

## MESSAGE

TEXT: Deuteronomy 26:16-19

THEME: SAVE YOUR PEOPLE, BLESS OUR LAND

“Save your people, bless our land,” is the title of a popular patriotic hymn, which we are using as the title for this Independence Day service.

“Save your people, bless our land.” Are the two phrases synonymous, two different ways of saying the same thing? We may have to be careful here, because we could come away saying that somehow that the United States of America is “God’s land” and that all of its citizens are somehow “God’s people.” A number of citizens would probably object to that; they want no part in being identified as “God’s people.” And while a goodly number of American citizens *are* God’s people—people of faith; more specifically, people who have been given saving faith in Jesus Christ, relying on his death and resurrection as the source of their forgiveness and righteousness, and the motivation for their godly living—just because there are Christians in our land does not mean that we are therefore a Christian nation.

But in the hymn the two phrases are placed next to one another. Does that mean there is a connection between God’s saved people, on the one hand, and the blessing of the land, on the other?

I think there is. And I think that in one sense it may actually be a kind of cause-and-effect relationship. Because God saves his people—forgiving our sins, changing our hearts, and so directing and inspiring our activities—our nation is blessed ... by the very presence of God’s people within it.

We are placed in a world, and in our society, the Bible tells us, to be a light for those around us—that’s one picture. Another picture is that we are to serve as examples of righteousness. Still another is that we are to be like salt, giving our surroundings a distinct (and most welcome) “flavor.” Our nation (as well as our city and our neighborhood) is supposed to be a better place because we are part of it, and we are God’s people, those who appreciate the great gift of God’s salvation.

Yes, we are a blessing to our land. For one thing, we pray for it. That “theme hymn” for this service (after the First Reading) is a great example of just that. In it we pray for physical and material blessings, things like our crops (and the weather they depend on) and flocks and herds (“fields of grass”) as well as “the labors of each hand” and “commerce on the sea.” It’s true that others are concerned about such things, but we are the ones who actually *pray* about them, holding them up before our God (and therefore also before ourselves) as important, important enough to include in our worship and prayer life. And we should probably do so more than just once a year.

The hymn goes on to pray for things beyond the material—for those who rule and govern us; for such beneficial attributes as faithfulness, truth, love, honor, righteousness, piety and peace. These are things we not only pray, but also *preach* and *teach*—in a society that often doesn’t know how to teach such virtues or whether it is even allowed it. As such, God blesses the nation through us who are his people, speaking on his behalf.

And living as God inspires. The Word of God directs the people of God to be good citizens, “seeking the peace of the city,” working for peace and justice. We vote, not just because we are citizens but because we are the children of God who take that citizenship seriously as a blessing to be treasured and exercised. We get involved in our communities, in our neighborhoods, in our school systems. We foster and support charities of all kinds, everything from hospitals and clinics to food pantries and shelters for the needy, disaster relief and childcare, local support groups and far-reaching agencies.

By the wondrous grace of God in Jesus Christ, we are God’s people. By the wondrous grace of God, we have been made citizens of our country as well. There *is* a relationship between the two. As God’s people, we have been blessed to be a blessing. Through us, who are the saved, God answers the prayers of others and blesses our land. Amen.

### CHILDREN’S MESSAGE

Hello, boys and girls. This weekend we celebrated Independence Day, the birthday of our nation when we declared independence from England and became our own nation. The people who established our country made it possible for us to live as free citizens in this land. One of those freedoms we have been blessed with is the freedom of religion. We have the freedom to come to church today to worship God and to praise Jesus for dying on the cross to save us from our sins.

Isn’t that a wonderful gift? But sometimes having the freedom of religion is not always easy. Some people don’t believe in Jesus. Some people may make fun of us for our faith. The Bible says that unbelief is like darkness, and that we should be like lights. **“Shine like stars in the world,”** we read in Philippians 2:15.

*(Show the picture of a fireworks display.)* Do any of you know what this is a picture of? *(Allow the children to respond.)* That’s right! This is a picture of fireworks. You probably saw some fireworks with your family this week to celebrate Independence Day. Fireworks help us to remember what it is like to be a Christian in this world and in this nation. We are to sparkle and shine and explode with the Good News that God sent his Son Jesus to save people from the darkness of sin.

Our job as followers of Christ is to keep shining for him no matter how dark it gets or how hard life may get. People often cheer when they see pretty fireworks, and God is cheering you on every time you shine for him. You are like fireworks when you tell someone “Jesus loves you!” You are like fireworks when you help someone who needs something. You are like fireworks when you pray before you eat a meal at a restaurant where people can see you. I can almost hear the oohs and aahs from God, who is always with you and gives you the freedom to live for him.

Let us pray: Thank you, heavenly Father, for saving people through your Son Jesus. Help us to display your glory in everything we do so that more people may know you. Amen.

—Pastor R. D. Starr