

NO KINGS ALLOWED

Here in the United States today is a national holiday, one we often refer to by the date. The Fourth of July. But more accurately, it is called Independence Day. Somehow calling it the Fourth seems to strip it of its importance, and it becomes just one more day off. One more excuse for a special sale. But calling it Independence Day can help to remind us of why this is considered an important holiday. For it marks the day in 1776 when the Declaration of Independence, the founding document of our nation, was approved in its final form by the Second Continental Congress. The Congress, a body of representatives from the thirteen British colonies in the New World, had actually voted to declare independence from great Britain on July 2nd, but it took two days for the so-called Committee of Five, led by Thomas Jefferson, to write the declaration and to present it to the assembled representatives.

At the time no one knew exactly what shape the new nation would take. No one knew exactly what form of government would be created. Indeed, it took a war and thirteen more years to come to a final resolution of that very question. And while many provided leadership in that period of time, including figures like John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, and James Madison, the widely acknowledged key figure, in both war and then in peace, was George Washington, a tall and elegant surveyor, farmer, and experienced military officer from Virginia. Most Americans know all that, but what many don't know is that in those early and formative years, there were some who felt that the newly formed United States should be a monarchy with a representative legislative body, much like the homeland. And the person mentioned most often to be the first king was none other than Washington himself.

The issue first surfaced in 1782. Washington had successfully led the Army during the revolution and had brought victory to the former colonies. He was a highly regarded hero and leader. One proponent of monarchy was Colonel Lewis Nicola. He had served with Washington during the war. In a seven-page letter to his former General, he suggested Washington consider becoming king of the new nation. "Some people have so connected the ideas of tyranny and monarchy as to find it difficult to separate them," he wrote. "[B]ut if all other things are adjusted, I believe strong arguments might be produced for admitting the title of king." (Quoted by Ronald Chernow, *Washington: A Life*, 428)

Washington was appalled. "If you have any regard for your country, concern for yourself or your posterity, or respect for me," he replied, ". . . banish these thoughts from your mind." (Ibid) Nicola was shocked by the vehemence of Washington's response, and wrote three separate letters of apology! Clearly, despite some who would have him be king, Washington wisely realized in this new nation, this new republic, there should be no kings allowed!

Our passage from II Samuel is from a far earlier time and chronicles the coronation of David as king over all of Israel. It is a celebrative passage, reflecting the joy felt by the Israelites over having David, who had been victorious in battle after battle, as their new king. The start of his reign came as a relief after the less than stellar reign of Israel's first monarch, King Saul. God is even said to have approved. "It is you who shall be shepherd over my people . . . ," says God, "you shall be ruler over Israel." (5:2b)

But while God endorses David, it is with a measure of reluctance. For what the writer seems to forget at this point is the fact that when the Israelites first asked for a king, some years earlier, God had warned them about the pitfalls that lay ahead of them. Go ahead, God tells the prophet Samuel, allow for a king, but give them fair warning. A king will draft your sons into his army. He will take your land. "he will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers," God says, of a king, "He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and . . . orchards and give them to his courtiers." And he will take far more. And the day will come, when "you will cry out because of your king." But despite the warning, the people insist, they must have a king "so that we may be like other nations." (I Samuel 8:11, 13-14, 18a) Sort of an early form of keeping up with the Joneses! Finally, no doubt with a heavy heart, God relents and allows for a king.

In the long run all that God had warned them about did come to pass. And while a few of the kings along the way, including, for the most part, David, and certainly Josiah, some three hundred or so years later, king after king after king turned their backs on God, took advantage of the people and led them in destructive directions.

I haven't come across any references to this story of God warning against a monarch in my studies of the early years of our nation but knowing how steeped in the scriptures many of the founders were, I wouldn't be surprised to find it being used to back up an argument against having a monarchy. And while there were those like Colonel Nicola and Alexander Hamilton who entertained the idea of having a king at the head of the new nation's government, there were many more voices being raised against it. Most notably those of New Englanders, where the strong Congregational tradition held sway.

When Europeans first came to this land, when the Pilgrims first colonized Plimouth, they brought with them a revolutionary idea about church government. They had emerged from the Church of England, where the king was held to be the head of the church. He operated through bishops. The king, it was said, was anointed by God, and his bishops were in turn consecrated to carry out his wishes in terms of the church. Power rested with the king and the bishops, to a lesser extent with the clergy, and basically not at all with the laity. But the Puritans, whose number included the folks we have come to call the Pilgrims, had a different understanding of how the church was to operate. While the king might be acknowledged as

the head of state and charged with conducting the affairs of the secular government, the affairs of the church were properly conducted by the members of the church. God's will, they believed, was made known in and through the people. As one author notes, "In all Congregational churches' members held equal power, all of them responsible to each other under the covenant that formed the basis of their life together."

(www.congregationallibrary.org/researchers/congregational-christian-tradition) Granted in the early years, the people were fairly narrowly defined. White, male, of a certain age, subscribing to the covenant of the church. But still, it was a far broader understanding of how God works than that which suggested God pours out the Spirit on the king, and through the king, to others. In essence, when it came to the life of the church, the early Congregationalists said, "No kings allowed."

Congregational churches were not democratic in the pure sense of the word. Ultimately, they understood God to be in charge. But the Puritans believed God works through everyday folks, and that concept, informed the type of government the new nation would adopt. No kings, no bishops for the church. Nor for the nation. And while there are other theological strands in our denomination, the United Church of Christ, the Congregational strand very much informs who we are today as a local church and as a denomination.

My father, though raised in the Presbyterian Church, was a dyed in the wool Congregationalist. He was brought up right here in Florida. In West Palm Beach. But when he went north to go to seminary in Maine there were no Presbyterian churches anywhere close to where he was in Bangor. And so, he connected with the Congregational church. Ultimately, it fit him to a "t".

Dad believed very strongly in the notion that being a Congregationalist, was a great privilege. It meant understanding that in concert with other members of the church one could discern the will of God. But even as he believed that it was a privilege, he also believed it was a responsibility, that church membership meant taking an active role in the life of the congregation. Not simply being a passive observer. He also believed that about citizenship. I don't think he ever missed an opportunity to vote. Even in local elections. With privilege, I often heard him say, comes responsibility.

Perhaps it is best summed up by the late Barbara Jordan. Jordan, you may remember, was a lawyer from Texas, who entered into politics and became the first Black southerner elected to the House of Representatives since Reconstruction. She was a powerful speaker and often said things in a memorable way. People, she believed, who had the privilege of living in a democratic republic like ours, also have a responsibility to participate. "The stakes," she once said, ". . . are too high for government to be a spectator sport." So too life in a congregation

in the United Church of Christ. Belonging is a privilege and with it comes the responsibility to take an active part in the work, the mission, of the church, even as citizenship carries similar responsibility in terms of our communal life as a nation.

On this Independence Day, might we celebrate those privileges, and might we remember those responsibilities.

Amen

John H. Danner