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Sermon Title: "Our America"
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: 2 Chronicles 7:14

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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.

Today we're talking again about my essay, "My America." It's a fitting ending to the two-month episode of having it out and about, read and responded to. Whenever I've written one of my books or white papers or essays, or even sermons, people always want to know what led me to it, what got me thinking. I wrote "My America" last summer on one of my many sabbaticals, sitting in the coffeehouses in Prague and Bratislava. Fact is, I went there to write more short stories, more fiction, but somehow this theme of "My America" took over.

Why? Well, as a Christian pastor, I always try to credit God's inspiration. Inspiration literally means "to put spirit into," and in religious terms that spirit is God's spirit. And when we do something right, we like to believe that God directed it, God breathed into it, God inspired it.

The Bible says of itself that it is "God-breathed." And I don't think God's inspiration ended with the last page of the Bible. Just like you, I've looked at great art, I've listen to great music, I've read a great book, and I know for sure, God had a hand in that. And you've had those moments in your life: an idea, a suggestion, a thought, a plan, something you did or wrote or created. And you just know it came in part or in whole from outside yourself. You had a hand in it, yes, you have imagination and skills and thought, yes. But something takes it over, takes it higher. We call that God. Or inspiration. Or both. God-breathed. So I like to think "My America" was inspired.

But, of course, there's also the human dimension. I think about America all the time, always have. I was raised that way, taught that way, lived that way. And in my family, two things always went together, side by side: appreciation and critique. It was applied to report cards, school projects, baseball performance, and America. As I went on in education, I had professors who negotiated your grade. You and the professor would meet together and decide your grade. So I'd saunter into the office and say, "I deserve an A," and walked out with a C (if I was lucky). I learned soon enough: be humble, start low, aim high. The more self-criticism I gave, the higher the grade I ended up with. I apply that theory still, to everything in my life: my work, my family, and yes, my America.

It's also true that my lifetime has been tumultuous. Probably every generation thinks that, but the only generation I really know is mine. And it was tumultuous. Tremendous tumult, of the best kind and the not-so-best kind. All that tumult forces you to think. And, of course, the 21st century has been a challenge. People and nations frittered away hard-fought freedoms. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of the Iron Curtain, and bye-bye to the old Soviet "evil empire," we assumed an unstoppable march toward democracy. Which stopped.

Then, 9/11. Nothing has been the same since 9/11. Everything is changed: religion, politics, war. How we talk to one another. Painful divisions. A few years ago, we sold lawn signs at coffee hour that said, "Hate Has No Home Here." They came in red and blue, bipartisan, you see. Red "Hate Has No Home Here." Blue "Hate Has No Home Here."

To my surprise, I met people who took offense. I heard stories all over town opposed to the signs. I live in the same world you do. I stand in the same lines, go to the same parties, read the same papers, watch the same news shows, listen to the same experts, hear the same conversations. And yet, we are all pulled apart in so many directions by so many forces. We Americans, we neighbors, we Christians, we relatives, we don't trust one another.

Indeed, the most heart-wrenching response to my essay was story after story after story of people, good people, who no longer can talk with other people, good people. Parents and children, siblings, lifelong friends, golfing buddies, work buddies. And I heard this from every generation: 80-year-olds, 60-year-olds, 40-year-olds, college kids, high school kids. Torn asunder by divisions. I refuse to believe it has to be that way. As a Christian, *and* as an American.

Jesus is actually described as "breaking down the wall of hostility." Jesus is actually called our "peace." Jesus actually defined the worst of sins, the worst, is to be insulting, hurtful with our words. And America, "E Pluribus Unum," out of many, one. "One nation, under God," what? "Indivisible," undivided.

I'm sure my life insurance agent could get out his actuarial table and tell us how many years I've got left. Well, however many there are, I intend to live them hopefully, positively, constructively, optimistically. So, I started to write. The great writing teachers say, "Write what you know," so that's where I started. My stories. My memories. My lessons. "My America."

You're going to expect that I like my own writing, or I wouldn't write it. And you'd expect me to believe in my own writing, or I wouldn't push it. And you'd expect me to highlight the positive responses, or I wouldn't devote another Sunday to it. So you'd be right on all three expectations! This essay, booklet, whatever you want to call it, "My America," has generated the most response of anything I've written, and I've written a lot. I could call it the fastest-selling book of my career, except it's not for sale (it's free!), and it's not long enough to be a book. So let's just say they've been flying off the shelves, and if response is any measure, it's being read.

I've received hundreds of responses, spoken directly with over 100 people, held a dozen group meetings, and I have a pile of letters and emails. You've given me a wealth of theological and Biblical and historical reflections—deep stuff, deep analyses; helpful, useful critique. Lots of segues into other vital topics, lots of ideas, suggestions, reflections.

Last Monday I was at a meeting (not a Church meeting, but with other people from around town), and one person said, "I read your essay. I love it. I have lots of comments and notes." Which was nice, and I thanked her kindly. But she persisted. She said, "No, I really read your essay." And she took it out of her bag, opened it up for everyone to see. "See?" she said, and I did see: there were underlinings everywhere, on every page, every paragraph, notations, notes, commentary. That's a writer's (or preacher's) dream come true: people who take it seriously, wrestle it through, and get back to you.

Now, of course, I'm human enough to love the praise. Comments like "bold, heartfelt, provocative," "couldn't put it down," "inspiring, helpful, thoughtful." "Spot on." My head got bigger with every email.

Here are my three favorite compliments: first, a person said, "I want to live in your America." Second, a friend wrote, "The America you describe in the first half is the America I imagined growing up in post-World War II Europe. America was our liberator, our superhero. You were our savior. We believe that the best came from America." The third compliment you've been hearing about. A dear friend took me aside one day and said he'd take care of all the expense of publishing and mailing a copy to every United States senator and congressperson from every state in America, and last week we showed you a photo of our office volunteers

with their assembly line putting together 500 copies with 500 cover letters in 500 envelopes to 500 politicians nationwide.

I'd like you to share that enthusiasm. Show people, show your friends, show your family. In this Church we believe in one another. We believe we can talk. We believe in America. We don't believe in division.

In my (by now) hundreds of conversations, here's the one illustration I use that everyone understands, everyone agrees with. You go to your doctor. He's done a test, a biopsy. It's come back with a problem. You're going to need follow-up: an oncologist, tests, surgery, treatment. What is your first question? Find out if they're Republican or Democrat? Find out whom they voted for? Find out if they agree with you on this, that, or the other? Or do you look for the best care possible, the best outcome, the best path? My little essay wants us to reach for the best outcome, the best path forward.

Now that I've bragged and boasted to the rooftops, I can tell you that the biggest response, the number-one item that caught the most eyes and grabbed the most agreement was the word "humble." In fact, folks were quite taken with that 3,000-year-old Bible verse that I based the essay on, the verse we read together a moment ago.

I spent the first half of the essay taking you on a nostalgic journey through my American life, right up to today's issues. And then I used that Old Testament verse to offer a pathway forward.

"If my people who are called by my name, (1) humble themselves, (2) Pray, (3) seek my face, and (4) turn from their wicked ways," then, God says, "I will (1) hear you, (2) forgive you, (3) heal your country." (2 Chronicles 7:14)

People are O.K. With prayer, so that is no big deal. And people would like to "see God's face," so that's not so tough. But I figured "humble yourselves" and "turn from your wickedness," wouldn't sit so well. Being humble is not exactly a popular virtue nowadays. And nobody likes to lose their wickedness, least of all our nation's wickednesses. To my amazement, people grabbed hold of both. It's as though we collectively realized that wanting improvement, doing better, being better, striving, being honest with ourselves, being aware, being humble—that's what the greatest among us do. It's Christianity 101. It's America 101. It's Good Business Practice 101. It's Athletic Excellence 101.

In the summer, I get out each day early to the track at Fairfield University. This week has also been Field Hockey Camp at the college, so the fields fill with enthusiastic high school girls doing their drills, practicing, playing games, starting

around 9 AM. Every day, every day at 8 AM, 8 AM, three girls show up all by themselves.

No coach, just those three girls. Running sprints. Taking shots. Passing. Practicing. Over and over. No one watching. Just three girls choosing to get better. They are already playing a varsity sport, and that's a good thing. And they are already at a summer sports camp, which is a good thing. But not enough for those three. They're there an hour early, determined to get better.

That is, in my little nostalgic brain, "the American Way." We talk about "American Exceptionalism" and "the American Dream," and I just mentioned "the American Way." None of that has to minimize anyone else to be true of us: our way, our dreams, our exceptionalism, our America can be as simple as that: to get up earlier, to be out there when no one's watching, to be better.

This is the one-year anniversary of my father's death last summer at age 96 in Brooklyn after 70 years as a Church pastor. I suppose like a lot of people I tried to gather pearls of wisdom from him in his later years, knowing time was getting shorter. We talked a lot of heavy stuff, but that was his custom his whole life, actually, but with death yet closer, it was all the more poignant. One day, I asked him about heaven. He spent 96 years as a Christian, 70 years as a pastor, almost 4,000 sermons, probably 2,000 funerals; he lost his own wife, my mom, long ago. I figured he had the inside scoop on heaven. "So, Dad, what is heaven?"

In his last year he'd become a man of few words. He would think hard, really ponder, and say something short, sweet, and to the point. "Heaven is where your fondest hopes are realized." *Heaven is where your fondest hopes are realized.*

Put that together with the one thing we do in this Church every Sunday, "The Lord's Prayer," where we say, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done . . . where? "On earth as it is in heaven." Right here, as it is in heaven. America, Fairfield, as it is in heaven. "Heaven is where our fondest hopes are realized." And right here is supposed to be as close to heaven as we can make it. That's our America. Let's not shy away from it.

Let's listen now as our tenor, David White, sings a favorite patriotic song, "God Bless America."

God bless America

Land that I love

Stand beside her and guide her

Thru the night with a light from above

From the mountains, to the prairies

To the oceans white with foam

God bless America

My home, sweet home

God bless America

My home, sweet home