

The Royal Poinciana Chapel

Sermon By

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Sixty Coconut Row, Palm Beach, Florida 33480

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"I STILL HEAR AMERICA SINGING!"

TEXT: "May the Lord give strength to his people!
May the Lord bless his people with peace."

Psalm 29:11

Walt Whitman was near enough the number one American poet, at least he was a perfect "poet of the people." He was born in Brooklyn, New York, the second son of a carpenter and his wife in 1819. He is largely forgotten now except for poets and teachers, and the preachers who trot out his patriotic pieces at holiday times, such as I am doing today this President's Day weekend.

He lived in Brooklyn, then out on Long Island for most of his early life. He was largely self-taught. He had no fancy diplomas or degrees or academic honors. He survived and prospered, as we say, in the "School of Hard Knocks." He joined his father in the occupation of carpenter. He remodeled houses and tried to resell them at a higher price. Then he worked as a printer in New York City until a devastating fire in the printing district wiped out most industry. In 1836 he became a teacher in a one room school house on Long Island, in which he taught all the subjects to all the students of any age who came to school. He next worked with, and founded various newspapers. In 1855 he published on his own first small edition of Leaves of Grass, which many ignored but which Ralph Waldo Emerson adored.

When the Civil War began, Whitman volunteered as a visitor to the New York area hospitals where the war wounded were taken. Later he did the same in Washington where his brother soldier was a patient. He helped a lot of other soldiers and their families.

By the 1870s he had settled in Camden, New Jersey. He first went there because his dying mother was at his brother's house and he thought that he should help out. But while visiting he suffered a stroke and could not return to Washington. He stayed on with his brother in a simple two story clapboard house

struggling to write and rewrite his poems for the rest of his life. He died in 1892 and was buried in a tomb he designed himself over in Harleigh Cemetery, a spot I have visited more than once.

Whitman had tremendous sympathy for those who were suffering in body, mind or soul. He loved his nation and defended her to a fault. Like Robert Burns, he adored the common folk: "God's people" he called them.

John Townsend Trowbridge wrote: "His friendships were mostly with the common people: pilots, drivers and mechanics. His favorite diversions were crossing the ferries, riding on the top of omnibuses, and attending operas. He liked to get off by the seashore and read Homer and Ossian with the salt air on his cheeks, and shout their winged words to the winds and waves. The book he knew best was the Bible, the prophetic parts of which stirred in him a vague desire to be the bard or prophet of his own time and country."

Whitman aspired to be for all time the poet of democracy and emancipated manhood, his simple prayer being, "Give me to speak beautiful words O God. You take all the rest!"

You might recognize his poems: "Song of myself", "Song of the open Road", "Leaves of Grass", "Drum Taps", "When lilacs last in the dooryard bloomed". Plus a host of patriotic poems, notably "O Captain, my captain", "Sail, sail thy best ship of Democracy!" And the one I bring you this morning, "I hear America singing".

Let me share this poem with you as we celebrate God's gift of America on this President's Day weekend.

I hear America Singing
Walt Whitman
(1819-1892)

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,
Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should
 be blithe and strong,
The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or
 beam,
The mason singing as he makes ready for work, or
 leaves off work,
The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat,
 the deckhand singing on the steamboat deck,
The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the
 hatter singing as he stands,
The wood-cutter's song, the ploughboy's on his way
in
 the morning, or at noon intermission or at
 sundown,
The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young
 wife at work, or of the girls sewing or
washing,
Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none
 else,
The day what belongs to the day – at night the party
of
 young fellows, robust, friendly,
Singing with open mouths their strong melodious
 songs.

The poem was written just as the Civil War was ending and amidst the sound and fury of battle. With Whitman helping the wounded day by day, it was essential for him to continue to hear America singing. Not essentially to the politicians or state department, not to the philanthropists and the noted industrialists, but to sing songs of the common men and women, the ones on whom all of it depends.

In Leaves of Grass Whitman wrote "The United States themselves are essentially our greatest poem." Just that we are here from all the stations and places of the earth. I still hear America singing.

Americans have been singing a new song since the beginning. Long before we were "The United States of America", our forebears were singing songs of freedom and peace, and telling of a land where all men and women would be equal. The crossing of the

Mayflower, the settlers in Virginia, the men and women of the American Revolution, through war and peace – all joined in harmony to sing a new song.

America was singing back near the turn of the nineteenth Century. God's people in Europe had grown tired and old and settled in. Power to determine who lived and died, or where each could worship God, was vested in a few kings, magistrates and rulers. The Lord looked around and said, "I don't like what is going on. This is not what I intended when I placed Adam and Eve in the Garden. I want more for my children." So little by little, He began to nudge, push, shove, beckon, even force the effort toward freedom for the individuals and their descendents. They brought freedom of religion with them across the sea. They braved the wilds and winds, and weather and formed a new nation "under God."

From time immemorial before that, it had been the hour for other nations. They mostly failed. Put on your History 101 cap now, my friends, and wander back down the lanes of your school-day memories. There was a time when it was the hour for the Roman Empire. Its great strides for education, arts, and culture and the declaration of freedom for its vested citizens, were of interest at that time. Then they let it all go to seed. When Gibbons wrote of the "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire", he told the sorry tale. If and when God gives up on the nation, or civilization, it is gone for good.

Others had their day: Greece, Germany, Britain, France, Spain, etc. When World War I came, the fledgling military power of America was thrown into the middle of a horrible conflagration. But you can still hear them singing, "Over there..." and "The Yanks are coming over there."

Then came Adolph Hitler and the Nazi regime in the 1930's. We were preoccupied with our own Great Depression, and we were late in getting "over there". In Hitler's Germany, the ones who had the right bloodlines and the right names and the right ideas could have their freedom. He waged a world war to prove he was right. France fell. England withstood.

Churchill said it was their finest hour. But America was singing the lead.

Next, all the way across the world rose the shadow of that rising sun of a Japanese empire that was casting its darkness around the globe...It was a scary time. That brought Pearl Harbor. But God said, "Fear not, this is America's Hour!" Had it not been for the men and women of this nation, one half a million of whom never returned to enjoy the freedom they won, think of the dark clouds which would still be hanging over our times.

For the ensuing fifty years, sing the chorus in harmony: The USSR was circling the world in tyranny. When the North Koreans and the Chinese Communists invaded South Korea. It took lives, pain and parting, but they were all stopped. Then the Viet Nam confrontation. It was sad, what we did to our nation then; we practically tore it apart.

Time was when here in America we could mind our business and look across the waters half wishing we could help, but determined that we wouldn't. That was shaken in 1914 when the dawn of universal history came, when the business of the world became our business. Time was when we were sure the power of our country was sufficient to ward off all attacks and to preserve us forever. Now, at times we wonder how we could have been so naïve.

It used to be that we were sure that honesty and morality were lasting virtues. We were proud that our children would grow up to inherit the marvelous kind of a world we would make for them.

It used to be that we thought we had finality and security, and no matter how evil or wretched the friends of the world became, we could still (if only we work hard enough) have a good earth to start again.

If George Washington could speak today, I think he would be amazed and pleased with all the things we have accomplished. He would be in a strange new world. In his time, most landed gentry had slaves. There was a huge disparity between his class and the other classes. Agricultural society dominated finance and culture. Women could not vote. All those

changes would startle him. But, I think once he adjusted, he would say "That's good. I am proud of where you have taken these United States of America. We had no idea."

I used to drop into Christ Church Cathedral, Philadelphia, to see that magnificent stained glass "Liberty Window" dated 1774. It depicts "The Prayer in the First Congress." There the delegates are shown feverently praying to God to help them create a new nation, to keep them humble and diligent. They were deeply religious men who committed themselves to the publication of Scriptures and to the imposition of Christian morality among all the people of the land, especially concerned with the spiritual well-being of the armed forces and promoting Christianity among the Indians.

Unapologetic Christian prayers were offered out loud everywhere, that the nation might obtain its freedom and prosperity through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ. Washington would wonder why so many Christian clergymen now disguise their prayers, so as not to offend. Confucius say "Keep an open mind but don't let your brains fall out!"

But, all that is past. I wonder what you hear America singing now...I hear some old gospel hymns with a foot stomping Baptist good cheer telling us that no matter how bad it gets down here, God is still in his heaven and we are all going somewhere great and good. That the Lord will not forget us or our destiny, if we by remain faithful.

There is something essentially healthy about our concern to share our faith in a common search for peace and goodness. I applaud it. We foster such cooperation in the Jewish-Christian dialogues, locally and of course in our chapel seminars on Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Good work. It is a new age and we had better be prepared to live in it.

But if I had a little red flag with me in the Pulpit this President's Day, I would wave it around for all to see. We want to be in communication with other faiths. We should seek to understand the basic ideas and motivations of other major religions. But in the

process we should not let our brains and hearts and souls fall out. Other religions want us to understand them and to be tolerant and kind to them. We should. We don't for the most part, but we should. But I hear our parents and our forefathers singing "Be careful. Don't sacrifice what you are supposed to believe for the sake of friendship or cooperation." I find Christians, clergy and laity alike, backing down to make our faith more inclusive, more palatable to others.

The problem is that if what we believe is true, then we should never compromise the truth. If you compromise yourself and what you believe, even for what sounds like a good cause, you will have nothing left at all. Or nothing worth keeping anyway. I don't find Muslims these days asking what they could/should give up from Islam to please me; or what part of the Koran they should modify in order to make their religion more agreeable to mine. They want me to understand them.

I don't find my Jewish friends and Rabbis asking what they should forsake of the Torah, The Law of God, or what Jewish customs or worship they should modify. Of course not! And I don't want them to. I want them to stand tall in what they have been taught and what they believe; then when we (I) do the same we can talk with all the issues on the table.

It comes down to this: either Christianity is true or it is not. Either Jesus Christ is the God Incarnate, or he is not. If not, then as St. Paul says, we have all been duped, and of all men we are to be most pitied. But if it is true, or at the least, if it is truth for me, and I declare it, then Jewish and Muslim clergy and laity know where I stand, where I will move, but where I will not. Martin Luther said "Here I stand, I can do no other."

But with Christian people these days I often find this casual attitude; "Oh I know the Pope and all believe this or that; I know the Bible makes an exclusive claim for Christ, I know all that, but don't you think it's time for us to grow up and move on and acknowledge that everybody has a faith and in God's eyes they are all on the right road?" Do I think that? "No, I don't." We might appear to be on the same road but the distance which separates us from each

other and from the truth can be immense. It matters to eternity what you and I believe.

I have friends in all faiths who have helped me to see where we are all going and what we are all after. I do not try to evangelize them and I have never, not with my friends, found that they were trying to evangelize me. We laugh and love and cry and pray and share together, without surrendering the core of our spiritual existence. When I say what I believe, they respect me. I do the same in return, whether it is a fellow Christian, or a person of another faith.

David Myers, up at Yale University, wrote a book a year or so ago called The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty: What a book! His thesis is that our search for freedom and opportunity have disappointed us. He says our attachment to material things, not human concerns, has made us miserable. And it will not change until we find our way back to them again.

I hear America singing, but in a cacophony of self aggrandizing tunes. These days, I also hear America singing a song of caution. We have the courage to open an endless war with Iraq. We have the military might to win the battle. But I hear America humming a tune of humility, lest we unleash a racial war across the earth. We need to be strong to carry a big stick; but as dear old Teddy said, we still need "to speak softly." I am not a pacifist. I admire and trust our President and his leaders. I am devoted to our military personnel. But I have been around long enough to see what happens when humility slips away and gives way to pride. I don't know what you hear, but if you are listening, I think you will hear the beautiful hope for peace.

In our text Psalm 29, God wins out over the chaos of the storm and our text in verse 11 reassures us that a signal victory will also come to his people.

It isn't all that long in God's time that we have been around. Let me share a personal story. For example, George Washington was born in 1732. He died in 1799. A certain man, who lived to be 86 years of age, who was born in 1789 and died in 1875, had occasion on a visit to President Washington with his father when he was 10 years old and he shook hands with General Washington. That man had a son who in

turn had a son name John. John grew up to be Chancellor John Bowman of the University of Pittsburgh, who belonged to the church I served as Associate Pastor from 1961 to 1966. One day as I visited him in the hospital, I shook hands with him. He said, "Reverend, you just shook the hand of a man who shook the hand of a man who shook hands with George Washington. Got it? John had shaken hands with his Grandfather many times before his death. Grandpa Bowman shook hands with Washington. So, if you shake hands with me, you are shaking hands with a man who shook the hand of a man who shook hands with his grandfather who had shaken hands with President Washington. That's all it takes to get back to the beginning in a couple of handshakes.

I received a copy of an email this week, a couple copies really. Thank you. Following is an email sent by astronaut Laurel Clark on Friday, the day before the space shuttle disintegrated in the heavens. She wrote: "Hello from above our magnificent planet Earth. The perspective is truly awe-inspiring. This is a terrific mission and we are very busy doing science round the clock. I have seen some incredible sights: lightning spreading over the Pacific, the Aurora Australis lighting up the entire visible horizon with the city glow of Australia below, the crescent moon setting over the limb of the Earth, the vast plains of Africa and the dunes on Cape Horn, rivers breaking through tall mountain passes, the scars of humanity, the continuous line of life extending from North America, through Central America and into South America, a crescent moon setting over the limb of our blue planet. Mount Fuji looks like a small bump from up here, but it does stand out as a very distinct landmark.

"Magically, the very first day we flew over Lake Michigan and I saw Wind Point (Wisconsin) clearly. I have seen my 'friend' Orion several times. I feel blessed to be here representing our country and carrying out the research of scientists around the world. All of the experiments have accomplished most of their goals despite the inevitable hiccups that occur when such a complicated undertaking is undertaken. The food is great and I am feeling very comfortable in this new, totally different environment. It still takes awhile to eat as gravity doesn't help pull food down your esophagus. Thanks

to many of you who have supported me and my adventures throughout the years. This was definitely one to beat all. I hope you could feel the positive energy that beamed to the whole planet as we glided over our shared planet. Love to all, Laurel."

I officiated at the funeral of former astronaut Donn Eisele – ten, twelve years ago. He and his family were in our church in Ft. Lauderdale. They asked me to read the Astronaut's Prayer.

Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of earth
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth
Of sun-split clouds – and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of – wheeled and soared and swung
High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,

I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
My eager craft through footless hall of air.

Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace
Where never lark, or even eagle flew –
And, while with silent lifting mind I've trod
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand and touched the face of God.

They read it again the other day. "Put out my hand and touch the face of God", for now and forevermore. Amen.

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