

Read Exodus 39:32-33, 40:16-38 and Revelation 21:1-7

Today we celebrate Independence Day. What does that bring to mind for you?

- *“All men are created equal”*
- *Freedom*
- *Commitment*
- *A belief in an ideal worth dying for*

Abraham Lincoln expressed its meaning in a speech given at a dedication ceremony for the soldier's cemetery in Gettysburg, commemorating the 50,000 who had died, been wounded, or were missing. Standing on the battlefield he had this to say:

“Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure . . .”

It was a crucial time; a time when principle met reality. We may not realize it, but such a question calls for an answer every day. **Do we live to preserve and promote what we believe?** Or, put another way, **considering what we believe, how then should we live?** President Lincoln realized that the founding fathers' vision had to be taken on by his generation, and those who died on that battlefield had assuredly assumed it. That battle turned the tide of the war, and eventually Mr. Lincoln's speech compelled ownership of the vision on which America was built, and which each generation must embrace for it to continue.

Today we talk about another vision, God's vision; begun in and through the people of Israel, whom God rescued out of slavery, guided and provided for in the desert. God taught them, forgave them, and imbued them with a purpose. The vision God had for those people continues all the way across the centuries to be realized through us. By faith we too are the children of Abraham, Christians, whose role is to tell of the reality of God's mighty presence in this world.

This whole story of the Exodus points forward to just that – Jesus Christ coming to dwell with us so that we could behold God's glory in the flesh. Ultimately, at the end of this world, those who believe will dwell with God in God's new heaven and earth, because God's home is among humans. It was meant to be that way from the beginning. God connects with people.

Do you see the cohesive story of the whole Bible? The Bible begins with the loss of closeness to God, but ends with restoration of that bond. God's vision is to restore our broken relationship with God and then use us to bring God's goodness, love, and justice to the world. Like the vision of our forefathers that America's ideal of freedom and equality must be defended by every generation, God's vision for the world must be defended by us.

Today we talk about something wonderful. Today is a joyful day! God had given the Israelites a task – to build the sanctuary in which the people would worship God, and they completed it fully. Listen to the story. READ Ex 39:32-33, 40:16-38.

Note the most prominent phrase: “just as the Lord had commanded Moses.” This was God’s work. We as Christians have a call. And our call works to bless us.

Why are we gathered here each Sunday morning? Why did God rescue Israel? What was the whole point of this promise made to Abraham? God was rescuing those people so they could bless the entire world. We are a part.

But Israel failed when they worshiped the golden calf. Do you feel like God can never use you because you have failed? God knows we are sinners. But God is willing to carry our sin. The chief thing that happens in the church is forgiveness. Perhaps we should name the church “Place of Forgiveness” or “Guilt Free Zone.”

Through their generosity in building, Israel showed their desire that despite their sin, they really wanted a relationship with God. They built not because God made them - God didn’t – but because it was the right thing and they loved doing it.

Why have we been working so hard around the church? You want to. It shows we have a desire to know and love God. The work is energizing. It makes us think, what might God do with us in the future? When we work for God it helps us see God more and more. And, because of the work, God has brought a few miracles our way. That happens because people begin “seeking first the kingdom of God” as they work. God works through them to others. God’s all about reaching out and being present with people.

The people completed everything just as God commanded; they didn’t stop halfway, they didn’t compromise the call or do anything except by the instruction of God and God saw that they finished it. And because they took the call to heart and completed it, Moses blessed them. And as they completed the job, it was as if God immediately came and dwelled in the midst of them.

It seemed like God couldn’t wait to be there.

God, you see, desires total commitment and undiluted devotion because that heals and restores us, and gives us purpose in life. Tolstoy asked, “What will come of my whole life?” Differently expressed, the question is: “Why should I live, why wish for anything, or do anything?” or: “Is there any meaning in my life that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy?” -*Tolstoy, A Confession*

God knows that in Him, we find meaning. In worship, we find forgiveness of sin and restoration, even though we are sinners who fail on a regular basis.

For Israel, God dwelt in the temple which was in their midst. But the New Testament tells us that in Christ, we become that temple. God’s very Spirit comes to dwell in us; our bodies are the temple of the Lord.

If you want God’s Holy Spirit and to experience God’s presence, then be right there doing the work of God. How does God reign on earth? God reigns when God’s children are intent on doing what God says; are intent upon worshiping Him and committing themselves to Him.

Have you ever had a dream? Israel was following a great dream given to Abraham. Our belief as Christians is that God is the originator of dreams and God is going to accomplish it. What is your dream for this church? Do you want to finish the building? Do you want it to be filled with folks who are drawn here because you are full of God's joy? Do you have a vision for the church to be a vibrant part of this community? People need the Lord desperately. I believe God's greatest desire is that they experience God's love through you.

In his Gettysburg address, Abraham Lincoln went on to say that the world would not remember the graves of the men who died, or the ground which was consecrated to their memory, or the words that he spoke that day. What the world takes note of, what really stands out and calls to others to make the same commitment is the lives of people willing to devote their all to a call.

“There is unfinished work to be done; uncompleted vision to be nobly advanced.”

Every effort you make here promotes God's vision. Scripture tells us every person in Israel contributed to the work. All of you have a part. Are you doing your part?

To honor the dead means we take up the cause ourselves. We resolve that all the believers before us who have tasted the goodness of God have not done so in vain, and we continue to call to the next generation that in God there is hope and abundant life. This is what speaks to our world today.

“How then shall we live?”

A very wise friend named Anderson Kelly writes: “Lincoln NEVER forgot that it was the **soldiers** in the Revolution and in the Civil War that secured the success of battle and the fruits of freedom...and we the citizens of the U.S. are the inheritors of their labor and spirit-- We have to live up to the Founders "ideal" and the "real" sacrifice of the soldiers, widows and orphans. With both the ideal **and** real in our hearts and minds, success is sure to come, whatever the endeavor.

So it takes both the ideal of faith, and the real commitment and devotion of you and of me to make it happen. Nothing short of that will do it.

Do you, too, want to be among those of whom it is said, “they finished the work, just as the Lord commanded?” That's when God's glory filled the sanctuary before all the eyes of the people, and God Himself was with them.

AMEN