

"Because It Was Thus Designated"

"Not a Rhetorical 'If', but a Functional 'If'"

Exodus 3:1-5, 5:1-3, 10:24, 12:31; Matthew 22:15, 17-22; Romans 13:1-7

Today, as we all know, is July 5th, the day after July 4th, Independence Day for the United States of America. Those who know of our nation's founding understands that July 4th stands as the day the colonists living on the eastern edge of this continent stood up and took a heart-pounding, and life-threatening, stand, pitting whatever they had at their disposal, risking everything they had in terms of position, possession, privilege, and even life itself. It was "independence or die" trying to secure it. Literally.

It also needs noted that few groups of leaders were any more at odds with one another than our Founders. There was severe and intense disagreement over a great many things. A close study of the documents of the time reveal that there were multiple times when it looked like their endeavors would evaporate like a cheap morning fog. And yet.... God, behind the scenes, created a way forward for them. Every side of every issue involved both sides believing the other side didn't care a hoot, as one way to express it, about the success of their joint endeavor. But the fact was, among differing opinions and ideals, and even vehement differences and rancorous disagreements, they did eventually find common ground for a common cause. In the end, after the Revolution was won, they sought further to solidify what God had given them - success in the face of not what we might consider overwhelming odds, but impossible odds. God granted our newly founded nation with a number of further gifts. Freedom was the first and foundational gift. But God added to that gift a number of other gifts, beginning with the Constitution and the adding to that what we refer to as "rights" as in the right to freedom of worship. I would submit that freedom of religion, freedom of the press, etc. are more properly understood as "gifts", not simply "rights" (which of course they properly are). These rights as described in the First Amendment were further gifts from God delivered into our hands but only through the rancorous debates and angry dialogues which ultimately produced them. This is a lesson for us today.

Today is the day we have moved corporate worship that for the past 3 weeks has been conducted and videoed in, and broadcast from, the fellowship hall back to our sanctuary. Though we are now back in our sanctuary, it is our Session's plan to continue our Facebook Live streaming and parking lot broadcasting for the foreseeable future. This is to ensure a balance of two things: the health of our members and to honor the wishes of our membership.

Part of the impetus for the move back to our sanctuary has come from some of you who have expressed not simply your desire to relocate back to the sanctuary but because there is something missing for them worshipping elsewhere. Some have noted that it's difficult to describe in actual terms what that "something" is but that it is real. Some have offered a few specifics as to what is different when worship is not conducted in the sanctuary. The question raised by those who experience the void or the so-called "missing something" is given an answer by Scripture.

Much of the time as it is read and pondered, the story of what is known as "the burning bush" incident seems to have as predominant focus the bush that was fully engulfed in flame but yet was not consumed - not a single leaf was burned, not a single resultant ash was to be found. While this element of the story usually gets the bulk of attention, there are times when the focus is on what Moses was told by the LORD, that is, that the ground he stood upon was "holy ground".

When we think of Moses we often think of and rely primarily on the 10 plagues in the Hebrew exodus from Egypt. But there was a single theological point in that story that should draw our attention as it ties back to the burning bush incident. Moses gave Pharaoh a single reason for which the Israelites so greatly desired to leave and be free. It is helpful to note what is not given as reasons for which they were determined to leave. Moses did not say they wanted to go and start their own businesses, to build their own herds of sheep and goats, or to start their own other businesses, etc. What was specifically stated was they wanted to go and worship the LORD. Moses and Aaron's first reply to Pharaoh's "why should I let you go? and what do you intend to do if I let you go" is answered succinctly, thus paraphrased, "we want to take a 3-day journey into the desert to offer sacrifices to the LORD, thus to worship God."

By the end of the 9th plague, Pharaoh had almost had enough; almost! In frustration and anger Pharaoh shouts, "Go, worship the LORD. Even your women and children may go with you; only leave your flocks and herds behind." (NIV) But even then Pharaoh reneged, of course bringing on the 10th and final plague. In the middle of the night, but only after his very own son lay dead, did he finally concede saying, "Up! Leave my people, you and the Israelites! Go, worship the LORD as you have requested." (NIV) We thus discover that there is no issue or reason specified other than their desire to go and worship God. And even if one might conceive of other reasons just as important, we nevertheless read that the very first thing on their agenda was worship of the LORD. Their worship of the LORD was their intended first activity. This was the people's intent and desire as Moses presented it to Pharaoh not only as prelude to the plagues but which continued through to the end. The paramount issue was their worship of God.

From time to time we remember, or are reminded, that the first duty or privilege of a human being (however one sees it) is to worship God, to bring glory to the Savior of the world, to praise and worship an infinitely wonderful God who not only could or would create such a fantastic cosmos and earth for us to live on, but who also would care so wonderfully for fallen creatures such as us. As of late, we have been putting strong emphasis on the privilege and duty of evangelizing, sharing the Gospel with non-believers, but even that is second to the first. Nothing is more important or crucial than worshiping God. That is the first and foremost purpose for which we were created. Not the second, third, fourth, or fifth, but the first and greatest.

All of this ties back to the mountain upon which Moses stood that fateful day. "Moses, Moses!" "Here I am, LORD." "Do not come any closer. Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." (NIV)

Scholars and Biblical archaeologists have been tireless trying to locate the exact spot referred to in Scripture, but all to no avail. [There is a good reason for that but I'll leave that for another time.] Let us close our eyes for a moment and envision that moment in time and actual geographical place. What I see is the rocky mountain side pathway as I perceive it, strewn with any number of different kinds of mountain rocks, pebbles, sand, debris, and vegetation. Rocks, pebbles, stone, sand, sprigs or blades of grass and/or various kinds of shrubbery that seemingly have been there forever. But let our imagination do a little bit more. Consider now the actual specific area upon which Moses stood at which time he obediently removed his sandals. What was different about that particular spot as opposed to any another location, even just 10, or 50, or 100 yards away? What was different, geographically or geologically? Did it look any different in terms of the area not far away? What was different, geographically or geologically? No, I highly doubt it. But was it theologically and spiritually different? Or was it just more rocks, sand, stones, sparsely arranged vegetation such that flocks had to keep on the move to find adequate food. Since we have no information to the contrary, I think it is safe to assume that it appeared no different than any other location of that area. So what made it "holy" ground?

Succinctly expressed, that particular and specific place was a point of contact between heaven and earth, between the human and the divine, designated and specified by the LORD, not Moses. It is critical to note that this designated spot was not designated or appointed by virtue of Moses' declaration. It was God's designation.

Simply put, it was holy ground because it was thus designated by God. This is difficult to understand in some ways for a rock is a rock is a rock. A rocky, sand covered path is a rocky, sand covered path. And yet, what made the difference was that the LORD simply designated that place as "holy".

Our 21st century mind has a difficult time thinking of the concept of "holy" in terms other than pure, pristine, without sin or filth, and/or "spiritually clean". The term "holy" in most instances in the story of the Israelites (especially as used in Leviticus) has far less to do with cleanliness or purity than it does with "that which is set apart for special use". Vessels used in the temple were designated as holy not because they were pure or clean, etc., but simply because they were set apart from common, every day usage, for a particular and specific function and purpose set by God.

This is precisely the same feel that many worshipers feel about worship in their own church's sanctuary. The very word "sanctuary" stems from and is related to the word "sacred" which connotes the word "holy", that which is set apart for special and specific use by God. Yes, it is true that "a person can worship any place and anywhere a person desires." That is true but only as far as it goes. This in no way denies the fact that, for many people, a specifically designated worship place offers a point of contact and a spiritual connection with God that no other place does or can. This of course isn't the experience of everyone. You may be a person where the fellowship hall being the newly designated place of worship is perfectly fine and worshipful for you. At the same time, and with no contradiction, there are those who do not receive or experience

the same spiritual experience as they do in the sanctuary. I've had people specifically tell me this and I find it the same for me. God designated that particular spot as a spot set apart for God's divine purpose by God's divine prerogative. It is this same spiritual reality and theological purpose and doctrine by which the church always has a geographically specified place where worship almost always occurs. This is why we allow far less latitude in terms of usage than the fellowship hall. The fellowship hall is primarily for general usage whereas the sanctuary is reserved primarily for worship types of activities.

One reason I go to such lengths to explain this is for the benefit of all of us, for those who sense this God ordained reality but who can't put words to it, and for those who do not feel, sense, or experience worship in any tangible way anything different between the fellowship hall and the sanctuary. For those that don't, that's fine. But for those that sense it, this is to acknowledge that there is a spiritual reality and groundedness in worship in the sanctuary because that is a key point of contact between heaven and earth, a place where the human creature mostly closely relates to and/or experiences God and is thus the recipient of those graces and benefits that God bestows upon the attending believer. Again, some people don't experience it this way, and that's ok; but, again, many do and that is because their belief and experience fits within the realm of what Scripture reveals is true and beneficial and what God intended from the beginning.

Long story short, bricks and mortar is bricks and mortar [a building is a building], except when bricks and mortar are not simply bricks and mortar. This is the reality described in and one implication derived from Exodus 3.

We now are going to shift to a different though very related topic. Please know that while some people contend that the church, pastors, preachers, and/or sermons, etc. should not reach or intrude into the political realm, understand that this is not a Biblical perspective nor is it the history, tradition, or prerogative of the church.

Some years ago someone gave me this book I'm holding containing 55 sermons from the founding era of the United States featuring topics and sermon titles such as The African Slave Trade, The Rights of Conscience Inalienable, A Sermon On Occasion of the Commencement of the New Hampshire Constitution, A Sermon Delivered at the Annual Election, Government the Pillar of the Earth, and An Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty. This compilation of 55 sermons, however, is merely representative of a very large and unknowable number of political sermons delivered over the course of 75 years (1730-1805) and more. These 55 sermons are representative of only that era. Sermons that reach into the political realm are found not only back as far as the days of the Pilgrims and Plymouth Rock, etc. but throughout Christian history, from the days of the apostles to the present day. It has always been not only allowable but accepted, and even expected, practice.

There is of course, I think we can agree, the danger of getting into politics in the wrong way and for the wrong reasons. But that being said, and with that caveat, let us consider that there is no compartment of life that is outside of the concern and care of God. The phrase sometimes used is, "There is no

compartmentalization of life for the Christian. God is sovereign over every aspect and realm of life and culture. Not most, but every." When we speak against and pray over the issue of the pre- and post-born who are killed via abortion we unavoidably involve ourselves in the political realm, especially when we pray for or involve ourselves with our nation's leaders who struggle with and are intimately and unavoidably involved in it by virtue of legislative action or inaction. It is the same when we pray for or involve ourselves in the issue or conversation regarding the murder of innocent people or the destruction of people's property. Murder, regardless of whether it involves a person of any color, or a person of any age is in our day unavoidably a political issue. Receiving and honoring federal or state mandates and restrictions regarding worship or any other religious activity is unavoidably political.

Jesus himself found out that he could not avoid being dragged into the political realm, though he of course had an interesting way to navigate the difficult course. In the trap laid for him, meaning he was asked if was right to pay taxes to Caesar or not he replied, "Give unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." Though no one could then accuse him of speaking affirmatively in terms of the laws of taxation, his words left the laws stand as written. It's just that he didn't take sides, either of which would have gotten him in hot water in one way or the other.

For many more instances take a look through the book of Acts. It is filled with instances where various leaders of the church were constantly at odds with the authorities and thus embattled with them in the political realm. To say that the church has not been politically engaged and embattled is to deny the very examples God has preserved for us in Scripture.

Especially telling is the passage from Romans 13. In terms of the power and authority of secular authority over Christians, this is one of the more often misunderstood and misused passages. Most of the time it is read to be a blanket and unqualified instruction for Christians to submit to the secular authorities in every way. Bear in mind that Paul's letter was written to the church in Rome, one importance being that the "authorities" he was referring to were indeed Caesar and the governing authorities of the Roman Empire. What Paul was referring to, as inferred in the wording in the first five verses of Romans 13, were those laws that saw to law and order as in that which was in accord with God's will and purpose for law and order. In not many decades Christians would be utterly forced, at the point of the sword or at risk of the flames, to do obeisance to the Roman emperor. In 111 A.D. the governor of Bithynia, Pliny the Younger put out an edict that required everyone, Christians included, to pray to the cultural gods, burn incense to the emperor, and to curse Christ, none of which any true Christian would ever due.

Romans 13 provides a critical caveat to the over all instruction - submit to the governing authorities - a caveat that I think most people either overlook, have forgotten, or have never seen. It is the qualifier "if". Give to the governing authorities everything that is owed to them "if" it is owed to them. This supports Jesus' instructions in the passage referred to above. "If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect, if honor, then honor."

But what is so often overlooked, omitted, or unknown is application of that caveat. If the emperor, his law, or his underlings do not warrant respect and honor then it is the duty of the Christian to not give honor and respect. If it is in terms of a law that has come from said authority or emperor but which contradicts what God has decreed, then you don't honor or respect that law, such as those trying to force Christians to burn incense to the emperor and pray to the gods of the Roman pantheon (both distinct and undeniable forms of worship). The church has always insisted that cultural laws put in place that in any way obviate or in any way set aside any of the things God has instituted for the church are to be not only resisted but flatly refused. What fits within what God has ordained, obey it. What contradicts what God has ordained, not only resist it but refuse it. Every generation since the days of Jesus has had to struggle with this in one form or another.

"When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation. We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." Thus opens the Declaration of Independence. It is noteworthy that the Declaration, at the top, reads, "The UNANIMOUS Declaration of the thirteen united States of America." [emphasis added] That which governs us and has governed us from the beginning rests upon a number of the most basic tenets of the Christian faith. It was with unanimous agreement that our founding rested on and was a derived from God. The rights mentioned here and enumerated and spelled out elsewhere are not grounded in the Constitution itself, but God himself.

The rights and privileges we thus have are in no way derived, ultimately, from kings, presidents, legislatures, or a founding Document, but from God and God alone. Our Founders made good use of Romans 13. They knew that what had happened in terms of the Roman Empire earlier and then now the British Empire could very well happen in America. It is telling that the first Amendment to the Constitution was drafted and then ratified effective December 15, 1791, a mere 15 years after the Declaration was issued and a mere 2 years after the War for Independence was over.

It was not coincidental that the several specified subjects of the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States included freedom of religion: The full wording is this: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances." In case it's not obvious the First Amendment sought to head off the abuses of those God-given rights that undoubtedly would come, sooner or later.

To the present singular point and focus let me distill the one to its essence: "Congress shall make no law... prohibiting the free exercise of

religion." Please know that while I have taken this singular point and focus out of the paragraph, it nevertheless is maintained in its pure and untainted form. There is no caveat or qualifier of any kind expressed, implied, or possible.

As is obvious in our day, there are a multitude of different view points and ideas about just about everything. And the church has to try and understand and stand sympathetic with all of them.

As perhaps hinted at earlier, there are those who do not feel that the Christian faith is a matter of, or amenable to, having "rights" as in the rights granted by the Constitution. Ok, that is what they believe and how they feel. That can't be taken from them. At the same time there are Christians who believe that, since it is God who has established and given these right to all people, including Christians no less than the non-religious person, these rights are for our good and our religious expression.

Similarly, as noted above, there are Christians who feel no discomfort and no theological or spiritual lacking when worship is conducted in the fellowship hall. Again, that's the way these folks feel and that's fine. At the same time, as mentioned previously, being precluded from worshiping in the sanctuary precludes some folks from some significant, if not critical, sense of what worship and space are designed by God to mean and to facilitate. One person noted to me specifically that even face coverings limit and hinder the personal and spiritual connection and communication that Christians have always had the privilege of. In terms of the place of worship and in terms of the manner of worship, for some folks, there is no barrier. For others, it prohibits the free exercise of their faith. Both view points are legitimate and accepted.

Lastly, this whole conversation points to the difficulty of which our Session and Elders find themselves in. Our Elders have really struggled over a number of these related things. Our Elders and I have sought to provide as best we can meaningful worship, bearing in mind and putting in place a good number of health and sanitation measures. Initially, this was due to health concerns for everybody and in obedience to our governor. At the same time there is a growing concern that our governing authorities have, at least in some small ways, overstepped their bounds. Not everyone sees it that way and that's fine. But everyone has an individual mind and voice and the struggle comes when those differing voices unavoidably come together.

What I'm asking for is the forbearance of everyone. Some things cannot be reconciled very well. What can be, however, is Christian people and the greater community who exist and live in tension with each other. This is why, in part, our Session plans to keep moving forward with our various means of worship to provide people choices and to provide differing measures of safety. It is my hope that folks of both view points can believe that folks who think differently than they also care about the value of life, the seriousness of this disease, and the value and nature of worship. It would be a tragedy if the ultimate health and life of the church is seriously damaged because of COVID-19. It has claimed enough victims already. Amen.