

- **What did the colonists wear to the Boston Tea Party?**  
Tea-shirts.

- **What was the most popular dance in 1776?**  
Indepen-dance.

- **What does the Statue of Liberty stand for?**  
It can't sit down.

- 

- Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,  
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;  
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand  
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name  
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand  
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command  
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.

"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she  
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

That poem is “The New Colossus,” written by Emma Lazarus in 1883 to raise money for the building of the pedestal for the Statute of Liberty. Most folks know the last part of the poem, “give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” As I reflect on the words inscribed on the bronze plaque in the pedestal of the Statute of Liberty, and the title of our offertory song, I think of Jesus as well. I could see Jesus saying that last part of the sonnet because we know he cared for the poor, the downtrodden, the cast-away, and for the stranger.

Jesus was the greatest prophet ever in addition to being the Son of God. The Gospel reading this morning described how he was shunned in his hometown. The folks in his hometown didn’t believe in him because they knew him as he was growing up, so how could little Jesus grow up to become a great teacher, healer, and prophet? In Nazareth they blew him off. I’m sure for Jesus that must have been a terrible day, showing again that being a prophet is not easy.

I can also hear the prophet Ezekiel speaking about this poem by Emma Lazarus too. But from what I know about Ezekiel, I don’t see him saying, “bring me your tired, your poor.” Instead, I can hear him saying, “are you caring for the tired, the poor, the huddled masses longing to breathe free?” I think that’s what Ezekiel would say (and I could hear Jesus saying that too), because that was what Ezekiel’s job was. God commanded him to preach truth to the Judahites in exile in Babylonia. Ezekiel’s job was to call out the people of Judah and Jerusalem. Ezekiel was there warning of the judgment coming to the Jewish people because of their disobedience to Yahweh.

Emma Lazarus practiced what she preached in her writing. Her ancestors were some of the first Jewish immigrants to the United States. By the late 1800s, Lazarus' family had become wealthy, and she had achieved some notoriety as a writer. She was an advocate for Jews immigrating to New York from Russia where they were escaping persecution. She used her position of means and influence and founded the Society for the Improvement and Colonization of East European Jews, an organization that helped Jewish immigrants coming to overcrowded New York to find housing and it offered education for Jewish immigrants.<sup>1</sup> She wouldn't have been one of the rebellious Judahites that Ezekiel preached to.

God is blunt when he calls Ezekiel to be his prophet to the people of Israel. God says I'm sending you to the people of Israel, a bunch of "rebels who have rebelled against me." They and their ancestors have disobeyed my commands. The people are disrespectful and stubborn. God is also giving Ezekiel a heads up that the road ahead will be difficult, but God tells him, don't worry about it and don't be afraid of them and their words. Ezekiel's ministry started around 593 BC.<sup>2</sup> Just speak the words I tell you. Yahweh gave Ezekiel words on a scroll of "lamentation and mourning and woe" (Ezek. 2:10) to speak to the exiles.

God gave Ezekiel a tough task. That happens with all prophets. It's always a tough task. It certainly was for Ezekiel. First, Ezekiel is already in a tough spot because he is

---

<sup>1</sup> Emma Lazarus, "Freedom: A History of US," WNET, <https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/historyofus/web10/features/bio/B04.html#:~:text=She%20established%20the%20Society%20for,as%20well%20as%20Jews%20read.>

<sup>2</sup> The Preacher's Handbook, 149

in exile along with thousands of other Judahites. He's in Babylonia, taken away after the Judahites are crushed by the Babylonians. God is warning Ezekiel that whether the people listen to you or not they'll know there's a prophet among them. How will they know that? Because Ezekiel is going to get real with them. By his pronouncements, they will know he is a prophet of Yahweh. God tells Ezekiel, don't be afraid. Just open your mouth and say what I tell you to say.

Ezekiel is brave and is there to speak the truth to the people. Ezekiel is there to tell the Judahites in Chapter 5 what God has told him, that Jerusalem "has rebelled against my ordinances and my statutes, becoming more wicked than the nations and the countries all around her, rejecting my ordinances and not following my statutes." God says the people of Judah have obeyed the laws of the countries around it more than God's laws, and "because of all your abominations, I will do to you what I have never yet done, and the like which I will never do again." (Ezek.5:8-9). And that "I myself am coming against you; I will execute judgments among you in the sight of the nations" (Ezek. 5:8).

The people of Judah and Jerusalem are going to suffer because of their decisions to go against the Lord and disobey Yahweh's commandments.

For the next 20-some chapters he prophesies judgments and disaster for Judah and Jerusalem, including the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

In the Hebrew Bible, there are numerous stories of the Israelites disobeying God and being punished for that, not just Ezekiel.

So, what can we take away from the Word of God in that reading from Ezekiel? What is going on in our world, in our country? Is God punishing the United States right now with deep division, anxiety, loneliness, and abject fear? Are we the rebellious people like the Judahites from in Ezekiel's time? Is God's judgment coming down upon us for our collective sins as a nation and society?

I've been grappling with that question and others like it a lot lately, because I hear that question and sentiment from folks here in our congregation, and out in the rest of the world. I do not know the mind of God and I must admit, I do not know. What I do know is that the United States is not in the Bible. And Yahweh never made a covenant with Americans like he did with the ancient Israelites. Yahweh did not make a pact with the United States and God didn't say you are my chosen people. It's just not there. In Deuteronomy 7:6, it is written that, "The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession." What I do know is that we as individuals, and as a society, pay consequences for our decisions. And sometimes, things happen that are inexplicable.

I think talking about God's judgment against a country is a device by people to make sense of why bad things happen. What's happening is that we have consequences for the choices we make as individuals, and as a society for the decisions we make culturally and governmentally. And sometimes, what happens simply does not make sense. But we as human beings are drawn to try and make sense of events. It is an instinct.

When I hear all the many songs we are singing in worship today, I think of them as songs of gratitude to God for the blessings I have received, by the grace of God, for being born in this country. I do not view the songs as triumphalist, rah, rah, songs, like Go America Go! Or USA! USA! That we would shout at a sporting event. I see them as songs of gratitude to God. I see the Emma Lazarus' poem as an ideal that we should shoot for. That we, the richest and most powerful country in the world, can have more compassion, that we can do more to be a sign of hope to the world. "From her beacon-hand, Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command," Lazarus wrote.

I do not think it's a stretch to say that we are all patriots here and we all love our country. But the United States is a civil government. The United States is not a theocracy where religious leaders govern the country. Nor do we have a state religion, such as Christianity. If we were to become a Christian nation as some in our country wish, or think we are, which Christianity would it be? Roman Catholicism Christianity? Pentecostal Christianity? Lutheran Christianity? Presbyterian Church USA Christianity? Methodist Christianity? Presbyterian Church in America Christianity? Evangelical Presbyterian Church Christianity? Southern Baptist Christianity? American Baptist Churches USA Christianity? Orthodox Presbyterian Church Christianity? It's not so simple, is it?

Our founders did not want a state religion. If they did, they would have put that in the constitution. But they didn't. What was put in there was the First Amendment, which states: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." There is no mention of a desire for a state religion

in the Declaration of Independence either. While there is mention of God in these documents, it doesn't say who that God is. The conflation of God and country into one is a dangerous thing. It has the potential to turn country into an idol.

Let us not forget that God is our first allegiance. We are followers of Jesus the Christ first. In our Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) book of order are listed the great ends of the church: the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world. We are here as the church for the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven. Let us never forget that. Amen.