

Welcome

Do you consider yourself a patriot? [DISCUSSION]

This is where I find it helpful to distinguish carefully between Nationalism and Patriotism. Patriotism is love of one's country. It's being able to look at our country, flaws and all, and say, "I'm really glad to be an American."

Or, as author James Baldwin put it, "I love America more than any other country in the world and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually." — James Baldwin

Nationalism is different. Nationalism says not, "I love my country," but "My country is better than every other country." It elevates love of people to a place where the people or nation can't be criticized. My nation is perfect, so any criticism can't come from a place of love, but hate.

That's an idol, plain and simple.

Today, let's explore the good news that real patriotism is only possible when we love another nation first - God's kingdom.

Message

Today is Palm Sunday. It's the beginning of the final week of Lent, the last week of Jesus' life. Lent is a season of transformation. In Epiphany, we asked who God is and saw that God is the one who lives in solidarity with us, calling and equipping us to be God's images in the world.

Lent is the chance for us to prepare for that calling. It's a way for us to take time together to look inside ourselves and do some careful introspection, to ask as a community where we are not prepared to embark on God's call together.

This year, our series has been "God is Not..." This is a technique to know God that originated with the theologian Thomas Aquinas. In his masterwork *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas wrote,

"We cannot know what God is, only what [God] is not. We must therefore consider the ways in which God does not exist rather than the ways in which [God] does." — Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*

That sounds strange, I know, but it's Aquinas' attempt to take seriously the command not to create idols of God. God is infinite and beyond our comprehension - what theologians like Aquinas call a mystery. But we constantly create pictures of God - pictures that are false. Pictures that do more harm than good.

Like Michelangelo carving the David, we're carving away the things God is not as a way to see more clearly the divine mystery that is God. As we see what God is not, we are more clearly able to confess our participation in those things and turn from them.

We began by confessing that God is beyond us - unknowable except where God chooses to be known. We faced our own propensity to play God. Tim challenged us to refuse the god of money. And last week, Sonya invited us into a deep understanding of how God engages our past. We looked at the idolatry of the family, race and gender.

Today, Palm Sunday, is a day where we confront the final idol of our series, Nationalism. To but it bluntly, God is not an American.

I know just saying that can raise our hackles. Many of us have grown up hearing that America is God's chosen nation. Ronald Reagan popularized the image of American democracy as a shining city on a hill, appropriating Jesus' description of the Church in the Sermon on the Mount. In fact, going as far back as the first English colonizers to settle on the East Coast, European immigrants have imagined America to be a new Promised Land, and themselves latter-day Israelites and the native nations Canaanites God commanded them to exterminate.

So when some of us hear, "God is not an American," it feels deeply wrong. It feels like an attack on our identity. It feels like we're being told to hate America. But this is where I want us to hold on to the distinction between patriotism and nationalism.

Because God has a lot to say about Nationalism. I'm sure you know that America didn't invent Nationalism. The line between patriotism and nationalism is fine, and people have been idolizing their countries for basically as long as we've had countries.

Turn with us to [Isaiah 49](#).

Israel in particular struggled with this, and it was perhaps made worse by the fact that they actually *were* God's chosen people.

When God led Israel out of Egypt, God made a covenant with them. "If you will be my people, I will be your God. I will make you my special nation, and you will be a kingdom of priests."

In other words, God chose Israel specifically to join God in healing the whole world (God wanted to make them priests to the whole world).

So from the beginning, Israel's chosenness wasn't about God loving them more, but a privilege God extended to them to *join God in loving the whole world*.

You can imagine how easy it is to forget that, can't you? To slide from 'chosen because God is good' to 'chosen because I'm good'?

This passage is one of the famous 'suffering servant' texts. God speaks to an anonymous servant. Scholars are divided - was this servant a real person? Maybe the prophet? Did he represent Israel as a whole? Early Christians saw Jesus in the figure of the servant.

So who is the servant? The servant is all of us, if we will listen to God's call:

And now the Lord speaks—
the one who formed me in my mother's womb to be his servant,
who commissioned me to bring Israel back to him.

The Lord has honored me, and my God has given me strength.
He says, "You will do more than restore the people of Israel to me.
I will make you a light to the Gentiles,
and you will bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."

The Lord, the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel,
says to the one who is despised and rejected by the nations,
to the one who is the servant of rulers:

"Kings will stand at attention when you pass by. Princes will also bow low because of the Lord,
the faithful one, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you." -- Isaiah 49:5–7 (NLT)

You can hear in this section, God reaffirming the servant's call. God will make us a 'light to the Gentiles' - that echoes the kingdom of priests language from Exodus.

Even in the midst of a hostile world, one that has eviscerated their nation, destroyed everything that gave their world meaning, God reminds them of their calling.

All these nations who despise them, all these nations who look down on them and consider them as nothing - these are the very nations God created them and called them to serve.

And the day is coming when they will see that light.

It's not hard to see why the early church found Jesus in these passages, is it?

Today is Palm Sunday, the first day of Holy Week. We call it Palm Sunday because of how Jesus arrives in Jerusalem. In Matthew's account of Jesus' life, he spends his time in northern Israel. If you were here last week, you may remember me describing Jesus' experience in the transfiguration as a sort of hinge-point for his ministry. He came down the mountain ready to go to Jerusalem, to confront the powers corrupting God's world.

Palm Sunday is the day he arrives. It's the week of Passover, so Jesus is traveling with a massive throng of pilgrims. And they're all coming from the North, so many of them are whispering that rumor that's been spreading:

Jesus is the messiah.

He's the promised king, come to make Israel great again. And now he's headed to Jerusalem, the seat of power. During Passover - the holiday that celebrates God freeing Israel from Egypt.

Imagine there was a guy running around the Midwest talking about liberty and justice for all Americans. And then he announced that, on July 4th weekend, he was headed to Washington,

D. C. *and* there was a pretty credible rumor that he was George Washington's great, great, great grandson.

You would probably think to yourself, "Huh. Not very subtle." Right?

Jesus' intentions weren't exactly secret either. People were expecting him to raise up an army, drive out Rome, reestablish God's kingdom here on Earth.

And when Jesus arrived, he made sure to enter the city on the same day as Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea. Pilate entered the city from the West, riding a massive war horse and trailing the infamous Roman legions behind him.

Jesus enters not a warhorse but a donkey. Not an army, but a mass of peasants and pilgrims.

This moment should have clued the people in to what kind of Messiah Jesus was.

He was not a conquering Messiah. He came humbly.

He didn't come to destroy his enemies, but to save them.

This is an important insight: in hoping for a military Messiah, God's people forgot their calling.

God didn't anoint them as special because they were better than everyone else. God chose them to join God in rescuing the world.

It's a short path from "God chose us because *God* is good," to "God chose us because *we* are good."

That distinction is subtle but so important. Israel understood that the Exile, the Roman occupation - these were because they repeatedly refused to *be* God's people, to be that light to the nations. What began as 'God chose us to be a light to the world,' was reduced to 'God chose us' to just 'Chosen'.

In that way, their own national identity became an idol. The very thing God had intended for good - their chosenness - became an obstacle to their fulfilling their calling.

This is the danger of nationalism, friends. We can be grateful for the country in which we live. We can rejoice for the freedoms we enjoy that do not exist other places in the world.

But when our love of country ascends to the place that we can no longer see our country clearly, when we become unable to see the good *and* the bad, we've made our country an idol.

This is what's behind, for instance, the fierce opposition to Critical Race Theory in our country right now. From legislators to parents of school-age kids to pastors, a number of Americans oppose media and curriculum that evaluate American history through the lens of race. Why?

Because it's not very pretty. It's hard to learn that stuff and still have unwavering, uncritical love for your country.

But as James Baldwin reminded us, part of love is speaking truth. We *know* America isn't perfect, just like Jesus in his day knew Israel wasn't perfect. We can't grow if we can't acknowledge that.

Throughout this series, we've listened as Scripture challenges the idols we've created in our culture.

An enshrinement of individual freedom at the expense of all else.

The pursuit of profit no matter who gets hurt or exploited.

A desire to deny the past so we don't have to work to heal the wounds that still exist to this day.

The centering of the nuclear family that marginalizes and dismisses so many who don't fit that mold.

The white Jesus embraced by so many as the God we're supposed to want to become.

And the uncritical love of country that convinces us we're chosen, special, better than the rest of the world.

We love the nation where we live because God loves the nation where we live. But we love it truly, deeply enough to know our history, to see it honestly, to speak truth and call our nation to the best version of ourselves.

Communion + Examen

Jesus makes us a new nation - the kingdom of God.

Where has my faith enabled me to offer loving critique of my country?

Where has my love of country caused me to ignore or overlook injustice?

How is God inviting me to seek Jesus' kingdom first this week?

Assignment + Blessing

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