"The Leaders We Honor"

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

This is a week of swirling emotions, and I don’t think it is just I who would say that. I have joked from time to time about “our tax dollars at work,” particularly when I and my former husband were privileged to receive grants from the National Endowment from the Humanities. Larry has especially benefitted from our tax dollars, having received a year-long sabbatical grant that allowed him to write his first book. For my part, as an educator, I benefitted from various summer seminars. In the summer of 1998, encouraged to write a grant for independent study, I was fortunate to work with a team of colleagues and a former professor of mine when we received a grant to study formative British thought of the 17th century. While you may think this is kind of an esoteric subject, I have recently found myself returning to much of what I learned then. I am sure that many of us have been wondering how to understand what is most foundational about our nation and our government, maybe particularly as we consider what it is that we believe about our most sovereign God, known to us through Jesus.

For our broad study back in ’98 (with Roger Johnson, so that his memory may live on), we looked especially at those authors whose works most influenced our own budding nation’s foundational documents. So, we read Edward Hobbes, whose *Leviathan* remains assigned reading in many introductory philosophy classes. We read John Locke, credited with some of the particular language of our own Declaration of Independence. We even read the poet/theologian, poet/pastor George Herbert, whose fascination with the supposed savage nations of what we now call South America made for interesting and often confusing reading. In all, we talked a lot about what separates civilized society from barbarism or brutishness. Even while I have in mind the unusual King, Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, and even while I have in mind the historic King David, also a poet-pastoral figure of another kind, I would like for us to think about what our own human inclinations are. Then, I would like very much for us to consider how God continually urges us to live together in harmony, forsaking individual gains for the greater common good.

I looked to the Encyclopedia Britannica to provide a clearer summary of the reams of notes I collected so long ago and chewed on this week. So, as we sit in our present state of uncertainty and concern, I thought we might learn a bit together about how we use human institutions to support God’s vision for us—or not. Quoting now from the Britannica website: “The **State of nature**, in political theory, is the real or hypothetical condition of human beings before or without political association. The notion of a state of nature was an essential element of the social contract theories of the English philosophers Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) and John Locke (1632–1704) and the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78), whose work we won’t really touch on today. Visions of the state of nature differed sharply between social-contract theorists, though most associated it with the absence of state sovereignty.” So, now to some of my own words for a moment:

Human beings, humankind existed in a state of nature without politics, without government, in a certain state, where our inclinations weren’t always to act together.

“The social-contract theories of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau were distinguished by their attempt to justify and delimit political authority on the grounds of individual self-interest and rational consent. By comparing the advantages of organized government with the supposed disadvantages of the state of nature, they showed why and under what conditions government is useful and ought therefore to be accepted by all reasonable people as a voluntary obligation. Those conclusions were then reduced to the form of a social contract, from which it was supposed that all the essential rights and duties of citizens could be logically deduced.” I imagine this sounds familiar to you, too, from Language of the Declaration of Independence, buzzing around this week of July 4th.

“For Hobbes, the state of nature is characterized by the “war of every man against every man” [every human being against every human being], a constant and violent condition of competition in which each individual has a natural right to everything, regardless of the interests of others. Existence in the state of nature is, as Hobbes famously states, “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” The only laws that exist in the state of nature (the laws of nature) are not covenants forged between people, but principles based on self-preservation. What Hobbes calls the first law of nature, for instance, is ‘*That every man ought to endeavour peace* [sounds good so far, doesn’t it?]*, as far as he has hope of obtaining it; and when he cannot obtain it, that he may seek and use all helps and advantages of war.’*

“In the absence of a higher authority to adjudicate disputes, everyone fears and mistrusts everyone else, and there can be no justice, commerce, or culture. That unsustainable condition comes to an end when individuals agree in a social contract to relinquish their natural rights to everything and to transfer their self-sovereignty to a higher civil authority, or Leviathan.  . . .” Thank you, *Britannica*, for taking reams of Hobbes and making it a couple of paragraphs.

“For Hobbes, the authority of the sovereign is absolute, in the sense that no authority is above the sovereign and that its will is law. That, however, does not mean that the power of the sovereign is all-encompassing: subjects remain free to act as they please in cases in which the sovereign is silent (in other words, when the law does not address the action concerned). The social contract allows individuals to leave the state of nature and enter civil society, but the former remains a threat and returns as soon as governmental power collapses. Because the power of Leviathan is uncontested, however [think, here, government], its collapse is very unlikely and occurs only when it is no longer able to protect its subjects.”

It was even more directly from John Locke that the authors of our foundational documents took their language and concepts. “For Locke, by contrast, the state of nature is characterized by the absence of government but not by the absence of mutual obligation. [Hmm . . . all about unity!] Beyond self-preservation, the law of nature, or reason, also teaches “all mankind, who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, liberty, or possessions.” [Sound familiar?] Unlike Hobbes, Locke believed individuals are naturally endowed with these rights (to life, liberty, and property) and that the state of nature could be relatively peaceful. Individuals nevertheless agree to form a commonwealth (and thereby to leave the state of nature) in order to institute an impartial power capable of arbitrating their disputes and redressing injuries. Locke’s idea that the rights to life, liberty, and property are natural rights that precede the establishment of civil society influenced the American Revolution and modern liberalism more generally.”

Thanks, authors of Britannica, for your clean and clear presentation. So, what happens to those of us who perceive from time to time that those who arbitrate our civil society, those whom we have elected not to reigns of absolute sovereignty, but to leadership of *civil* constraints and privileges somehow challenge our idea of civil society? Well, the idea of civil disobedience is explained as the response when an individual is no longer protected from incursion of government on the inalienable, natural rights we hold as “self-evident.” For our part, as people of faith in God, who is our ultimate sovereign, we are meant to work hard to assure that any human leader follows the model of our savior, of Jesus, who led as does a shepherd, even sacrificing his own comfort for the protection of his flock. God who made us loves us and asks us to *love* our neighbors—defined repeatedly as those with whom we come into contact, most often those who have been denied fundamental inclusion in the civil structures designed to protect us.

So, we hear news of leaders whose promises differ greatly and we wonder who will best serve. We hear from the historical book in scripture, Joshua’s first chapter, “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.” We human beings struggle with trusting anyone but ourselves, even while we acknowledge that we have to lean on each other in relationships that serve our many needs. With the celebration of our nation’s birth of independence from Britain falling in a week whose judicial decisions have us concerned regarding the nature of our republic, I began sermonizing by reminding myself of the various biblical kings. I pray for the kind of strength we hear of in Joshua 1:9 as I look to the original outline I had for today’s sermon: “The reign of King David, and his end; the reign of King Solomon and his end. The various GOOD deeds and choices made by many human leaders, even US presidents, even as I look at the number of presidents who died while in office and also at the lives some have lived following their presidencies. I thought of this as we heard very explicitly from today’s scripture how long David reigned over the united kingdoms of Israel and Judea, and also of just the one nation. At 99, for example, I look at the human character of Jimmy Carter with some awe and great respect, even while I may look at the four years of his “reign” more critically.

I began sermonizing with my own musing with the simple questions, “Who are the leaders we honor? What kind of leader was Jesus, and what did he suggest when his good deeds were not well received?” I am not here to tell you where to fall politically, but I *am* called to teach you about the life of Jesus: a shepherd willing to take on the wounds and challenges of others for their protection; one who called us to *love* one another in just such a way. I wish I had an easy balm for all of our concerns, our fears and our uncertainty. We are promised that God walks with us; we are called to love rather indiscriminately So, in a difficult season, I also offer a beautiful prayer/poem from the African-American poet, Lucille Clifton as she “blessed the boats.”

Lucille Clifton’s blessing the boats:

“may the tide

that is entering even now

the lip of our understanding

carry you out

beyond the face of fear

may you kiss

the wind then turn from it

certain that it will

love your back     may you

open your eyes to water

water waving forever

and may you in your innocence

sail through this to that”

Amen.