

Proper 9 (July 6, 2014)

“I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say” (*Lutheran Service Book*, #699)

“I love it when a plan comes together” was the signature line of Col. John “Hannibal” Smith (George Peppard) in the 80’s TV series *The A-Team*. (If you’re too young to know the show, get together with a seasoned colleague over a cup of coffee and get filled in on this cultural icon that you have missed.)

Every once in a while a liturgical day will, by almanac coincidence, share a calendar space with a non-liturgical event, as when Mothers Day and Good Shepherd Sunday locked arms on the second Sunday in May in 2014. And when attentive and thoughtful musicians and preachers can discover ways for those events to converse with each other, I am one who joins in the Hannibal Smith cry: “I love it when a plan comes together.”

Proper 9 (July 3-9) may well be such a fortunate concurrence of the church’s liturgy with the secular American calendar. This is the week when Americans celebrate Independence Day. We will once again be called upon to gather under the nations flag to patriotically eat the barbeque *du jour* and buy new cars and furniture, to hoist ourselves by our own bootstraps, to remember the noble deeds and the sacrifice of our forebears, to trust the ultimate power of the people, to sing of our sweet land of liberty, and to ask God to bless America. In that annual nationalistic fervor, we will not be far from many Old Testament people of God, who expected God to back their political and cultural aspirations and ambitions. And that is not to say that they were necessarily wrong. In the Old Testament reading for Proper 9 God promises to use His people to accomplish His seemingly political purposes.

“For I have bent Judah as my bow; I have made Ephraim its arrow. I will stir up your sons, O Zion, against your sons, O Greece, and wield you like a warrior's sword.” (Zechariah 9:13).

And one of the Psalms appointed for this week could, taken out of context, sound like a theocratic welfare system:

“The LORD upholds all who are falling and raises up all who are bowed down. The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand; you satisfy the desire of every living thing.” (Psalm 145:14-16)

But lest we head down that dangerously jingoistic road, this week’s hymn provides a simple but profound corrective. There is a place where we can put our ultimate trust; there is a source for security and wholeness; there is a Person who will lead us to inherit the earth. It is Jesus. It is His voice we finally follow; it is His promise that shapes our hopes and our expectations beyond time and eternity. The conversation between the sacred and the secular will inevitably come together in this week, and we need not avoid it, for we know that the voice of Jesus trumps all other voices we may hear. It is the voice of Jesus who finally gives shape and direction to our living and our loving. It is the voice of Jesus that supplants the American dream with the hope of eternal life. It is the voice of Jesus that makes all manner of plans – sacred and secular – come together.

There is good reason to be deeply thankful for the national blessings that God gives; we *do* want God to bless this land and use our leaders to protect our welfare and guide us in the paths of righteousness. And we do want God to use us in that process as good and faithful citizens – people charged by the scriptures to have dominion over God’s creation and to care for all who populate it.

But praying, singing, preaching the hymn of the week reminds us that any national trust is at best transitory. It is the glorious and gentle reign of the risen and ascended Christ that finally governs me. On the cross He has pledged His allegiance to me and won for me eternal citizenship in the kingdom of heaven. And finally, amid all the national clamor of this week in America, He is the “Thee” of whom I sing.

David Christian  
Carmel IN



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I heard the voice of Jesus say,  
"Come unto me and rest;  
lay down, thou weary one, lay down  
thy head upon my breast."

I came to Jesus as I was,  
so weary, worn, and sad;  
I found in him a resting place,  
and he has made me glad.

I heard the voice of Jesus say,  
"Behold, I freely give  
the living water; thirsty one,  
stoop down and drink, and live."

I came to Jesus, and I drank  
of that life-giving stream;  
my thirst was quenched, my soul revived,  
and now I live in him.

I heard the voice of Jesus say,  
"I am this dark world's light;  
look unto me, thy morn shall rise,  
and all thy day be bright."

I looked to Jesus, and I found  
in him my Star, my Sun;  
and in that light of life I'll walk  
till traveling days are done.

Text: Horatius Bonar (1808-89) Bonar was a Scottish pastor who always carried a notebook with him to jot down ideas. He eventually wrote some 600 hymns. This text is in the public domain.

[This devotion was prepared for the website of the Center for Church Music, Concordia University Chicago. It may be downloaded and printed for local use.]