

My Country, Right or Wrong
Sermon One in a Series of Four on Patriotism
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Scripture: Exodus 33:1-16, Amos 5:21-24
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From the fall of the Roman Empire, right through to the early 1800s, Berber residents of North Africa made a living as pirates on the Mediterranean Sea. History calls them the Barbary Pirates. They were notorious slave traders. They pillaged coastal villages on the European side of the Sea so frequently that Europeans abandoned their coastal towns for hundreds of years.

The United States, France, and many other nations either paid bribes to keep the pirates at bay, or paid ransoms to release captured ships. In fact, at that time, the United States was paying up to 20 percent of its annual budget to the pirates, if you can imagine that.

In 1803 these pirates captured an American ship, the Philadelphia, that was caught on a reef near Algiers. A few months later, Captain Stephen Decatur captured a local boat. The pirates, not expecting an attack from a local boat, were surprised when it docked it beside the Philadelphia, and Decatur stormed aboard with 60 American soldiers, captured the ship and burned it to the water line. Decatur escaped without loss of life, and came back to the States as a huge hero.

Years later, after a treaty was finally signed with Algeria to end the Barbary Wars, Stephen Decatur offered this toast at a banquet honoring him for his heroics. Decatur said, "Our country! In her intercourse with foreign nations, may she always be in the right; but our country right or wrong."

Very patriotic. But Decatur's toast was soon simplified in the public mind to just the words, "my country, right or wrong." And that phrase has often been taken to mean that it doesn't matter what your country does, how it does it, for what ends it does it . . . if you're a patriot, you approve and celebrate your country, no matter what.

Is that really patriotism, though? Giving your country a moral blank cheque, right or wrong? Can we be critical of Canada and still be patriots?

In a backhand sort of way, I ran into this problem in a very personal way. Some years ago, while I was living in Cobourg, I had a weekly column in the Cobourg paper. In one of my columns, I noted that Israeli and Palestinian peace activists were meeting in Jerusalem, and that they had together condemned some aspects of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank. I listed those Israeli injustices. The very next week, a response to my column came from an Israeli lobby group that argued, basically, that any criticism of Israeli policy was anti-Semitic. That group, at least, believed that any criticism of their country, right or wrong, was very, very bad — racist, in fact.

Now, I wasn't an Israeli citizen, but you can see the problem. Can we, as Canadians, both love our country and criticize it when it is wrong?

Well, there is Biblical precedent for doing so. Ironically, in view of my own critical column about Israel, ancient Israel's sternest critic—at least according to the stories we read in the Bible, was God.

Take our first scripture reading, for example. Israel is in the Sinai desert. This is soon after—again, according to the scriptural legends—God personally turned the world upside down to free the Israelite slaves from Egypt. God chose Moses to liberate them. Moses performed great magical signs. God rained down the ten plagues on Egypt in order to get Pharaoh to see things God's way. When the Israelites escaped to the Red Sea, God split the sea in two to let the Israelites pass through on dry ground, and then flooded it again when the Egyptians tried the same trick. In the desert, God led the Israelites to freedom with a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of cloud by day. In the desert God provided the Israelites with mana and birds to eat, and provided water from a dry rock to drink. Amazing stuff.

So finally, free from slavery, the Israelites end up at Mt. Sinai. God calls Moses up the mountain to give him the ten commandments. There is more thunder and lightning, say the stories, because the glory of the Lord descended on the mountain. Moses was up there for a long time.

And the Israelites? Well, in spite of all the miracles I've just told you about, they become impatient and decide that Moses had been up the mountain for too long. They feel alone and abandoned, so they build themselves two large golden calves to worship instead of the God of Israel.

God is not impressed. God is so upset that God decides to abandon the Israelites. In our scripture God says, okay, you can still, "Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; *but I will not go up among you*, or I would consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people." God sends an angel to go with the Israelites instead.

But the other amazing thing is that in spite of their stupidity and stiff-necks, in spite of their faithlessness and idolatry, God still loves these people. They rejected God, but God still offers an angel and the Promised Land. It seems that, when it comes to Israel, God knows both how to be divinely patriotic, but fiercely critical, too.

And that is pretty much how it was for the rest of Israel's history. The walls of Jericho fall, but the people loot the ruins rather than leave them alone, as God had instructed them to do. Samson defeats the Philistines, but falls for Delilah instead of governing wisely. David defeats Goliath . . . but kills Bathsheba's husband Uriah and generally lives as depraved a life as Henry VIII did. Israel conquers territory but worships the idols of the conquered, turning its back on God, over and over again. Israel is blessed with wealth, but ignores the poor, the displaced, the widow, the homeless, the alien.

Time and again, the ancient Israelite legends tell of the same repeated historical patterns. The pattern never ceases. Israel is blessed and thrives. But Israel turns away from the just laws of God. God punishes. Israel repents. God restores Israel, so she is blessed and thrives once more. But Israel again turns away from the just laws of God. And so, the cycle repeats, over and over again, until finally, totally fed up, God sends the people he liberated from Egypt back into exile and slavery in Babylon. Which should have been the end of the story, but because God loves these people, he liberates them from slavery a second time, and tries again to get them to be a just nation.

And all along the way, on every occasion that Israel failed to do justice, love mercy, or pay attention to the greater matters of the law, God sent patriotic but honest prophets to condemn Israel's behaviour. Prophets like Amos. So, in our second scripture reading from Amos, ironically, for once, the Israelites are actually doing all the little things right—the sacrifices, the rules and regulations, the singing, the worship and all that. But they are condemned by the prophet Amos because they do not let “justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” Which is the whole point of being a nation, as far as God is concerned.

The legends of Israel are all about a nation that is constantly doing wrong, and as a result is constantly visited by prophets who condemn the nation and call it back to being all that it should be. Samuel, Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos . . . it is always the same, prophetic patriots criticizing their country because it refuses to do right.

And, thinking about modern patriotism—I'd say, whether in modern Israel, or modern Canada—there is still plenty of room for prophetic patriots. There is plenty of room for straight talk about moral values, about the least and the last, about the environment, about the deficit, about transparency, about universal health care, about racism—there is plenty of room for straight talk in this country as it approaches its 150th birthday. Not because we, like the ancient Israelites, worry that God will ring us up if we do wrong. No, we need straight talk because as followers of Jesus we still believe in justice, and mercy, and kindness for all, just like the Old Testament prophets did. We need straight talk because while our country is often right, it is often wrong, too—especially wrong when it comes to the most vulnerable, to those on the bottom rungs of the ladder.

Not “my country right or wrong,” but “my country, so I'm going to help her right the wrongs.” Not always fun. Not always the most popular stance. Not always the easiest path. Prophets, whether they are prophets over the watercooler at work, or over the fence at home, or in the election campaign—prophets are not always the most popular people in the room. But then, rather than follow a pillar of fire by night or cloud by day, we follow Jesus.

It's the right, and patriotic, thing to do.