Whose God Is YHWH?

Psalm 33:12-19 (NIV)
Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD,
the people he chose for his inheritance.
13 From heaven the LORD looks down
and sees all mankind;
14 from his dwelling place he watches
all who live on earth—
15 he who forms the hearts of all,
who considers everything they do.
16 No king is saved by the size of his army;
no warrior escapes by his great strength.
17 A horse is a vain hope for deliverance;
despite all its great strength it cannot save.
18 But the eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him,
on those whose hope is in his unfailing love,
19 to deliver them from death
and keep them alive in famine. ~ The Word of God for the people of God...

I vaguely remember the ending of WWII. I was four; almost five. I went to church with my parents on the Sunday after Japan surrendered. The choir sang "Battle Hymn of the Republic," and the preacher said, "God was on our side."

My high school band director's father was in that war. One year we were preparing to march in a 4th of July parade—playing "Battle Hymn of the Republic." As we were practicing one day he told of the day his father left New York Harbor on the troop ship, heading for Europe. The crowds were waving and cheering, and a band was playing "Battle Hymn of the Republic" as they sailed by the Statue of Liberty.

His father said, "It was a stirring scene; and I felt proud to be an American, and confident that God was with us as we prepared to go into battle."

At Normandy, something happened that shook him to his core. His unit trailed most of the action, and their duty was to pick up the dead, and to make sure medics had not passed over any of the wounded, thinking they were dead.

They began to note an inscription on the belt buckles of the fallen German soldiers. The words were: "Gott mit uns." ["God is with us."] The Psalmist wrote, "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord." But who's God **is** the Lord?"

The Allied Forces were finally victorious. Does that mean God was on their side Was the Lord any less the God of the German soldiers whose belt buckles made the same claim? Whose God **is** the Lord?

Have you noticed how national heroes are mostly military? And patriotism almost always involves military terminology. And yet, consider this quote from the Supreme Allied Commander of WWII, and later the 34th President of the United

States, Dwight Eisenhower: "I hate war as only a soldier who has lived it can. Only as one who has seen its brutality, its futility, its stupidity."

Or this one: "Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies in the final sense a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children,"

The history of Israel is evidence that God's favor is not measured by military force. Israel's own military strength—unparalleled under David and Solomon—deteriorated in later years, primarily because of complacency. Israel *assumed* God's presence and favor; *assumed* they would not have to worry about their military strength, because God would fight their battles for them. They were God's people.

And so, their military force became more of a ceremonial thing; and in 586 B.C. Babylonian forces under the command of Nebuchadnezzar, breached the walls of Jerusalem, sacked the city, and destroyed the temple. So, whose God *is* the Lord?

Unfortunately, national defense is necessary. I'm proud to be a combat veteran, and I'm thankful for our military. On this Independence Day weekend it is right for us to remember and honor those who voluntarily place their lives at risk for our country. But I do not believe military victory is a sign of God's favor, for war does not originate in the will of God, but in the sin of man. Listen to the Psalm again:

> 16 No king is saved by the size of his army;
> no warrior escapes by his great strength.
> 17 A horse is a vain hope for deliverance;
> despite all its great strength it cannot save.
> 18 But the eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him,
> on those whose hope is in his unfailing love,

Nor do I find God's favor in a world-leading economic system that tolerates some people accumulating more wealth than they will ever use, living in the same city with children who go to bed hungry every night and strong, willing men and women who go to bed without an honorable job to awaken to the next morning—and those who do work, even full time—even two jobs, don't earn enough to pay rent and utilities, put food on the table, clothes on their backs and cover medical costs. And the elderly often have to choose between food and prescription medications.

Nor is God's favor reflected in a political system in which leaders of state are more commonly rogues than saints and who smirk victoriously about withholding food and medical care from children and the elderly.

Nor in an education system that is vulnerable to takeover by sectarian groups that inflict their rigid convictions on the whole community, and promote hatred on a

population whose only fault is being born with a particular set of genes.

Even the best human systems are no better than the people who lead them. Mahatma Gandhi is credited with saying, "Beware of the illusion that you can create a system so nearly perfect that nobody has to be good."

Whose God **is** the Lord?

You may have noticed: to this point there've been no patriotic slides in the PowerPoint; not for lack of love of country. It's aways dangerous to mix patriotism and religious faith; and it's prudent for us to recall that our nation was not founded to be a "Christian Nation," but to be a nation of religious liberty.

The reality is that we live within both a secular community, and a faith community, and the two need not be mutually exclusive. Each can inform the other. Injustices erupt when one faith community faith community attempts to use political power to inflict its own beliefs on the entire population. How do we participate in both without damaging either?

From the biblical story of Israel, through the dark ages when the church controlled the state, into modern times when we have seen totalitarian states controling the church, that mix has never worked. Yet some insist on dressing Jesus up in red, white and blue. While we have no right to try to force others to copy us, as Christians the best thing we can do for our nation—*THE BEST WE CAN DO*—is love God first.

What does it mean to be a nation whose God is the Lord? The Psalmist wrote, "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, *the people he chose for his inheritance*." The key is, *it's God's choice*. The question then becomes, "Whom has God chosen for his inheritance?" And hear these words from the First Epistle of Peter:

(1PETER 2:9-17 NIV) ***But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God,*** (and here is the key): ***that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.***

It's not so much which nation God has chosen, as it is the reason God chooses any nation—every nation. The nation whose God is the Lord is the nation that declares the praises of the One who calls all humanity out of darkness, the One who called Abraham and said to him, "Through you all nations of the earth will be blessed."

The problems begin when we begin to turn things around and behave as though we had chosen God. A nation "whose God is the Lord" isn't a nation at whose beck and call God stands waiting; it is a nation surrendered to God.

From our Disciple faith perspective, I believe the best way to honor this nation is for us Disciples to partner with God in the work of creating a world of unity, and justice, and peace. And insofar as we relate our own faith to our participation in public life it is prudent to remind ourselves occasionally that the words of the song have it right. It **is** "God, bless America;" not, "America, bless God."

PASTORAL PRAYER:

It's always dangerous to mix patriotism with religious faith; and it's prudent for us to recall that our nation was not founded to be a "Christian Nation," but to be a nation of religious liberty.

Patriotism (which is not to be confused with nationalism) is a good quality to be nurtured; but not in this room. Still, it is totally appropriate for Christians to invoke God's blessing and guidance upon our nation and upon our national leadership.

Let us Pray: God of the fathers and mothers of our nation, lead us in their footsteps. Grant us their vision of "One nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." Grant us an understanding of patriotism—not as that blind loyalty that would have us follow the path of history; but as that vision that would have us lead and mold history according to your eternal and universal truth.

Lead us in the footsteps of the fathers and mothers of our faith. Grant us their vision of "One great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide world." Grant us an understanding of faith—not as a blind acceptance of what we are told from pulpits and councils; but as that vision shared by the prophet, Micah, "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God."

Thank you for our heritage—both national and sacred. Help us keep them separated so neither controls the other; and yet related so the best values of each are reflected in the other. Thank you for the hope you inspire: that one day our nation truly will be one. Lead us in the effort to bring about that day, not through laws that inflict sectarian religious faith upon an entire population, but through a people united in mutual concern for the welfare of each other regardless of creed or sect.

Hear us as we pray for our nation and its leaders. We are not a perfect people, and so ours is not a perfect nation. Guide us as we vote; inspire our pens as we make known our convictions to those who represent us in government; and guide our action, as we try to influence the path of history. We pray, as we sing, *"America! America! God mend thine every flaw."*

Hear us as we pray for your church. Lead us to minister to her factions; and where there is brokenness, give us a ministry of reconciliation.

Hear us as we pray for our friends in anxiety and grief and pain. Send us to minister to them in your name.

And hear us as we offer you our own petitions, some of which are too private to mention aloud. In the quietness of our own hearts, minister to our needs.

And now unite us in the mind of Christ; that the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts might be acceptable to you, our Lord and our God. Amen.

Invitation to the Table

On this Freedom and Democracy Sunday I think of two statements. The first is in the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

"The pursuit of happiness." By this, Jefferson didn't intend a hedonistic, self-centered personal pleasure. He was Scottish, influenced by Francis Hutcheson, the father of the Scottish Enlightenment.

Hutcheson believed that everyone's ultimate goal in life is happiness, and he found the deepest happiness in making others happy.

Haven't you found that to be true? Seeing your child open a gift? Those videos of children around the world opening those shoe boxes we send at Christmas?

The second statement is in **HEBREWS 12:2:** ***"...looking to Jesus… who for the joy set before him endured the cross ..."*** It seems strange to include joy in the same phrase as enduring the cross but it's true: when Jesus was on the cross he was in " pursuit of happiness"—the happiness of forgiven sin, of cleansing and reconciliation and hope.

It's still a mystery. For 2,000 years Christians have been arguing about how his death on the cross accomplished all of that.

At this table we don't try to explain it. We simply celebrate it; and we experience again that joy set before us at His table.