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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

July 4, 2021

Year B, Proper 9, Track 2, Revised Common Lectionary

[Ezekiel 2:1-5](#)

[Psalm 123](#)

[2 Corinthians 12:2-10](#)

[Mark 6:1-13](#)

In the name of Jesus, who has redeemed us as a royal priesthood from every family and language and people and nation: Amen.

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One of the formative conditions of my childhood was living overseas from when I was seven up through the end of high school. As our family moved to Korea, then to Pakistan, then to Russia, I spent a lot of my adolescence pining after things from back home in the U.S. Shopping malls; chain restaurants; baseball games on TV; even commercials. Little pieces of the culture of home, of America, where I was from. On visits home during the summer I would marvel at what it felt like to be able to go into a gas station, chat with the attendant in my native language, buy a newspaper or a soda and get change in quarters rather than rubles. Now I liked growing up overseas, and I liked the countries I lived in. I loved getting to travel, and learn new cultures and languages. And yet for me the United States was the place I longed for, the best place on earth, because it was home.

And at the same time I felt more than one way about the United States. Once at a McDonald's restaurant in Moscow my friends and I cringed and rolled our eyes as we watched a couple of American guys ahead of us at the register. "I said a double cheeseburger, no onions!" said one of them in English at about a hundred decibels, the way people sometimes do, as if shouting louder would make people understand your language, then turned to his buddy. "She doesn't understand me, can you believe it!" They were the stereotypical "ugly American" expats: assuming they didn't have to learn a word of Russian, expecting the world around them to accommodate them. "Americans!" my friends and I said to each other—of course several of us *were* Americans; that wasn't the point. Or rather, it was; because actually *being* American made us feel we had the right to criticize, to think of ourselves as "not *that* kind of American."

Identity is complicated. Sometimes being from somewhere means warm fuzzies and a sense of belonging. Sometimes it means alienation. And a lot of times it means both at once. Sometimes there's no criticism that can be harsher than the criticism from inside, born out of love and anger in equal measure.

Today we heard about the prophetic call of Ezekiel. God sends Ezekiel to Israel, to the beloved chosen people, yet with words of rebuke. Ezekiel goes to his own people with a message born of love and anger: return to the LORD! His words are harsh not because he's an enemy of Israel. He's not signing on with the Babylonians. His words are harsh precisely because he is part of this people and he yearns for it to be what it truly can be.

And we heard about Jesus in his own hometown, in that same long tradition of prophets who are critical from the inside—and who in turn are rebuked by the inside. His message is finding hearers everywhere he goes, until he comes back where they know him too well; where he already has a role, and prophet isn't it; where they take offense at him. “A prophet is never without honor except in his own hometown,” he says, or as the version of this story in Matthew's gospel puts it, “except in his own country.”

Now today is Independence Day for this country, the country that for most of us in this gathering is our own country, our home. And like any home, this place carries many meanings and many feelings for each of us, as well as for those who aren't. I think one thing we need to say clearly on this day as Christians is that our ultimate citizenship, as St. Paul says, is in heaven. Our most basic identity is not as Americans but as children of God, and that is an identity we share across any human-made borders. There is a terrible danger in mixing up patriotism with faith, especially in this country where Christianity is so tied up with militarism and nationalism, including white nationalism. America may be many things, but it is not the source of our salvation or the hope for humankind. God is bigger than any nation.

And with that said, I want to say also that I love this country, as so many of us do. Having been fortunate to see many others, I've chosen to spend my adult life here, partly because my family and friends are here, partly because it's the place where my language and customs and culture were formed, partly because I love its hills and rivers and lakes and oceans, its sounds and smells; and partly because I am truly grateful for the genuine freedoms this country aspires to and sometimes achieves.

Here in this place we can worship, or choose not to worship, freely. We can criticize the government. If we get into trouble we can generally be tried by a jury according to written-down laws rather than be tossed into prison at the unaccountable whims of a dictator. Those things are not the case everywhere, including some of the places I lived growing up. Those freedoms aren't to be taken for granted, and they have come, in many cases, at a high price.

So I do love America. And yet it's also true that there are many people who don't love America, because they have no reason to. There are those for whom America means only violence or exploitation or being left out. As Langston Hughes put it, "America never was America to me. ... There's never been equality for me, Nor freedom in this 'homeland of the free.'"¹

So if we do love America we may sometimes find ourselves, like Ezekiel, called not just to offer words of praise but also to prophesy about what America could be, and should be. What could this country be if we didn't have the highest rates of gun violence on earth, or the most child poverty of any rich nation? If we, like every other wealthy nation, found a way to get health care to all our people? If it was equally easy for every citizen to vote? What would America be like if it was no longer true that every single measure of well-being, from income to wealth to health to education and so on, is dramatically correlated with race, with white people at the top?

¹ Langston Hughes, "Let America Be America Again."

To love the United States is not just to wave the flag and be content with what this country is today. To love the United States is to see not only what this country is now but also its potential for what can be, with God's grace, and with the work of human hands.

Later this morning we will sing a song about America, one of the handful of "National Songs" in our hymnal: *O beautiful for spacious skies*. And I think it's an appropriate song to sing in church today because it is not a song of triumphalism, but a prayer. Listen to the words as we sing it: a prayer *that* God will shed his grace on America; *that* God will crown what is good about America with real brotherhood; *that* God will mend America's every flaw and bring about a dream where America's cities are no longer dimmed by human tears.

It's a dream Langston Hughes wrote about too, in a different way. "America never was America to me, And yet I swear this oath—America will be! ... O, let America be America again—The land that never has been yet—And yet must be—the land where *every*[one] is free."