*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the* *"pursuit of Happiness.”*

I know, I know. Last Sunday, our hymns and our prayers pointed us forward to this weekend’s holiday. Now we are past it. And I find I need to ponder this year’s odd and different Independence Day.

I grew with grand parades and grander fireworks; with my Dad raising the Stars and Stripes on our front lawn and playing Sousa marches at full volume on the record player. Picnics and potato salad and red, white and blue. Traditional Americana has always marked the nation’s birthday party.

This year, nothing was the same. Parades were not an option; nearly 80% of the nation’s fireworks displays were canceled. Conversation about flags is fraught; taking a knee, an action of reverence and respect when you do it in church is now another line in the sand of this divided country when you do it at a sporting event – kind of like masks and social distancing.

There was clearly confusion and chaos about just what needed to be celebrated.

The national project to crush Covid-19 has failed; at least 127,000 dead Americans, and surging cases around the country, testify to that trauma. We find ourselves turned into the planet’s new lepers; old friends like Canada and the European Union will not let us in as our infection rate soars.

Wholesale economic paralysis leaves many anxious and hurting; white Americans are facing a searing racial reckoning – and maybe that is the good news, as Americans of all colors are allowing a cautious optimism about a new dispensation.

Our American foundational story has been outed; it still holds vision and valor and values about liberty and freedom and equality. But from the beginning, the vision was not only incomplete but compromised.

The authors of the Declaration were privileged men who sought to protect and preserve their privilege when it was threatened by a hostile government and a distant king, -- white men, educated men, land owning men, many of them people owning men. Their lives were created equal.

That many of our fellow citizens do not recognize how that is a problem is a problem.

The problem did not go unremarked at the time.

Abigail Adams to husband John at the Continental Congress;

*“Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. If perticuliar care and attention is not paid to the Laidies we are determined to foment a Rebelion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation.”*

This year is the 244th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

It is the 100th anniversary of the constitutional amendment that enfranchised American women.

Darker truths, not new ones, emerge these days; many of those who created and signed the document did so knowing that it was deeply flawed. As were they.

Instead of a parade I watched Hamilton this 4th of July, on TV this time. Even a Broadway musical took us into hard places; George Washington, John Adams, Hamilton himself understood that the issue of slavery would distort the soul of the new nation. They let it go, to entice colonies that depended on enslaved labor into the new national fold, perhaps not to rock some ugly boats.

Over these 244 years, Americans have pressed the incomplete vision of the founding fathers, pressed our foundational document to embrace a larger vision, to include other sufferers of oppression. Never perfectly or adequately or completely. But almost always in the light of the biblical witness, the witness of prophets, and apostles, and the ministry and message of a Crucified and Risen Lord.

Abraham Lincoln at a cemetery in Gettysburg, Harriet Tubman at a stop on the Underground Railroad with fleeing slaves, Martin Luther King on the steps of the Nation’s Capital – earlier iterations that Black Lives Matter.

And now still we find the dream is harder than we knew. A faithful patriotism calls us to repentance, to compassion and to costly transformation.

Americans are not in denial about the nation’s turmoil of the last three months. Most of us are angry and fearful about the state of the country.

We can’t even agree to wear a mask, to protect ourselves and others. The notion of the common good, of what is best for the community, of a public trust – so many Americans refuse to acknowledge how that is a necessary value in a democracy. We are in this together; not every man for himself.

New York Times columnist David Brooks adds: A lot of people look around at the conditions of this country — how Black Americans are treated, how communities are collapsing, how Washington doesn’t work — and none of it makes sense. None of it inspires faith, confidence. In none of it do they feel a part.

If you don’t breathe the spirit of the nation, if you don’t have a fierce sense of belonging to each other, you’re not going to sacrifice for the common good.

So now I begin to see that the 4th of July 2020 means more than I expected.

How many martyrs like George Floyd does it take to open our eyes to devastating truths long ignored? The nightmares of slavery, Jim Crow, white supremacy, are finally pushing their way into our consciousness and giving context for how power, privilege, and property have never been distributed by any moral criteria.

The violence that destroys black lives is newly visible to many of us. Attitudes are changing at a remarkable pace.

Love of country requires honest assessment of our failures now. Not America, love it or leave it but America we can do better, we can be better.

In his first inaugural address, Lincoln called upon the better angels of our nature to overcome division. We could use some better angels now.

Americans go to the polls thinking we could elect a savior.

 We come to church because we have one.

*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*

Jesus’ ministry and message are not to preserve the rights or the righteousness of the privileged and pious; but to raise the hopes of the powerless, the poor, and the marginalized. Those prisoners of hope that the prophet consoles.

 Jesus begins with God not the government as the source of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,-- all lives created in the image of God-- and ends with an invitation to make a declaration of dependence upon himself.

 His egalitarian yoke is offered to us, to embrace our weariness, our brokenness, and our longings for a life that is upheld by a greater power than merely our own or any governments, a yoke to hold us in a covenant with all humankind, and under the ultimate sovereignty of God alone.

 A Savior for the world weary and disease-burdened knows the politics of a hard and heavy world. He places himself in our midst doing God's giving, forgiving work, and he invites those who believe themselves unlovable, unforgiveable, untouchable to join him in the task.

 He has worn himself -for us all- the awesome weight of hatred’s yoke and he found it easy, as easy as hanging on a Cross.

But the burden he leaves for us is as light as the emptiness of a tomb.

 Not merely a free people, but a redeemed humanity yoked by the perfect love of God into a church that must wear the fierce and gentle face of God in this world, not to be politically correct but passionately engaged.

Who better than Christians like us should bear witness in word and deed that care of the poor, compassion for the vulnerable, hospitality to the stranger and sojourner, and justice for the oppressed are not merely matters of civil law, but the ethos of the Kingdom of God and the imitation of Christ.

* We are people who will reveal the presence of Jesus by our acts of love, mercy and justice.
* Patriots who will challenge the nation to a fuller vision of the common good, because we know how it is with God.

*"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.*  JER+