bless you. They make known the glory of your kingdom and speak of your power; that the peoples may know of your power and the glorious splendor of your kingdom. Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, your dominion endures throughout all ages.” (Ps. 145:10-13)

This, then is the freedom to which you and I are called. When we enfold ourselves in the bounties of the Father, and the Lord of infinite love, we enter into that incredible freedom of delighting in Him. And through the power of His Holy Spirit and by the grace of His Son, Our precious Lord Jesus, we become the free beings that we were always meant to be, citizens of a kingdom that will have no end. So, as we celebrate our nation’s freedom this weekend, let us also celebrate our own, reveling in the words of Holy Scripture. If the Son of God shall make you free, you shall be free indeed.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen. JWB+ 4/19/16



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