

"One Nation Under" (3July16)
LuKe10:1-11,16-30; Ps66; Isa66:10-14

As can surprisingly often be the case, the coincidence of these lectionary readings fit well this weekend.

The prophet Isaiah speaks glowingly of the homeland, perhaps a natural reaction after years of being away, held captive in exile in Babylon. On this weekend when this country turns toward celebrating our heritage and the blessings of living in this nation, Isaiah's delight is a strong and worthwhile reminder of others celebrating that as well. The words of the prophet glorify the capital city of Jerusalem, turning attention and devotion there, expecting that from the capital flows prosperity, wealth, comfort, and relief from needs.

While in these days few lavish such praise on capitals—whether for what happens down at the Square or for how things function in Washington, DC—still this weekend expects the same general acclaim for our nation. With calls to devotion to this country, we are still supposed to be living into the dream that America is a place—or even declared *the* place—of prosperity and wealth, of comfort and relief. We continue to abide with "city on a hill" identifications, and recognize that this remains a place of hope, of refuge, a place of asylum and also potential. Even if we're not living into the fullness of that, even if we're putting up walls that would keep out those seeking to share in what this country offers, even if the wealth is increasingly isolated among the few instead of shared and extended like the "overflowing stream" of Isaiah's vision, still we have to admit that this is the typical conception of our country: a good place, a desirable place, of potential and hope.

The essential aspect for us to notice—both for the sake of these United States and within

our Bible reading—is that the goodness is not inherent. Jerusalem is not a source of blessing in and of itself. We anticipate the good of America not because America is so good. The blessing always comes from God.

This is beautifully stated in Isaiah, in some of the most tender language in Scripture. These are nearly the concluding verses of the 2nd longest book in the Bible, and they speak with the warm embrace of this mothering God. The prophet invited his listeners to realize they were being nursed and comforted from the consoling breast and to drink with deep delight from the glorious bosom of Jerusalem. That's already a reorientation from a notion of the mighty fatherland, of patriotism. This, instead, is "matriotism," understanding the homeland as giving you life, as what nurses and raises, consoles and swaddles you.

Beyond that, it isn't only the matriotism of what you receive from your country. That all comes from the maternity of God, for thus says the Lord (as Isaiah relates): "you shall nurse and be carried on her arm, dandled on her knee. As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you." Where the words of today's psalm, Psalm 66, proclaim that God keeps watch on all the nations, that all the earth is blessed and may well respond in song and with joyful noise, Isaiah's more intimate message won't leave God as some beneficent presence on high, a kind yet distant ruler who cares for his subjects. No, Isaiah notices that all your nourishment is the milk of God, that when you lay your head to rest, wherever that may be, it is on Her consoling breast, that all your tears are not only heard by but cradled in the arms of God.

Such tender and gracious language almost makes the next words from Jesus a nasty surprise, a stumbling block. There seems little compassion or consolation in his words about the surrounding citizens, but instead warning and

opposition for the children “like lambs in the midst of wolves.” How did those wolves come to inhabit the same country Isaiah saw as tender toddlers held by God the Mother?

Yet the harsh edge and the worry of Jesus’ words is not unknown to us, either, on this Independence Day weekend. As good as our nation can be, as fruitful and bountiful of a place to live, as a place of home and so much care and security, as embodying that image of a mothering God who strives with all her being to ensure that our needs are met and that we don’t suffer undue harm—as strongly as we know or wish that our United States will be that sort of presence for us and for others, still we also quickly recognize the other side, where we fail, where our culture is harmful rather than nurturing and caring. We realize our society has a long way to go in being a mother to all the children of this household.

And for that, the fiercest word of Jesus may actually speak the truest. When he says he “watched Satan fall like lightning,” it is about tearing down from the pedestals all the false gods, the corruption, the entrenched patriarchies, the powers that only want to claim power over and not power on behalf of. As much as a nation fails to be a mothering presence, as much governments neglect or abuse the authority of a God who delights and dandles and consoles and cares, as much as those with the strength to help the weak instead devour them, they abdicate their shepherding or motherly role, and oppose the will of God.

In that case, Jesus sends us out—even if we’d been part of the problem—sends you and me, to extend peace and proclaim the Kingdom that stands against the Kingdoms that have too long stood over the good of this world, have too long squashed and squelched and hoarded wellbeing. Jesus sends us to embody his

message, his vision, his care to set the world right, to contradict and overcome the demons, this satan, those false gods and terrible authorities that fail to do what needs to be done.

That is our model for Independence Day. More than an occasion to barbeque and enjoy fireworks, and certainly not just the chance to assess our standing in the world, to assert our superpower, this is an opportunity to recall God’s mothering presence, watching out for you and for us, and watching over all the nations of the world, eager to hear the cries of the despairing. As we celebrate our blessings from this God, we also attune *our* ears to those cries. We rightly celebrate the good that comes from our country, and also amid other nations. And we rightly confront the wrongs, throwing ourselves into the project though we may be fiercely opposed or violently disregarded, yet nevertheless trusting that our God is on the side of the hurting and suffering, the weak and the longing, and that the Kingdom of God comes near and is present even as we meet new challenges to serve as God’s children in ensuring care for all our sisters and brothers, in this country, in all nations, and throughout creation.