

“Prophets, Covenants, and Constitutions”

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July 3, 2011

**First Presbyterian Church
Wilkes-Barre, PA
I Samuel 8: 4-9 (Selections)**

Levi Preston of Danvers, Massachusetts, was in his early twenties in the spring of 1775 when he fought at the Battle of Concord, at the opening of the American Revolution.

Many years later, Captain Preston was asked why he went to fight that day. Was it the intolerable oppressions of British colonial policy, or the Stamp Act? “I never say any stamps.” What about the tax on tea? “I never drank a drop of the stuff; the boys threw it all overboard.” It must have been all your reading of Harrington, Sidney, and Locke on the principles of liberty? “Never heard of ‘em. We read only the Bible, the catechism, Watt’s *Psalms and Hymns*, and the *Almanack*.” Well, what was it? Asked the interviewer. What made you take up arms against the British? “Young man, what we meant in going for those redcoats was this: we always had governed ourselves, and we always meant to. They didn’t mean we should.”

“We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this constitution for the United States of America.”

Tomorrow is Independence Day, and I want to ever so briefly share with you the idea, the historical reality of a common thread running from the ancient Hebrew’s concept of God and humanity’s relationship to God and each other, and our contemporary understanding of Liberal Republican Democracy. (I say “Liberal Democracy,” because we have recently seen, not all democracies are created equal. Mob rule, is not what democracy’s founders envisioned.)

I believe that I can say without contradiction that our modern historical teaching has endeavored to clean-up history by de-legitimizing Christianity’s role (the Judeo-Christian role) of the rise and development of Liberal Republican Democracy - Constitutionalism. If anything Christianity has been used to exhibit parochialism, backwardness, and ignorance in the way of developing Democracy’s sense of freedom and equality. This has been a harmful caricature that is finally being addressed.

No doubt, religion has been used to destructive ends and is being used to destroy lives this very hour, but such is not the total story, nor history.

And dare I say it?

- Not all religions, denominations, sects – are created equal!
- Just as not all political philosophies are on equal standing, for instance – Fascism, Nazism, Communism, and Liberal Republican Democracy. All equally valid? Only if you subscribe to the belief that, all is cultural, there are no norms, there is no truth with a capital T!

Again, this Sunday before the “Fourth of July”, with care and humility, recognizing nuance, and historical intricacies beyond my “time” this morning – I will venture back to an ancient text and people – to where the seeds of this American experiment were planted and nourished. By all means, this is a shared history. Both the Greeks and Romans added to and nourished this magnificent growth of liberty, freedom and equality! Much, much has been written about their immense contributions, but little about this powerful force from these Middle Eastern nomads – wandering the desert – known pejoratively as Hibu – “dusty ones.” Their concept of one God, sovereign over all, who expects moral actions, and justice equally distributed among that one species created in this God’s image, was integral to where we stand today! And the prophetic voice, reminded power of its limits and responsibilities! This history needs a hearing. This is not a fundamentalist theocracy that I am unfolding – by no means! Rather – limiting rulers – governments

- The voice of the people
- Agreements, covenants debated and ratified.

These are the early windows into our revered way of living: Freedom, Equality, Rule of law – Constitutional protections.

It should be no surprise that just as many religions reverence specific writings; such as our Bible (which is to guide us); so too our Constitution – limits behavior – majority rule, is mitigated by laws that protect the minority. Implicit, is there are higher standards than a purely majority rule! And this transferred from covenant to constitution!

Keep in mind, this One God assumed a novel role: the liberator of slaves! This God was not totally linked to nature and its ever-recurring seasons and rhythms. This God was in history, a part of history. Away with subjection to the forces of nature, which included a “King” representing such forces!

Graham Maddox, to whom I owe much in my proceeding remarks, writes in his recent book, Religion and the Rise of Democracy: “Judaism unlocked human personality, nurturing it in a personal relationship with the godhead. While through and through a religious experience, this relationship was irrefutably political because it was irresistibly liberating.” (p.2) How different does that sound from multiple diatribes of theocracies running rampant!?

As much as I enjoy the intellect and wit of Christopher Hitchens – all religion is not poison! In fact some religion has been extremely good and beneficial!

This morning’s text – Israel’s demand for a King just like the other peoples around them – is a pivotal paradigm in this democratic Republican development. Prior to the monarchy, Israel (according to its text) was ruled by God through judges – charismatic men (normally) who came forward to unite the 12 tribes for battle – to protect themselves. After the battle they returned each to his own tribe and home. God ruled.

Samuel, the prophet, leaves no doubt that neither he nor God is pleased with the people’s request for a King. A litany goes forth of “be careful what you wish for.” Taxes, conscription, etc. By the way, this “theocracy” did not legitimate the early rule of the priests. This theocracy developed via the realm of conscience, not power. Contradiction and equivocation reign in the beginning monarchy’s Israelite texts.

This is due to disagreement and reality. In the end of this request for a King – God and prophet Samuel grant such, but and here is one of the greatest caveats the world has ever seen, BUT...the monarchy, unlike any other in existence, will be limited! Limited! No King will rule Israel with absolute power! That is only within God’s prevue! Through the prophet (not a soothsayer – seer into the future fortune teller –

but one who knows the norms of the peoples – adopted as a covenant between the ethical God and this people) the King, government, will be limited and the voice of the people will be heard!

Recall, Saul (the first King) is disobedient to God, and Samuel, the prophet revokes Saul's royal commission. "You have rejected the word of the Lord and therefore the Lord has rejected you as King over Israel" (I Samuel 15:26).

Imagine that in Pharaoh's court!

And how about King David? His great sins of adultery and murder! Nathan, the prophet, indicts David, King David "You are the man!" Who deserves death! You broke the moral code – covenant – constitution! The great 8th century BCE prophets such as Amos and Hossa – continuously condemn and castigate the powers that be – for injustice and unfaithfulness!

Listen to the early development of limited power, rule of law, and community ethics! Hosea knows their "constitutional law" and that some are breaking it.

The prophet declares, (4:1) "the Lord has a charge to bring against the inhabitants of the land." (The Supreme Court is in session!)

Prophets, Power and Pursuit of the good life! I have merely scratched the surface of a neglected historical reality – that our Judeo-Christian tradition was foundational for the development of a free democratic Republican society. This neglect must be addressed, for the health and well being of all God's children!

"We the people..." the rafters should be shaking! We should be shaking – for all that that phrase encompasses and means!

Amen.