

[Final Four talk - won't know what it is until that weekend]

Isn't this why we love sports? Yes there's something beautiful about watching humans who've trained their bodies to peak physical condition competing against each other. There's a celebration of our embodiedness to it.

But that's not why we crowd around TVs or gather in sports bars. It's not why we create Fantasy Football teams or March Madness Brackets. It's not what makes taking the family to Dragons Stadium or heading down to the Great American Ballpark with some friends such a great Saturday. It's not why we buy Ohio State t-shirts or decorate our homes in scarlet and gray (or maize and blue).

It's something deeper that draws us to the big sports: as humans, we love to be part of something bigger than ourselves. We love to be part of a tribe, an in-group that has its own identity, traditions and behaviors (O-H...?).

But we've all seen how this desire to belong goes rotten, too. At sporting events (and actually, it's usually not at the actual game, but watching them on TV), some of the nicest, most upstanding and respectable people I know turn into monsters. They say things I'd never imagined hearing one human being say to another. They suggest behaviors that are not only anatomically improbable, but painful and immoral. They say things I'd never have imagined them saying to another real human being.

Why? That's the danger of the tribe. If we're not careful, we forget that at the end of the day, we're all part of the Human Tribe. That we're all children of the same God, that we all bear God's image. We get to thinking that MY tribe is better than YOUR tribe. Not just on the scoreboard (or whatever measurement we're using), but essentially. That somehow my tribe is more basically human than yours. We don't say that out loud (okay maybe we do about Michigan), but it comes out in how we treat people who are Other, who are part of different tribes.

The word the bible uses for these different groups is *ethnoi*, which is where we get our word "ethnicity". It gets translated in our bibles as "nation". The Bible talks about different ethnic groups, different peoples who are connected by a common language, common traditions and stories. And that's the idol we want to investigate today: the idol of Nation.

We're nearing the end of Lent, a six-week season churches all over the world set aside to confess and repent of Sin, to prepare ourselves to celebrate Jesus' resurrection on Easter Sunday. This year, we're investigating various aspects of our American culture that can easily become idols in our lives. Good things that we give the wrong weight to, that cause us to doubt God's truthfulness and goodness. [[Gravity Well](#)]

It's important to remember a couple of things as we explore Nation as idol. First, we're not just talking about political borders. [[map?](#)] That's how we define nations today, but we know that nation is much more complicated than that. Even in our own Nation - the United States of America, we have any number of different "tribes" - Red States and Blue States, the South, the North East, those Hippies out in California. Texas. We're divided along racial lines - white/black/hispanic/asian/native american. And of course we're divided by conference. Big 10, Big 12, Pac 10... did I leave anyone out? (Oh right... sorry SEC!)

So when we talk about Nation, we're talking about any group we're part of. Any group we feel like we belong to. And that includes the USA, but it includes a lot more than that too.

The other thing we need to remember is the same caution we've been making about every idol: nations aren't inherently bad. We all have an innate desire to belong, to be part of something larger than ourselves. Groups, *ethnoi*, nations - they can be a source of camaraderie and friendship. Nations often embody some wonderful, praiseworthy qualities, like hard work, bravery, loyalty.

Nations only become toxic when we give them improper weight. [Gravity Well Nation] When we place them above God and expect God to serve them rather than the other way around.

That may sound strange, but that's what ends up happening when we're not careful. We begin to think God is on my side [Jesus in an OSU basketball jersey]. Our prayers sound like "God help my side. Help us win. Make them lose." We begin to think God is on my side - the side of my team, my group, my country. That God is fighting for us, God supports our values, our ideals.

When we see that sort of thinking, it's a huge red flag that we've got an idolatry problem. God is never on my side. God never pulls for my team or fights for my country.

Turn with me in your Bibles to Joshua 5. [Scripture title slide] If you grabbed one of our maroon bibles off the rack on the way in or out of the pew in front of you, you can find Joshua 5 on XXXX. And if you don't own a bible, please keep that as a gift from us.

As you're turning to Joshua 5, let me give you some background: Joshua has been selected by God to succeed Moses (of 10 Commandments and Red Sea fame). Joshua has led the Israelites out of the desert and into the land God promised to take them. The first city they encounter is Jericho, a highly fortified city that was a huge obstacle to Israel settling this land. In these verses, Joshua is out scouting, to try to figure out how they're going to defeat Jericho. Watch what happens:

When Joshua was near the town of Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with sword in hand. Joshua went up to him and demanded, "Are you friend or foe?"

"Neither one," he replied. "I am the commander of the Lord's army."

At this, Joshua fell with his face to the ground in reverence. "I am at your command," Joshua said. "What do you want your servant to do?" -- Joshua 5:13-14

Joshua runs into a stranger and asks him the quintessential nation question: Are you with me or against me? Are you friend or foe? Are you on my side or their side?

And this person - who turns out to be the commander of God's army, says Neither. I'm not on your side Joshua. And I'm not on Jericho's side. I'm on God's side.

And Joshua's response is exactly how we all ought to respond: he bows down and says, Tell me what you want me to do.

We can't ask, Is God on my side? We must ask, Am I on God's side?

That's not just a silly word game. [Nation Gravity Well] When nation is at the center of my life, when my group is the most important, God serves my group. Now My Tribe is above reproach. Worshiping my nation sanctifies everything my nation does - if God supports it, how can it be wrong? (By the way, if you can't have an honest conversation about the good *and* the bad about your groups, that's a clear sign you have an idolatry problem).

When nation is an idol, my enemies are now God's enemies. God hates the people I hate. God fights the people I fight. I hear Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount:

You have heard the law that says, 'Love your neighbor' and hate your enemy. But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! -- Matthew 5:43

But I think to myself - Not likely! When nation is my idol I can't imagine praying for my enemies (except in those disingenuous, self-serving ways: God make them lose, God destroy them). If your commitment to your group keeps you from taking Jesus' instructions seriously, you have an idolatry problem.

This is why the New Testament is careful to remind us that when we follow Jesus, he becomes our first allegiance. When I say Yes to Jesus, I put down my nations, my groups and I embrace God's side. I recognize that God is not working for me or for my enemies. God is working for God, and now I am too.

Turn in your bibles to 1 Peter [Scripture Title slide]. Again, you can find 1 Peter 1 on page XXXX in the maroon bibles. 1 Peter is a letter written to the first Christians. Thanks to extensive missionary efforts, churches were scattered all over the known world [I can find a good map for this]. These new Christians are much like us - they live in various cultures and nations, but also have chosen to follow Jesus. And their groups are all ruled by the Roman Empire, a decidedly anti-Christian government (since, you know, they killed Christ. Hard to get much more anti-Christian than that). Look with me at how Peter addresses them:

I am writing to God's chosen people who are living as foreigners in the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. God the Father knew you and chose you long ago, and his Spirit has made you holy. As a result, you have obeyed him and have been cleansed by the blood of Jesus Christ. -- 1 Peter 1:1-2

Peter describes them as "God's chosen people, living as foreigners." These new Christians weren't foreigners. Most of them probably lived a short walk from where they'd been born. And yet Peter tells them they're *living as foreigners*. They're now part of a different group - the Church. They now have a different nation - the Nation of God.

That's difficult for us living here in the USA to hear. We experience all the freedoms, the wealth, the innovation and progress that living in the USA has brought us, and it's tough not to slip into Exceptionalism. It's hard not to think that we must be special in some way, that God loves us more. Because just look around at all we have.

But if we truly are to live as foreigners, if we're to treat the USA as our temporary residence, as the place we're staying for a while that's not our true home, then why do we have all these freedoms, this wealth?

If we're now part of God's chosen people, God's nation, then our charge is the same as it was for Israel. When God made his original covenant with them, he said:

If you will obey me and keep my covenant, you will be my own special treasure from among all the peoples on earth; for all the earth belongs to me. And you will be my kingdom of priests, my holy nation.' -- Exodus 19:5-6

If we are following Jesus, if we're living as foreigners in our nations, then we're a kingdom of priests. We're a bridge between God and people. We're a link between heaven and Earth. We're a waypoint between our true home - with God - and our temporary home - in the USA.

In other words, we're an embassy for the Kingdom of God. That's what Paul says in 2 Corinthians:

God has given us this task of reconciling people to him. For God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people's sins against them. And he gave us this wonderful message of reconciliation. So we are Christ's ambassadors; God is making his appeal through us. We speak for Christ when we plead, "Come back to God!" -- 2 Corinthians 5:18-20

We are God's ambassadors. We live in a foreign nation and announce the Way of God to those who don't know God. We plead with our neighbors to come back to God.

I didn't really fully understand what being an Ambassador for God looked like until my parents moved to the United Arab Emirates a few years ago. The UAE is in the Middle East, and it's an Muslim country. As you can imagine, it took my parents a while to make friends there - they were not only American, they are Christians.

My mom worked at a Women's college while she lived in the UAE, and connected with another staff person there named Nezzim. Over several months, my mom and Nezzim became friends, and eventually they wanted to do a double-date. But Nezzim's husband, a Palestinian man named Abraham, was reluctant. I found out later that he was afraid to meet Americans because he didn't know any, and he and his friends always talked bad about Americans (much like many of us probably don't know many Muslims but still talk about them).

But eventually mom and Nezzim made it happen. And even though the dinner was tense at first, it soon became familiar. Nezzim made a joke about something her husband did that annoyed her, and mom said, Oh my husband does that too. Abraham and my step-dad exchanged a knowing eye-roll and suddenly it wasn't two Muslims and two Christians having dinner together. It wasn't two Americans and two Palestinians. Two white people and two Arabs.

Suddenly they were all just humans. They loved, they raised children. They worked hard. They cared deeply. My mom and step-dad are some of the only Christians Nezzim and Abraham know, and they count them as friends. As deeply faithful people. As Americans who aren't afraid of Arabs.

This is what it looks like to be an Ambassador. To be a patriot, to celebrate our earthly nation, to enjoy the freedoms and opportunities we have, but always to keep them in perspective. To remember that the USA is not my permanent home. That I am an ambassador here, advancing the Kingdom of God. That I am to be a faithful picture of Jesus wherever I go.

If you're still in 1 Peter, look over at chapter 2. Later in his letter, Peter gives us some advice on how to live as resident aliens:

Dear friends, I warn you as “temporary residents and foreigners” to keep away from worldly desires that wage war against your very souls. Be careful to live properly among your unbelieving neighbors. Then even if they accuse you of doing wrong, they will see your honorable behavior, and they will give honor to God when he judges the world. For the Lord’s sake, respect all human authority—whether the king as head of state, or the officials he has appointed. For the king has sent them to punish those who do wrong and to honor those who do right.

It is God’s will that your honorable lives should silence those ignorant people who make foolish accusations against you. For you are free, yet you are God’s slaves, so don’t use your freedom as an excuse to do evil. Respect everyone, and love your Christian brothers and sisters. Fear God, and respect the king. -- 1 Peter 2:11-7

Live properly among your unbelieving neighbors. Embody the way of Jesus everywhere you go. Respect human authority. Don't use your freedom to do evil. Respect everyone (even people who aren't part of your tribe! Respect people who pull for the other team! The other political party. Respect them all.) And honor the king, but fear only God.

Brothers and sisters, fellow resident aliens, fellow ambassadors, let's remember that when we choose to follow Jesus we become part of a new nation. We get a new identity. We're reborn into a new life.

That doesn't mean we stop being part of our old tribes. We're still Americans. Or Republicans or Democrats or Buckeyes. Remember: nations, tribes, they're not *bad*. They're good gifts from God. They make us who we are and they're good.

[[Nation Gravity Well](#)] But when we exchange the God of the universe for our tribe, it becomes an idol. It whispers to us that our group is special, that it's better. That My Tribe is more holy, more right, less sinful than the Other Guys. When we start to believe that our lives become distorted. We quit treating people as Jesus did and begin treating them as less. As other.

Our tribes, our nations are good. But they are not God. God is not on our side. God is not fighting for us. God does not love our tribe, our nation, any more than God loves any other tribe, nation, tongue or people.

God gave a prophet named John a Revelation in which John was allowed to peek into Heaven, to see a vision of the End of all things. Look at what John saw:

I saw a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb. They were clothed in white robes and held palm branches in their hands. And they were shouting with a great roar, “Salvation comes from our God who sits on the throne and from the Lamb!” -- Revelation 7:9-10

A vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, all declaring in one voice, "Salvation comes from our God."

Every nation. Every tribe.

That means Buckeyes *and* Wolverines! Reds and Indians and Cardinals and Cubs. Americans and Canadians and Mexicans *and* Iraqis and Chinese and Russians and hopefully even some from the Taliban who found against all odds that Jesus is in fact the way, the truth and the life.

God's tribe is the Human Tribe. God loves us all and God is working to call all peoples, all tribes, all nations to him. If Christians are ambassadors for that God, then this Church is his embassy here in Beaver creek, Ohio.

You were handed a work visa on the way in today. Pull it out. Write your name on it. (You don't have to fill in the other stuff if you don't want). This is to remind you that you're a resident alien. When you choose to follow Jesus, God gives you citizenship in his kingdom. And now you're here - in your nation, among your tribes, as an ambassador. Speaking for God. Representing Jesus and his invitation to everyone around you.

### **Communion SetUp**

We come to the table today to remember Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus was crucified as a pretender king. His body was broken and his blood poured out by a people who had put their nation and its false gods above the God of the Universe.

We take these wafers to remember Jesus' body, broken for us and for every other person on the planet, in every nation, tribe, tongue and people. We dip it in the grape juice to remember Jesus' blood, poured out so that every one of us can now be freed from our idolatry and reconnected with God.

You don't have to be a member of Beaver creek Nazarene to receive communion here. If you're willing to be an ambassador for God, to be first and foremost part of God's nation, the human tribe, then you're invited to Jesus' table this morning.

Let's pray together.

### **Benediction**

God has given you this task of reconciling people to him. For God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people's sins against them. And he gave you this wonderful message of reconciliation. So you are Christ's ambassadors; God is making his appeal through you. You speak for Christ when you plead, "Come back to God!" -- 2 Corinthians 5:18-20