

Independence Day

July 4, 2010

St. Stephen's, Spokane

Anna and Richard Heun made their way to Chicago from Germany some time around 1890. They settled in a German-speaking area of the city and Richard, a master lithographer, found work. They had four children: Richard, Rudy, Pauline, and Alma. They were well on their way to settling into a new country when Richard, in his mid 30's, got sick and died, leaving Anna with a large family to support. She did that by taking in ironing and doing housework to earn enough money for them to survive.

Anna was my great-grandmother, (Nana to me) who left Chicago with her daughter Alma (my grandmother) and Alma's husband around the time of the First World War when he found work in the Navy Yard in Bremerton. She lived with them until she died at the age of 93, sharing in the cooking and household chores while both of my grandparents worked.

I remember well researching their journey to the United States when I had to write a paper in junior high school on "my nearest immigrant ancestor." I was fascinated by the challenges they faced as they journeyed across the Atlantic, then to Chicago. I've always wondered who helped and supported them – particularly in those crisis times like the death of my great-grandfather. Who welcomed them? Who assisted them?

I suspect that many of you have immigrant ancestor stories like this one that are part of your family lore. Maybe you've wondered about the missing details, too. What was it like to have the challenges of culture and language and finances as they made their way in a new country? What brought them here? What sustained them, especially in the early years?

I think of my great-grandparents each time I read the lessons for Independence Day. This long holiday weekend has been a chance to celebrate the birth of our nation. To embrace a kind of national pride. To fly the flag, enjoy a picnic, relax with friends. Our religious celebration of Independence Day is a bit more reflective than the hot dogs and fireworks that are part of the holiday tradition. As we hear these lessons from scripture, we have an opportunity to both give thanks for the freedom we enjoy and to ponder what God might be calling us to as a nation – to consider what our vocation is as a nation.

This religious celebration of the Fourth of July has been around a long time, but it has also been controversial. It was first included in the prayer book of 1786 but was opposed by some bishops because so many of the clergy had been loyal to England rather than supporting the American Revolution. It didn't make it into the 1789 prayer book at all. There were local observances that were authorized in some dioceses, but Independence Day didn't show up in a prayer book again until 1928. In 1979 it became a major feast.

And so here we are on July 4, with three readings that say something about our calling as a nation – not as a country that has everything figured out, but a nation that is a work in progress – always called to new challenges and opportunities.

The Deuteronomy reading says something about God and the marginalized – orphans and widows, strangers. All of them deserve justice. In ancient Israel the whole subject of strangers was a complicated one. There were all kinds of ethnic barriers – fears and prohibitions. But at the same time, there was an ethical demand for the Israelites to show love and kindness to strangers, remembering that they were once strangers and aliens when they were captives in Egypt. This calls for empathy and compassion, risky as that might seem.

I think of my great grandparents as strangers and aliens in this country more than 100 years ago. Someone welcomed them. Someone showed them compassion. And more than 100 years later, I am grateful.

Welcoming the stranger is a challenge that has existed through history and continues today. How does a nation offer a kind of practical hospitality that welcomes and honors the marginalized and offers justice? It is a risk, but, according to Deuteronomy, a holy one. I wonder how we ponder this in a time of great angst and controversy about immigration. What is a just and holy response?

In Hebrews, we're reminded of Abraham, one of our great spiritual ancestors whose story we hear in other parts of the Church year. Abraham heard and embraced God's promise and left his home – a familiar place – to go to an unknown place. He took a big risk. Worked without a net. Let go of the security of his home, his friends, his extended family – all those things we build when we put down roots – and then packed up his household and left. To go where? Who knows? This reading, too, might spark memories of our own family members who pulled up stakes and came to this country.

As Abraham and his household journeyed, the author of Hebrews tells us, "They did not keep thinking about the country they had left." They overcame a powerful temptation. Sam Potaro, former college chaplain who was a keynoter at one of our diocesan conventions, reflects on July 4 as he points out the importance of "declaring again our independence from old securities in order to take the bold steps forward into the new frontier God has prepared for us."

We can easily see the parallels in this journey story with the founding of our country and in the many people from many parts of the world whose journeys have led them here. That's part of our history. But this passage also reminds us that as a nation we are still on a journey. New challenges, new opportunities await us. God is constantly calling us into new frontiers. Scary? Possibly. But the consolation is that we are not alone. We are assured of God's presence and guidance as we journey.

Potaro says, "Like our Hebrew forebears, we could return and settle into our past. But God has promised us a new land, a brighter country where all people dwell in love and mutual respect. Our God accompanies us, yet always with the leading step." And that is good news, indeed.

The gospel reading from the Sermon on the Mount, is a challenge as well. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your father in heaven, Jesus says. It is one thing to hear the message of this text as an individual – to try to live in a more forgiving and reconciling way. That in itself is a challenge for most of us.

But to read this as a nation is an even greater challenge. To do everything in our power individually and collectively to live into Jesus' words, knowing that he calls us far beyond the comfort zone of our impulse to strike back and into a more difficult way at least trying to be peacemakers. It doesn't always work, but we are called to give it our best.

My parents always looked to the attack at Pearl Harbor as an experience that would come to mind immediately in response to the challenge of this passage. Maybe our most poignant memory of being challenged by this passage in recent years is the attacks at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001. At that time of national crisis, much was said to try to make sense of what was happening. Nathan Baxter, then dean of the Washington Cathedral and later Bishop of Central Pennsylvania, said this: "**By the grace of God, may we not become the evil we deplore.**" In other words, don't answer violence with violence.

Our Fourth of July weekend is in full swing and our journey as a nation continues. Many, including our family members, have come to this land seeking freedom and justice and many more will come. May our vocation as individuals and as a nation always be open to the call of God, who leads us to offer welcome to the stranger, justice to the marginalized; who travels with us into an unknown future; who calls us to new frontiers and who offers us the promise of peace.

