

I Corinthians 6:19-20; 7:17-23
Luke 4:16-21

BOUGHT WITH A PRICE

It was a David and Goliath story from the beginning. How could the tiny resources of the disorganized and quarreling colonies defy the might of the British Empire? Britain had 42,000 well-trained, professional regulars, supplemented by 30,000 German mercenaries (not to mention the navy and supplies and equipment). The colonies were so disorganized that it's hard to tell, but at most we had 20,000 fighting men at any one time, mostly farmers. Looking back, it seems ludicrous that anyone could have imagined that we would win. Seeing this more clearly than *we* did, the British became arrogant. That was our secret weapon, our only hope. British arrogance was a more powerful weapon against *them* than our quarreling, disorganization, and lack of cooperation was against *us*. The British knew we were a "house of cards" – that if they just hung around for a while, the citizenry would turn against the Congress and it would all fall apart. They were right, too, by all conceivable logic. The only thing they did not figure on was George (ours, not theirs) and the impact he would have. Not that others weren't also incredibly brave and noble, and even brilliant. But the British had that covered. They knew even that couldn't last for long enough.

But where did George Washington come from? Who could have imagined that a man would arise who was so brilliant, humble, patient, and idealistic, and yet steady? He tolerated fellow officers he could have justly shot. His strategy often seemed so obtuse that people were not sure he had one ... until after it worked. Anything normal or sane, the British could have handled with ease. George was the one who fully grasped that. Well, there is no time to go into the real story, but it seems to me that few of us realize how much we owe this man. We never fully paid him; never fully paid his army; never gave him the supplies, the authority, or the cooperation he needed to save our necks. He just did it anyway, even though it was impossible. Then in the end, when it was over but also just beginning – when he was our first President and we thought he was too old, and yet he had the only balanced wisdom left in the land – then we turned on him. How familiar. Dear Pisces. There are the strong and there are the weak. And then there are those so strong in humility that we mistake it for weakness – except they keep saving us. Do we ever stop to wonder where they come from?

But I don't want to talk about that. What I want to talk about is the Declaration. We just celebrated the Declaration of Independence of July 4, 1776. The vote to declare our independence was actually taken on July 2nd. The wording – the Declaration itself – was adopted on July 4th. That detail is minor. But what is not minor – what is truly important, at least to me – is that we celebrate the Declaration. As a matter of fact, so far as I'm concerned, that is what makes life on this planet possible and tolerable: We do not celebrate the accomplishments. We celebrate the Declarations.

In this life – in this broken realm – we celebrate beginnings, not conclusions. Where do we think we are?! The Declaration of Independence is more than a political complaint against tariffs and taxes. It is a vision – a hope, a dream – that has never been accomplished, that is still in progress. It is a Declaration of intention, and a Declaration of how we intend to live and be – not an accomplished fact. People keep coming up with comments about imperfections and injustices as if such things were some incredible new insight, something nobody ever thought about or noticed before. “No kidding, Sherlock.” Yes, they took the paragraph against slavery out of the Declaration of Independence because they did not want to deal with the reaction of the southern colonies. Some will still argue that it was pragmatically necessary. Nobody argues that it was right. George Washington himself died with many debts (thanks to an ungrateful country), and he had slaves. Some think it was to protect them and that he intended one day to free them. But that did not happen. However sad, that does not mean there was no Valley Forge, or no Christmas night crossing the Delaware. In this world, we celebrate the Declaration, not the accomplishment. But the Declaration was serious. They were backing it with life and limb and enormous effort. Still, nothing gets perfect here.

People were becoming angry, even furious, for twelve years prior to the Declaration of Independence. Nobody celebrates that. Open hostilities (British and Colonials shooting and killing each other) broke out on April 19, 1775, at Lexington and Concord. In case you're daydreaming, that is more than a year *before* July 4, 1776. General Richard Montgomery invaded Canada and captured Montreal in the fall of 1775. Nobody is celebrating the earlier events. Full intention is not clear yet. We celebrate the Declaration.

Equally fascinating is that we do not celebrate the accomplishment of our independence from England. Richard Lee proposed that all allegiance – all political connection between us (the thirteen colonies) and the State of Great Britain – be dissolved. John Adams seconded. John Adams wrote to his wife: “I am apt to believe that it [the 4th of July] will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival. It ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, balls, bonfires, and illuminations from one end of this continent to another, from this time forward forevermore.”

Well, I saw some beautiful illuminations at the celebrations of this past 4th of July (over 230 years later). That is hardly forever, but it's a start. On the other hand, how could John Adams be speaking of parades and celebrations in 1776? Cornwallis would not be surrendering until October 19, 1781. The Treaty of Paris, officially ending the war and recognizing our independence from England, would not be signed until September 3, 1783. That was seven years later – seven years of chaos, death, hunger, stupidity, and hardly any rational hope on any horizon. If France had not declared war on England in 1778, Spain in 1779, and the Netherlands in 1780, can anyone imagine that Britain would have turned away from us? And we did not really do it all by ourselves, of course. From 1776, the French were supplying us with guns and ammunition, and neutralizing Britain's terrible sea power. How could John Adams be speaking of parades before any of this had been played out?

We celebrate the Declaration, not the accomplishment. That seems to me to be terribly important. We get to choose what we will live for; we do not get to choose the outcome. We get to celebrate what we believe in, and what we are about, and what we are striving toward. If we wait until it is accomplished, we will never celebrate anything, and nobody will ever know what we cared about or what we were living for.

Have any of you ever celebrated a wedding anniversary? What are you celebrating – the Declaration, or the accomplishment? The wedding is a Declaration of love and a promise to cherish, and a claimed determination to live life together no matter what the outcome. Then comes seven, or thirty, or sixty years of chaos, death, hunger, stupidity and, some days, hardly any rational hope on any horizon. And if you will not keep coming back from defeat after defeat ... risk crossing the Delaware on a Christmas night against all odds ... keep

believing in the life and the love that you declared in the first place – then you get precisely what any rational person would expect from this life: nothing ... at least nothing worth having.

We celebrate baptism, the Declaration that begins the Christian Life. Do we ever! But have you ever been to a ceremony where we declare that some of us are now perfect, or that we live the Christian Life perfectly?

We get to celebrate the Declaration, not the accomplishment of our freedom. We never know the end of any story. You can see us trying to pretend we know: Watch a movie, and after a while it says “The End.” Yet that is never true. I always go away wondering what would happen next. We write books, and they also say “The End.” But that’s only because of lack of funds, or lack of imagination. We try to do it in real life too: *that* man is a failure; that child is spoiled; that woman is a saint. Only, we never know what the next day will bring.

God says, “*I am the alpha and the omega.*” That is not just poetry; it means: “Stop judging. Stop trying to write ‘finished’ on things and people you do not understand. You do not have the power or the authority to create or to destroy. It is MINE! *I AM the alpha and the omega.*” So we go back to humility, and appreciation, and wonder. We watch, and when we think we feel the rhythm, we try to move with it. It is not our task to create the ocean; we only get to ride the waves. But the endings are none of our business. God will tell us when everything is over. By the way, if we really want to *start* something, we might check that with God too.

Therefore, it is appropriate that we celebrate Declarations. It is wonderful to feel the rhythm and sense the destiny. It is good when we turn in the direction we believe God wants us to be going. Our forebears signed a Declaration of Independence and turned toward freedom. They did not know if they could achieve it. They *did* know their lives were on the line. All real choices in life are like that.

So we celebrate Declarations because they are what really matter in our realm. Our *choices* are what matter. The outcome is never in our hands. In many ways, our nation has never achieved what it set out to accomplish – not yet. Some of us know that on the day enough of us turn away from these aims and goals, we will be destroyed as a nation. Some days, it feels like the margin separating us from this very fate is narrow indeed.

And then it gets personal. As individuals, we must also declare our independence from various people, places, and things. To be truly dependent upon God, we must declare our independence from all other things. Hopefully, none of us ever let Independence Day pass us by without remembering and reviewing this. It is one of the great insights of our inheritance and heritage: In true celebration, we also make fresh Declarations of our own. Each new Declaration will put some part of our lives back on the line. Each new Declaration will cost us “seven years of warfare.” If we trust God, does that matter?

Now that we have that clear, I want to talk about Jesus. You probably knew that I would. Some of you think Jesus is my only hero. Today, you may have noticed that I think quite a bit of George, too. I owe him a lot! More than we can put into words here. But what impress me most are the patterns I see in him that I learned from Jesus.

Jesus is a Declaration also. He is the one, back at the very beginning of His ministry, who declared us all free. Remember? *“God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”* (Luke 4:18)

If the boys in Philadelphia had not known Jesus’ Declaration better and more clearly than most folk realize today, even they would never have dared their own Declaration of Independence. Jesus is the Declaration of Independence from sin, death, and the Devil. That is an old formula and no longer resonates with everyone like it does for me. If you use that phrase within my hearing, I hear bells ringing all over the universe with wild peals of joy. If I cut the language way, way down: It is also a Declaration of freedom from all inner psychological terrors; from all outer discouragement with life; from slavery to false values; from the weight and pain of all the mistakes and blunders and evils that I have committed, unwittingly or on purpose. It is the biggest and greatest and primary DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE. And it is for everyone who wants true freedom, not just for one nation or culture or religion.

Jesus’ death and resurrection gather it all together, bring the issues to clarity, prove the power that can make it stick. This is the freedom on which all lesser freedoms depend. Some people today do not like us to mix Christian truth with nationalism or patriotism. I understand the problems. Only, I happen to know that the founders of our country were deeply religious, and so do you. How can we honor them without honoring

the faith that guided their lives and gave them the courage to follow the light that makes all our Declarations possible?

It really is true, in strange and eerie ways, that when we make the Declaration of freedom, we are free. The warfare is a reality, and the Declaration would be fake – a charade – if we did not fight for it. But that is life working itself out, and us learning and growing and making the truth our own. Nevertheless, if we make the Declaration, the freedom has already begun. Even if Great Britain has an army and a navy a hundred times more powerful than the colonies (which it did), and it is going to come against them (which some if it did) – nevertheless, if they declare that they have no further allegiance to Great Britain, AND MEAN IT, then they are free. The consequences are the only thing left. But the freedom is already true and real.

It is exactly so if we decide to go with Jesus: The freedom is then already ours. All that remains is the warfare – the consequences. Who cares about that if our spirits can finally breathe and be free – and seek truth, find love, and know God?

But what happens if, after Shane clears the valley, Joe Starrett and his family sell out and move anyway? What happens if, after George Washington's starving army wins the war, we simply choose new tyrants to live under? What happens if, after Jesus dies and rises again and comes to us as Holy Spirit, we still live our lives in fear and guilt, and go on trying to run our own lives and the lives of all those around us?

Then the simple truth is that we have not made the Declarations, no matter how much we pretend to celebrate them. What was gained at such a high cost to others is nevertheless lost to us. Feeling no honor or obligation, we never experience what was won for us. Not to be under a New Way is to go back to an Old Way.

If we think we are patriots – if we honor the people who framed our heritage – then we must celebrate the Declarations. And that means we cannot play it safe. Our lives have to go on the line like theirs did. Every person here is sitting by some Delaware River, wondering if they dare to cross it. You know you should – and something within you cries out for you to risk it. But you are afraid. Of course!

Welcome to the party! Do not forget that God is the host.