

## **God and Country**

Preached on July 7, 2002

At Hanover Street Presbyterian Church

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Texts:

### **1 Samuel 10: 17-19, 20a, 25**

Now Samuel called the people together to the Lord at Mizpah; and he said to the people of Israel, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'I brought up Israel out of Egypt, and I delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of all the kingdoms that were oppressing you. But you have this day rejected your God, who saves you from all your calamities and your distresses; and you have said, 'No! but set a king over us.' Now therefore present yourselves before the Lord by your tribes and by your thousands." . . .then Samuel brought all the tribes of Israel near. . .and Samuel told the people the rights and duties of the kingship; and he wrote them in a book and laid it up before the Lord.

### **Romans 13: 1-7**

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of him who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain; he is the servant of God to execute his wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay all of them their dues, taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.

### **Revelation 13: 1-8**

And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems upon its horns and a blasphemous name upon its heads. And the beast that I saw was like a leopard, its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority. One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth followed the beast with wonder. Men worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?" And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months; it opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. And authority was given it over every tribe and people and tongue and nation, and all who dwell on earth will worship it, every one whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain.

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"The nation is always endowed with an aura of the sacred, which is one reason why religions, which claim universality, are so easily captured and tamed by national sentiment, religion and patriotism merging in the process." (Reinhold Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society).

"God" and "country"--those two words arouse awe and respect in many a Boy Scout as he works toward the pinnacle of achievement, the Eagle badge.. The "God and Country" award confers special distinction on the Scout who demonstrates exemplary religious devotion and patriotism. The mere existence of such an award leads impressionable young men to assume that there is no tension between loyalty to God and loyalty to country. No need even to consider the dictum, "My country, right or wrong," for if you grow up thinking that patriotism and piety are linked ideals, you automatically assume your country can do no wrong.

That's a dangerous assumption, which the prophet Samuel foresaw. When the people of Israel decided to stop their wandering and settle down and become a nation like other nations under the leadership of a king instead of prophets, Samuel warned them. This will lead to no good, he thought. The king will get uppity and start throwing his weight around. He will forget that his power is not absolute. So, Samuel wrote down rules in a book to keep the king in a proper covenant of mutual responsibility with his people, and to keep them from making an idol of him. Samuel anticipated the problem of modern nation states, which is always easier to recognize in someone else's nation than one's own, that patriotism becomes religious.

That's what scares me these days, in the wake of 9/11, as I see so many evidences of increased patriotism --flags festooning lapels, windows, doorways, and car antennae. I'm scared of blind patriots-- people who assume their governors can do no wrong. To tell the truth, I'm becoming more frightened these days of internal threats than external ones. I'm scared of pious people who assume there is no tension at all between love of God and love of country, and I'm especially scared of shrewd people in high places who are too clever themselves to believe that, but who will exploit naive patriots' good will for all it's worth.

Recently there's been an uproar over the 9th Circuit Court of Appeal judge's ruling that the Pledge of Allegiance is unconstitutional because it contains the clause, "one nation under God." Some people are so outraged--especially elected officials eager to prove their patriotism--that they are ready for civil disobedience:: To heck with the Constitution, " they're snorting. " Even if the Pledge is found unconstitutional, we're going to keep on reciting it anyway." Now, should we regard these righteously indignant protestors as champions of piety and patriotism, or rather, as misguided fanatics?

Where can we look for scriptural guidance on this question? Romans 13: 1-7 is the most obvious passage, because it addresses the question most explicitly. Obey your rulers, Paul says, for they are God's own agents for maintaining peace and order. If you get punished by them, that's your fault; you've been doing wrong. Is Paul for real? Did he really believe that? Undoubtedly he did, because the governing authorities of his day, the Roman emperor and his legions, were not persecuting Christians. They were

maintaining a modicum of justice and order which benefited Christians. So, they seemed benign to Paul, who, it must be added, was himself a Roman citizen. Therefore, he urged his fellow Christians to obey the Romans, and even to pay taxes to them in full, which was quite a burden in those days..

Is this the final word for Christians --that we must always obey our rulers, for they are God's agents to preserve justice and civil order? Hasn't history proven that governments, sometimes even democratically elected ones, can become corrupt, self-serving and oppressive? (Consider the Third Reich, for instance.) The fact that certain people are in positions of power does not prove that they are God's agents, though they obviously appeared so to Paul. In fact, by the time the book of Revelation was written Christians spoke of the Roman state as a beast, because it was no longer protecting them, but rather, jailing and killing them. So, the New Testament does not speak with one voice about our proper allegiance to governors, the state, one's country. Opinions on this differed even among very early Christians, as demonstrated by the diametrical positions expressed in Romans 13 and Revelation 13. How should we see our governors then: as divinely appointed agents for protecting civil order; or, as corrupt, self-serving beasts? Or, perhaps neither, but something in between?

When Jesus sent out his disciples he admonished them, "Be as shrewd as serpents, innocent as doves." This is very different advice than Paul gave. I hear Jesus saying: "Don't let anybody put anything over on you. Don't take authority for granted. Question it. Even be suspicious of it. But don't let your good hearts be soured by this suspicion. Don't let your shrewdness turn you cynical." John the Evangelist put it well: "Be in the world, but not of it."

Church, as we face unprecedented threats to our government and personal safety let's beware of blind patriotism. Let's remain vigilant, and suspicious of the intentions of governors apparently untroubled by the removal of hard won civil liberties, arguing that extraordinary times warrant extraordinary measures. Freedoms once relinquished may not be easy to recoup. And in these days of terrorism, as we gather around the table of a Lord who dared to reach across barriers of culture, and break bread with people very different than he, let us especially beware fear of strangers. May the spirit that helped Jesus to conquer death keep us indeed shrewd as serpents, innocent as doves.