

WGUMC July 6 "Christ and Country" Part 1
A meditation on Hymn #159 "Lift High the Cross" by Hank Millstein

This hymn has been one of my favorites ever since I encountered it as the opening hymn of the 1982 General Convention of the Episcopal Church. Thrilled at having been elected a delegate to our church's national convention—and thinking that that might be a start to a kind of political career in the national church—I thrilled at the stirring words and melody of the hymn, and it has stirred and moved me ever since.

I have to admit, however, that I missed a possible darker side to this hymn until Rebecca pointed it out to me. It's easy to hear it as a martial hymn, a celebration of a western Christian triumphalism.

And when I looked into its origin, I saw why. The words were written by an English cleric in 1887 for a festival service of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. Now I'm not

against spreading the Gospel; the world needs our Good News more than ever; but it's all too easy to confuse spreading the Good News with promoting our own ideological, cultural, and institutional self-aggrandizement and our triumph over the competition. It's undoubtedly no accident that this hymn was written in the heyday of the British Empire, when Christian missionaries worked hand in hand with colonial authorities and saw their tasks and goals as complementary to the spread of imperial power and Western culture. This is a sensitive point for me right now, because our Muslim sisters and brothers are celebrating their holy month of Ramadan, and one of the practices of that celebration is reading through the entire Qur'an in 30 days. I am joining them in that practice; this is now the second time I've read through the Qur'an, and while I am by no means going to trade in the New Testament for the Muslims scripture, it is more and more apparent to me, not simply from reading the Qur'an but from observing the lives of

Muslims around me among whom I work that God really does reach people through Islam. And I can say the same, on much the same basis, about Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, on the religions of Native Americans, and on and on. Whatever spreading the Gospel of Jesus means, it can't mean dissing these faiths and aiming simply to replace them with our own faith and its institutions. Too often—in fact I'd say for most of its history—the Church has understood mission in precisely those terms—"we" are going to win and all the others are going to lose.

But is this hymn really feeding such triumphalistic aspirations? I think that, whatever may have been on the mind of the original composer and of those who first sang it, a triumphalistic understanding of it is exploded as soon as we consider what it is and who it is that we are invited to lift high. It is Jesus on the Cross, Jesus on an instrument of shameful death. It's Jesus the ultimate loser, in the world's terms. And

that should lead us to think about what Christian mission—and Christian living—is really about. It isn't about winning as the world understands winning. It isn't about becoming powerful or influential on the world's terms. It isn't about getting even fifteen minutes of fame. It may be about losing on the world's terms, to show forth the power of Christ's weakness and humility. Lifting high the Cross and the One who is crucified upon it means giving up our individual and collective egos and allowing the Crucified One to reign from the Cross—which is precisely where He shows the power of His resurrection. Let's look how we can lift high His Cross and His Resurrection in our daily lives.

"Christ and Country" Part 2

A meditation on Psalm 33 and Hymn #437 "This Is My Song" by Rebecca Irelan

I spent July 4th in the Ancient Bristlecone Pine Forest in the White Mountains, east of Bishop, and I tell you that those pine trees put the holiday in a new perspective for me. I was

amazed to touch trees that were already old when Jesus was born and were well on their way when the nation of Israel was formed. As I looked at their twisted trunks and gnarly branches, I realized that some of these trees were here before there were any nations anywhere. Empires rise and fall, nations come and go, but the Bristlecone Pine just grows and grows.

And that got me to thinking about this nation and how it goes. Like the Jews in Ancient Israel, we like to think of ourselves as the Chosen People and this land as the Promise Land. We relate to the Bible's story about a bunch of tribes squabbling with one another, competing against each other, then coming together under one government to worship one God. We claim that story as our story. But for the Jews in the Bible as well as the Pilgrims and other immigrants in America, it has never really been "one nation under God."

And God knows this, has even planned this, because Psalm 33 says, "The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to

nothing; God frustrates the plans of the peoples." [Psalm 33:10] And boy, have our plans been frustrated at times! The people of Ancient Israel believed that the throne of David would last forever, but it didn't. The Davidic dynasty and the kingdom was destroyed by the Assyrians, the Babylonians, and later by the Romans.

Now Christians believe that Jesus revived the throne of David, but Jesus himself says that his kingdom is not an earthly one. He tells Pilate, "My kingdom is not from this world." [John 18:36]

So there I was in this otherworldly place in the Bristlecone Pine Forest, looking at those ancient trees and thinking of these ancient stories and the lessons that they teach us: earthly kingdoms will fall, but God's kingdom stands forever.

That means, for me, that God's kingdom will always take priority over my country. The maker of heaven and earth will get my first pledge of allegiance. The lesson of the Bristlecone

Pine is the same as the lesson of the Bible: "the counsel of the Lord stands forever, the thoughts of God's heart to all generations." [Psalm 33:11]

Now I'm going to go out on a limb here to say that, despite all the failures of the nations, the thought of God's heart is for all of God's people to be blessed. "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord." [Psalm 33:12] But for this nation to be blessed, we have to remember that the Lord is God. That means that We The People are not God and the king (or president) is not God and the great army is not God. We must remember, too, that the war horse (or nuclear weapon or unmanned drone) is a vain hope for victory and that by its great might, we cannot save. [Psalm 33:16-17]

In other words, we have to let God be God if we want to be blessed in this or any country. And that is the conviction captured for me in the third verse of my favorite patriotic hymn: "This Is My Song."

The first two verses were written by a public school teacher by the name of Lloyd Stone, in 1934, in the uneasy peace that followed the Great War. Those verses remind me that every nation has its treasure that is every bit as precious as a Bristlecone Pine. And if every country's skies are not as blue as the sky over the Eastern Sierras, then at least every country has hopes and dreams as true and high as those mountains.

But this third verse was written by Georgia Harkness, the first female theologian to ever teach in a seminary in this country. She wrote these words just as Europe was descending into the Second World War. And this verse puts our patriotism in proper Bristlecone Pine perspective. God is the Lord of all earth's kingdoms, not just ours. And when the kingdom comes, God's will is done, not ours. To this end, we Christians must lift up Christ, not so that others will fear us but so they will see us serving Christ and want to serve God. Though we are separated

by nation, race, class, and a hundred other distinctions, our hearts can be united in him and we can learn to live as one. But first we must give *our hearts* to God, which is one thing that a pine tree *can't* do, but by the grace of God, people *can* do. Let the kingdom come!