

In the ancient tradition of the church, holidays falling on a weekday were celebrated on the Sunday following – that was referred to as being the Sunday within the “octave” of the holiday. But we live in a society which anticipates rather than celebrates, so most churches in our country probably acknowledged the Fourth of July last week, as we did using the collect for the Fourth as the closing petition of our Prayers of the People.

But I have kept that ancient tradition in mind as I thought about preaching this Sunday’s lessons about Naaman (from the Second Book of Kings) and the Seventy (from Luke’s Gospel).

As we Americans celebrate the declaration of our country’s independence from the Crown of England and the beginning of the Revolutionary War that actually secured that independence, we usually think in terms of freedoms won. But the freedoms that we enjoy and usually associate with this holiday weren’t actually won in that war. Many of them were already enjoyed by British subjects (but often denied to colonials) and they weren’t formally guaranteed to American citizens until the adoption of the U.S. Constitution and its first ten amendments more than a decade after the founding of the Republic! (The Constitution was ratified on June 21, 1788, and actually took effect on March 4, 1789. A “bill of rights” of twelve articles was proposed on September 25, 1789; ten of those articles

were ratified on December 15, 1791, forming the “Bill of Rights” known to us.)

So, on July 4 many of enjoyed parades and fireworks displays; many participated in family gatherings and picnics or barbecues. Probably very few took part in church services even though Independence Day is a “prayer book holiday” with its own “proprs” (lessons and prayers). I have to admit that we didn’t hold our usual Wednesday service on the evening of the Fourth, though I had planned to. I forgot that the community parade would be marching by at the very same time ... and so we watched the parade instead of celebrating the Eucharist.

Keep the Fourth in mind while we take a look at the Bible lessons today.

First, from the Second Book of Kings, we have the story of Naaman. Naaman was a powerful and important man. He was the commanding general of the armies of Aram (ancient Syria), an enemy of Israel. He was also, according to Scripture, a leper – he probably didn’t suffer from leprosy *per se*, but he had some sort of disfiguring skin condition.

Naaman’s wife was served by a Jewish slave girl who was taken as a captive from Israel. This young woman suggests that Naaman go to Israel and seek the assistance of “the man of God”. Why would Naaman listen

to someone with (according to his culture’s way of thinking) three black marks against her? She’s (a) Jewish, (b) a female, and (c) young. This makes her, quite literally, a nobody in her situation. Unworthy of any sort of respect, and yet Naaman not only listens to her, he convinces his king to help him get into Israel to seek this cure.

The king Aram sends a letter and some very expensive gifts to the king of Israel and asks, “Heal my servant Naaman.” Now the king of Israel thinks this is a set-up. Remember, Aram and Israel are enemies. He’s sure that there’s nothing he can do for Naaman and the king of Aram will use his failure to cure the general as an excuse for war. So he rips his garments and makes known his anguish and unhappiness over this request.

But Elisha, the man of God, sends word, “Don’t worry. Send him to me.” This man of God is a prophet, but in a sense he is a nobody – we don’t even know his real name. We call him “Elisha”, but that is his message; the word “elisha” means “God is salvation” – it has become a name, but in truth it was simply this nobody-prophet’s main message.

Naaman is sent to the man of God who tells him to do nothing more than bathe in the River Jordan to be cured. This enrages the general because the Jordan is, he rightly complains, just a river. It is no better than the Abana or the Pharpar, the rivers of his homeland, no better than any

other river of the Middle East, no better than the Tigris or the Euphrates. It is nothing special.

Yet God uses the nobody slave girl, the nobody-prophet, the ordinary nothing-special river, to heal the enemy general, to confound the expectations of the powerful.

Our second Bible story is the sending forth of the Seventy, these advance-men sent out by Jesus to visit the towns and villages he expects to go to eventually. These folks really are nobodies! These are not the Twelve whose names we know and who we have come to call “the Apostles.” We know nothing about this group – we don’t know their names, we don’t know their occupations, we don’t know where they came from, we don’t know what sex they are. They are nobodies. And yet ... Jesus used these nobodies to spread his message; God used these nobodies to heal the sick throughout the land and to announce coming of a new order, the Kingdom of God, which would overturn the powerful.

In both the story of Naaman and the sending forth of the Seventy, God uses the ordinary and the common, the nothing-special river, the nobody slaves and nobody prophets and nobody followers of Jesus to upset the expectations of the mighty.

Return now to the Fourth of July, 1776. King George the Third was the mighty monarch of Britain whose reign in North America was overthrown by a bunch of colonial rabble-rousers, a bunch of nobodies. Sure we *now* know the names of a few of the leaders of that rabble, but for the most part, they were nobodies. Some were former criminals sent to this continent to get them out of England; many were just poor folks who came here looking for something better. For the most part, they were nothing special, just ordinary (and largely unknown) folks. But they overturned the expectations of the mighty.

And since the beginnings of the nation, the coincidence of God’s use of ordinary folk in the Biblical stories and the success of those ordinary folks in the American revolution was suggested to some something more than a parallel. To some, it has suggested that this nation is a chosen people, a favorite of God’s, and thus the symbols of the Christian faith and the symbols of the nation have often been mixed and confused for one another.

In the nearly six years that have followed the terrible events of last September 11, 2001, there seems to have been a lot of such “symbol mixing”. For example, I recently found the graphic shown on this page – a stars-and-stripes garbed angel night light... Other “mixed symbols” I’ve

seen have included stars-and-stripes decorated crosses, and American flags with the field-of-stars replaced by a cross. My favorite (or perhaps I should say “least favorite”) “mixed symbol” is on a t-shirt marketed in a Christian magazine. It is an American bald eagle flying in front of a cross trailing a red, white and blue banner from its beak; on the banner are the words, “God so loved the world....”

All of these “mixed symbols” are based on the notion that America was founded as some sort of “Christian nation.” I must confess that I’ve never quite understood what that means. As a student of religious history, I’m painfully aware that most of the influential “founding fathers” were not particularly “orthodox” in their religious beliefs (even the ones who were active members of the Anglican-Episcopal Church)! Benjamin Franklin, for example, was a deist who believed that God set everything up and got the universe started, but otherwise took no interest in it. (This is the “clockmaker” image of the Almighty.) Thomas Jefferson, though he was active in his local Anglican congregation and even served on the Vestry, did not believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ! He even published an edited version of the New Testament from which any mention of Christ’s divinity was removed! So it seems rather unlikely to me that such folks intended to found a “Christian nation.”

Instead, they founded a “pluralistic nation” in which those of every religion (and those of none) enjoy freedom of conscience. The First Amendment declares: “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.” We are free to speak our minds, to worship (or not) as we choose, and to confront our government when we believe it has done wrong. It is for this, not for the founding of a “Christian nation”, that we should give thanks! These rights of conscience are rare among the societies of this world and we should all be grateful that we have them.

These rights were secured by common ordinary folk, by nameless nobodies, just as Naaman was cured by the efforts of common ordinary folk, the nobody slave girl and the nobody prophet using the water of a common ordinary river, just as the Gospel of Christ, the healing power of the Spirit, and the Kingdom of God were spread by common ordinary folk, by nameless nobodies.

The nation and the faith in different ways encourage us, the common ordinary folks, the nameless nobodies of today, to do extraordinary things. But the nation and our faith are not the same thing and we should never

confuse them! We give thanks not that we live in a “Christian nation,” but rather that we live in a free nation where we – the nobodies of our day – can be Christians.

Let us pray: Lord God Almighty, in whose Name the founders of this country won liberty for themselves and for us, and lit the torch of freedom for nations then unborn: Grant that we and all the people of this land may have grace to maintain our liberties in righteousness and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.