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Sermon Title: "My America"
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: 2 Chronicles 7:13-15

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When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command the locust to devour the land, or send pestilence among my people, if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land. Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayer that is made in this place.

That's startling Scripture, isn't it? It begins with an unpleasant message. Ends with hope. And in the middle provides a prescription for a nation's well-being. The unsettling part, the unpleasant part is God's taking credit for all the bad stuff that happens. God cites drought and plagues of locusts ("climate change," we'd call it; "acts of God," the insurance companies used to call it).

Elsewhere in the Bible, God cites other disasters: military defeats, powerful and successful enemies, sickness, and God claims to be behind it all. God does it, or allows it, or stands by as it happens. That's not my theme for today, but it sure gets your attention. Just run through your mind the toughest things you've faced or America has faced, and tell yourself that God did it to you for a reason. I don't believe that. I don't believe God does bad things, and Jesus agrees with me, so I'm sticking with it. But as I said, that's for another day.

God's larger point is, hey, look around your country "from sea to shining sea." There is a lot going on you're not happy about, you're not proud of, you're worried about, opposed to, upset about; things that make your head spin, ruin your breakfast, and make you want to throw a brick at your TV set when the news is on. So, God says in our key verse, if you want your nation better, greater, kinder, more together, more fulfilling its destiny, then here is a four-step path: "humble yourselves, pray, seek God's face, and turn from your wicked

ways." And then God says, "I will hear you, forgive you, and heal your land." (2 Chronicles 7:14)

That verse was not written about Obama when half the country didn't like what he was doing or how; and it wasn't written about Trump when half the country doesn't like what he's doing or how. Like all the important verses in the Bible, this one was written for a specific time and place, Israel, 3,000 years ago *and* meant to be useful in all times and places, like us now.

For instance, the Bible says, "Thou shalt not steal" and "Love one another." Both are thousands of years old, but they are meant for us too. Well, that's what I think about today's verse. It was a great way forward for ancient Israel. It's a great way forward for modern America.

My not-so-little essay begins with nostalgia. I think for any of us who had a halfway decent childhood, we look back on where we grew up and when with strong memories of place and time and events and even smells.

I grew up in Queens, New York, 1950s, doo-wop music, sock hops, Brooklyn Dodgers. Ike was president. And the wonderful aroma of the nearby Wonder Bread Bakery filled our streets. We played stickball, hooky—not hockey—*hooky*, and we all wanted to be James Dean. Nostalgia glosses over a lot of stuff. Our "Field of Dreams," and it was a field of dreams, was so littered with broken glass that I used to have to rake it before games, and so covered with soot it was called "Smokey Oval." Life is like that. Then we grow up, our eyes open, we learn, we live, we experience, and before you know it, it's May 2019.

"My America" grew out of that life journey. Nostalgia. Reality. Memories. And now. Your life may have been much the same or vastly different, but there is one key element we share: we are alive now, here. These times are our times. And there isn't a single American soul I've met, ever, ever, who didn't want things better.

I fervently state in my essay that "better" is bred into our DNA. That's who we are. That's what we are. That's what has driven us from day one. That's what drove every person who landed at Ellis Island. That's what drove the children and grandchildren of slaves. That's what drives people still.

There's a phrase I hear a lot among protestors and critics when something goes wrong in America: "We're better than that," someone will say. I like that: "We're better than that." What that means is that our sights are always set higher, our expectations are always greater, we always believe "we are better than that."

All God is doing is coaching. You've all been athletes in some way; many of you have been coaches. You know what it takes to improve. God is simply doing what a batting coach does, a golf pro does, a yoga instructor does, a nutritionist, a tennis coach, heck, an SAT tutor.

You want better? Here's how. They're all saying the same thing: try this, try that; change this, change that; different approach, different attitude, different angle, different discipline. You all know the definition of insanity: doing the same thing over and over and over again the same way and expecting a different result. God is telling us to change it up.

I coached baseball for a lot of years, and I had this boy—oh, he looked good. Uniform, hat, perfect; his stance at the plate looked like a sculpture at Cooperstown. He couldn't hit at all. Nothing. Ever. I had him for two years. I showed him every possible way forward. He rejected them all. He thought he looked great. He preferred to look good striking out. And he did. A lot.

"My America" and God's verse are written for those who don't want to look good striking out. God says if you want to hit the ball, here's the way. And then you'll look good.

Number one, be humble. In athletic terms, be coachable. In academic terms, be teachable. In God's terms, be humble. I suppose the opposite of humble is to quote myself in my own sermon—forgive me, but here goes: I write, "Humility is an inner kindness that doesn't put yourself first. It leaves open the possibilities for other thoughts, other people, other choices, other requirements than just your own. You don't put yourself first." (Page 27.)

In the essay I listed every hot issue bedeviling America today: immigration, abortion, health care, climate change, racism, anti-Semitism, gun violence. And whatever I missed I invite you to add more. Make your own list. But for whatever it is you think is troubling America, dividing America, God says, start humble. Then pray. The next two steps, "pray" and "seek God's face" are two sides of the same coin. We could put it this way: pray, and pray harder.

You've all had two-minute conversations with people, 20-minute conversations. Two hours, two days. A lot different, aren't they? From shallow to deep. The same with a job search. You have your "elevator speech." Maybe a 20-second message left on a phone. Then a phone interview. Hopefully a follow-up one-hour interview. Then you're invited to go deeper. God is inviting us to go deep. Pray. Pray harder. And by harder, I mean specific. Get specific. Get detailed. Get into the weeds. Whenever we're exasperated, we say "God, help us!" Well, that's a prayer. Now go deeper. God help us . . . how? With what, exactly?

To “pray” is to open up a conversation with God, all well and good. To “seek God’s face” is, as young people say today, to get in God’s face, to go one-on-one, to sit down and have it out. I don’t know how it was in your house, but in mine, when my father said, “David, sit down here for a minute,” it was not going to be a minute, it was not going to be easy. It was going to be intense, specific, uncomfortable. He was going to be “in my face, in my business.” God is inviting us to that kind of intimacy. And it could be intense. The deeper we go, the more likely God can get through to us: some revelation, some insight, some step forward.

That’s what this is all about, right? Israel wanted to be healed. America wants to be better. We need to get beyond sound bites, generalities, and lock-step loyalties, blind allegiances. We need to hit the doggone ball out of the park and not just look good striking out.

Well, I saved the best for last, or maybe the toughest. “Turn from your wicked ways.” Let’s face it, nobody wants to come to a Congregational Church in New England to hear about their wicked ways. I could get away with talking about other people’s wicked ways, maybe even mine—not yours! And certainly not America’s. “Wicked” is a hard word. Couldn’t we say “wrong” or “mistaken,” an “error”? Something softer? But no, God says for a nation to be what it wants to be, we’ve got to confront the ugly truths about ourselves. There’s stuff about us that’s not good for us.

Let me talk to the older folks in Church today, say, 50 or over. Younger folks won’t get it. But the rest of us, we know what every doctor visit is: “You can’t do that anymore.” “You can’t get away with that anymore.” “You can’t eat that anymore.” And we all have our bottom lines. The doctor says, “Diet more,” O.K. “Exercise more.” O.K. “No coffee.” WHAT? “I’d rather die.” “O.K.,” the doctor says, not with a wink.

Apply that to America. There’s stuff about America we don’t like. There’s stuff that makes us uncomfortable, sick, worse. We need to be awakened and slapped silly. And, just like with the doctor, your symptoms, your issues may be different from mine. You are as interested in a way forward as I am. And the way forward is to “turn from our wickedness.” To do it, we have to name it. I’ve named 10 or 12, and it wasn’t fun naming them, it isn’t fun facing them, and it hasn’t been fun living them. But God is simply saying, like a good coach, like a good doctor, to be healthy, to succeed, to get better or be better.

In “My America,” I tell a mildly amusing story about a truly horrific fall I had last summer in Bratislava. Full face down in the middle of the busiest street in town. I was bloodied, battered, bruised from head to toe. But I didn’t need any help. Not from the two young men who picked me up. Not from anybody. I couldn’t move. I

couldn't think. I hurt like heck. But I refused all help. I didn't want to admit I was in trouble. I didn't want to face the cure.

After three days, the hotel staff threatened to call Alida (who was back here in Connecticut), so I finally gave in; and they brought medical staff to my hotel. With big needles, lots of pills, stern advice. And they found a therapist who poured hot oil over my body and slapped me silly for five days. I got better.

Here's what you need to tackle, here's what you can't gloss over, here's what's hurting you. The final part, after naming the hurt, the wickedness that rots what we love, after naming it we have to turn from it. That can mean *Stop it. Do a 180*. In Christian language, *repent*. Here's what you used to be. Here's what you're going to be.

God says apply that to us, America, 21st century, here and now. Some issues are going to be harder than others. Overcoming 400 years of racial injustice takes more than giving up plastic straws and plastic bags to save the environment. But each begins somewhere. God says it begins with our being humble enough to seek God's face and pray hard till we know the worst about ourselves and choose to change.

Let me end with this. At one of the "My America" discussions this week, a friend quoted Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln said of another person, "I don't like that man. I must get to know him better." God offers us a path to get to know our fellow Americans better. Use this little essay to get some conversation going. You and some family member, you and a neighbor, you and a certain friend, you and a golfing buddy, a work colleague. You and someone you know with whom you have differed, argued, all because you both care so much. Take "My America," add it to *your* America, invite in *their* America, and let's find our way to *our* America.

Let's conclude our service today by singing that beautiful hymn, "O Beautiful for Spacious Skies," No. 720:

*O beautiful for spacious skies,
for amber waves of grain;
for purple mountain majesties
above the fruited plain!
America! America!
God shed his grace on thee,
and crown thy good with servanthood
from sea to shining sea.*

*O beautiful for heroes proved
in liberating strife,
who more than self their country loved,
and mercy more than life!
America! America!
May God thy gold refine,
till all success be nobleness,
and every gain divine.*

*O beautiful for patriot dream
that sees beyond the years
thine alabaster cities gleam,
undimmed by human tears!
America! America!
God mend thine every flaw,
confirm thy soul in self-control,
thy liberty in law.*