

A Happy Independence Day to all of you. On this day we celebrate the signing of the Declaration of Independence, a document through which the United States declared itself independent of England, giving itself birth as a new nation. We can be thankful for the liberties granted to us in our nation.

Later in the service we'll sing "God Bless our Native Land." Perhaps it comes as a coincidence, then, in today's Gospel text that Jesus goes to His native land. Mark 6:1 reads "[Jesus] went away from there and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him." If you remember last week, this text immediately precedes the account wherein Jesus does a double-whammy miracle. On the way to raising Jairus' daughter, Jesus heals a woman with a flow of blood almost by accident. The woman approaches Jesus in a crowd and Jesus notices her only because of the power that went out of Him. He then goes and raises Jairus' daughter from the dead.

Jesus then goes to his hometown. He goes back to His native land, His father land, back to the region where He grew up. Don't you think that He would get a tickertape parade? Wouldn't He be lauded as a hero for such miraculous feats? But what do we read? **"And on the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished, saying, "Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him? How are such mighty works done by his hands? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him.**" We learn: DESPITE REJECTION, JESUS STILL SENDS MESSENGERS.

**"And Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household." And he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them. And he marveled because of their unbelief."** One thing that the Holy Spirit wants to teach you today is I. It's not a given that your hometown will accept you for being a Christian.

There is no guarantee that your community, your state, or your country is going to love you for being a Christian. I don't want to run around like Chicken Little and say the sky is falling. To be certain, we can be thankful for the privileges that our culture and country have afforded Christianity. It's still the case that I can get into hospitals and nursing homes more easily wearing a clerical collar.

In the pandemic, the government made exceptions to religious communities to worship despite more stringent regulations in other sectors. The Supreme Court is still handing out favorable decisions to the Church in many cases and situations. There are no jackbooted thugs who are pounding on our doors whenever we gather to worship, pray, or preach. Some Christians need to worry about that in their fatherlands.

Abraham Lincoln in the Gettysburg Address described America as a government “of the people, by the people, for the people.” That is still true. That is to say, common citizens can be elected and appointed to serve as legislators, governors, and judges. All of us are the rulers.

People often want to argue whether America is a Christian nation. You can mean various things by this, but the data is in showing us that America is no longer a nation filled with Christians. A Gallup data analysis released March 29 of this year found that less than 47% of American adults belonged to a church. This is compared to 73% in 1937.

Put the two ideas together, if the United States is ruled by the governed, and less than half of the population has a formal tie to a church, then what is coming down the pipe? It is likely to be rejection. Churches may lose tax-exempt status in our lifetimes. We may face persecution as people increasingly take offense at the Gospel. Just as Jesus’ fatherland rejected His message, so too might ours.

But II. even in spite of this rejection, Jesus kept on preaching. What do you do when you face opposition? Maybe you get discouraged. Maybe you wonder what you did wrong. Maybe you try to re-adjust your strategy and try again.

It’s easy for us as Christians to be scared. It’s easy for us to be nervous about speaking up among our families, our friends, and our communities. It’s easy to think that rejection means that we somehow did something wrong, or we didn’t package the Gospel the right way, or that we failed Jesus. But get this straight, rejection doesn’t mean failure. We are successful as Christians when we represent Jesus and speak out about the faith, even if imperfectly. We are not accountable for others’ reactions. It’s not you they are rejecting, but the Savior you follow.

We see Jesus’ example in this text, after facing rejection, “**And he went about among the villages teaching.**” He just kept on going. He didn’t throw in the towel all discouraged. He didn’t change His message so less people would be offended. He didn’t take a week’s vacation to collect His thoughts. He just kept on going.

He kept on going and kept on preaching. He kept on working miracles. He kept on teaching. And His own family rejected Him. His own hometown rejected Him. His own country, the people of Israel, who were God’s favored, chosen people, they rejected Him. They didn’t just reject Him, they framed Him. They tortured Him. They crucified Him.

Maybe you get frustrated when you see people in your family making poor choices and turning away from God. Maybe you’re distraught when you see your neighborhood, community, and country collectively turning away from the Triune God. Don’t you think Jesus knows how that feels?

The Son of God was there at the birth of the nation of Israel back in the time of Abraham. The Son of God miraculously rescued the Israelites from Egypt. He

walked alongside them as He defeated the nations on their behalf. He saved them again and again from trials and tribulations. When He finally steps on the scene in the flesh, they don't recognize Him and they as rebels kill Jesus, the Lord of Glory.

We're a nation of rebels, and, no, I'm not talking about the United States. The Church is a nation of rebels, rallying together at the foot of Jesus because at the feet of Jesus we have been granted amnesty. We're forgiven rebels. And in Christ's resurrection, He raises us up to be "... **a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that [we] may proclaim the excellencies of him who called [us] out of darkness into his marvelous light.**" The Church is an embassy to the Kingdom of God. We are a holy nation of those who have been made righteous and perfect in God's sight.

Jesus was rejected in Nazareth. Yet III. Even in spite of this rejection, Jesus keeps sending out messengers. We read right after Jesus' rejection in His hometown, "**And he called the twelve and began to send them out two by two...**" The keyword here is "began to." Jesus began to send out messengers, and it didn't stop that one time back in Galilee. It continued after Easter and continues to this day.

It's not a given that your hometown will accept you for being a Christian. We don't know what the religious landscape of America will look like in twenty years. But it *is* a given that the Lord will keep on sending workers into His harvest.

It's a little white binder in the Student Center, if you're not looking for it you might miss it, but it's titled the Pastors of Faith Lutheran and the Sons of Faith Lutheran. Take some time to look at it. Each one of those pastors who have served at Faith Lutheran is a continuation of this sending that happened way back in Mark 6:7. Messengers of the Gospel have moved into your hometown and lived alongside you, laughed alongside you, and cared for you. Likewise, each one of the Sons of Faith who either attended here growing up or attended here in college were sent to hometowns like yours to do the same. Each one of these men is a promise of God fulfilled in your midst.

You don't need to be ordained for the Lord to use you. The Lord is even sending you to your own hometown, to your own family to continue this important work of calling others to Faith in Jesus. It's not for you to change hearts. It's for you to share the "**excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.**" Make hay while the sun is shining, on this fourth of July, we can be thankful for the many freedoms still afforded us to do this very work.

As we close out this sermon, I wanted to conclude with some thoughts from a book I've been reading *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* by Protestant historian Carl Trueman. This book attempts to diagnose the source of many of the problems in our society today. But in the introduction Trueman writes, "As for the notion of some lost golden age, it is truly very hard for any competent historian to

be nostalgic. What past times were better than the present? An era before antibiotics when childbirth or even minor cuts might lead to septicemia and death? The great days of the nineteenth century when the church was culturally powerful and marriage was between one man and one woman for life but little children worked in factories and swept chimneys?... Every age has its darkness and its dangers. The task of the Christian is not to whine about the moment in which he or she lives but to understand its problems and respond appropriately to them” (30).

**DESPITE REJECTION, JESUS STILL SENDS MESSENGERS.** There’s no way to sugarcoat it, things will probably get harder for the Church in the upcoming years and decades. We will face rejection in our hometown, country, and families. But Jesus is never giving up on you. He’s never going to reject you. He’ll never abandon His Church. He keeps sending you messengers, and He keeps sending you out as a messenger. Your job is not to long for the good old days but know that today itself is a blessing. Today is the day to keep your hand to the plow and stay faithful. Today is a wonderful day to be a Christian in the land of the free and the home of the brave. A happy 4<sup>th</sup> of July to all of you. Amen!