

Today we join with churches across our nation to honor our veterans, tolling the bell twenty-one times.

This national holiday was originally called Armistice Day to remember the end of World War I, a day of peace.

The name was changed to Veterans Day in 1954 to honor those who had served in World War II and the Korean conflict and all military veterans.

It was at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour on the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the 11<sup>th</sup> month of 1918, the cease-fire with Germany went into effect to end what at the time was called the “War to End All Wars.”

Some scholars believe this psalm was written at such a time in the history of Israel.

It is possible that some invader, relying on horses which Israel did not have, with warriors and armies which seemed invincible, had been defeated and the people of Israel were delivered from defeat.

As verses sixteen and seventeen proclaim, “*A king is not saved by his great army; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength. The war horse is a vain hope for victory, and by its great might it cannot save.*”

And victorious nations begin to claim that 12<sup>th</sup> verse, “*Happy is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people whom God has chosen as his heritage.*”

On paper it sounds so good for us as God’s people in this nation.

As it says in the preamble to the Declaration of Independence, “...endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”; and in the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag, “one nation under God.”

We have it on every coin, maybe you have it on your license plate: “In God We Trust.”

But you see, what the psalmist does, what Peter does, is remind us that even as we put forth a claim on God for us as a nation, God has the original claim on us as God’s people.

That’s the flip side of the coin, God’s claim on us.

Have you ever thought about it this way, “Can God Trust In Us?”

Some say that in our pursuit of happiness we have forgotten God’s name. What one theologian calls ‘practical atheism’.

He says that “having lost a sense of transcendence (that is, a relationship with God) in our common life, we look for meaning in power, achievement, and success.”

The psalmist, even following a great victory for his nation, will not allow us to wrap ourselves in any of those kind of flags and lose that relationship with God.

What this psalm does is to wrap us with the greatness and goodness of God and calls us to know God, to praise God, to worship God as the God sovereign over all: the world, all the nations,  
“*all the inhabitants of the world to stand in awe of him.*”

The psalmist says that it belongs to God to frustrate the plans of nations who set out to make themselves the center of the world and dictate their will for everyone.

And the New Testament is very clear that it’s not so much about nations as a political power or a certain form of government, but power as God’s people.

Look again at what the psalm says.

First of all, there is the matter of our identity: Not as a matter of the nation in which we live, but the fact that wherever we live, we are God's people.

There is, of course, our allegiance as loyal citizens, but we are first called to loyalty to God.

On one hand we have to deal with the political reality of our land, and votes were cast for the ones we think represent our personal view of what is the right thing to do.

On the other hand, our ultimate allegiance is to the One who knows no national boundaries or political preferences. Our God is God of all nations, all people!

Let us never think God favors us politically over other nations. It would be nothing short of utter blasphemy.

But then, we do affirm the fact that religion has been a factor in American life and politics from the beginning.

But forced belief is no belief at all. We need to remember the words of Roger Williams, who established religious freedom in what is now Rhode Island, "I commend that man, whether Jew, or Turk, or Papist, or whoever, that steers no otherwise than his conscience dares."

This is fundamental to our faith as Presbyterians, "The Lord alone is lord of the conscience."

In other words, freedom; as one commentator put it: "As crucial as religion has been and is to the life of the nation, America's unifying force has never been a specific faith, but a commitment to freedom..."

So, as we have celebrated our freedom as citizens of this great country and voted this past week, let us consider our freedom in light of God's word: *We are free, Paul writes to the Galatians, only as we are rooted in service to Jesus Christ.*

We are free only as we are grounded in faith that give order to our lives, in a way of life that loves as Jesus did, transcending any measure we use that separates or denigrates human beings, God's children all.

For even as we have celebrated our responsibility as citizens with the freedom to vote, we cannot neglect the way the dreams and hopes for justice and mercy and humility have not always been open to all our citizens.

We cannot be content when our land is stained by pain and sorrow, people worn out by life's difficulties.

I think of those whose homes are gone, taken away by hurricanes or deadly fires or those who live with an empty seat at the Thanksgiving table, a life taken by the bullets of hate.

It's clear that our time calls for principled people of both parties to use their power for the sake of the powerless rather than simply retaining power.

We need a renewed commitment to candor and compassion, cooperation and truth-telling.

We have to be able to trust that our leaders are facing facts, dealing with reality, and leveling with us. We are too accustomed to and too tolerant of hype and spin, misdirection and hiding the truth.

I know that "they" all do it. All of us, in fact, are capable of muddying the waters for honest conversations about the issues.

But we are also capable of repenting.

Followers of Jesus believe in the liberating power of truth, and one way we can serve faithfully in these troubling times is to renew our own commitment to "speaking the truth in love."

Maybe you read or heard the interview with Jeff Cohen, president of Allegheny General Hospital, who also attends the Tree of Life synagogue, site of that ungodly massacre.

He led the medical team who tended to Robert Bowers after he was shot multiple times by police minutes after he had burst into Tree of Life Congregation Synagogue and opened fire on worshipers armed with an assault rifle and three handguns.

Bowers told officers "I just want to kill Jews," Cohen said that Bowers was still shouting that phrase when he arrived in his emergency room.

"My job isn't to judge him ... my job is to care for him," Cohen said.

Cohen also said he personally took time to meet Bowers, because he was curious.

"Quite honestly, he's just a guy ... He's some mother's son," Cohen said. "And how did he get from that to where he is today? That's going to be a large debate that we have to wrestle with as a society."

We're all aware that these bewildering times call for prayerful and wise discernment. But we need to ask hard questions about justice and mercy.

It's easy, I know, to draw the line in such a way as to put ourselves on the side of the good and others on the side of evil.

Jesus warned us plainly, though, about not making the mistake of pointing out the speck in our brother's eye while having a log in our own.

The fact is that people of goodwill have differing ideas about how to create conditions of 'life and liberty and happiness' for people who are trapped in poverty, caught in unemployment or underemployment, and lack adequate healthcare.

However, followers of Jesus, whether conservative or liberal, must place "the least of these" at the center of our politics and economics.

What we do to the hungry, homeless, sick and imprisoned, we do to Jesus; which gives us a mission to be vigilant in protecting the vulnerable.

Edmund Burke once said, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men (people) to do nothing."

Of course, the questions are raised: "Who's good? What's evil? What must be done?"

There's still more to be done if we are to truly be those people who trust in God.

We need to continue to strive to fulfill those words of our Declaration of Independence, that "all men (people) 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."

But just having these words in a document or having them on a license plate doesn't make them so.

We must live them to make them so.

Over and over again, since the earliest days of the Christian church, the most crucial issue for Jesus' followers is whether we will be first citizens of the empire and of the status quo or citizens of "*a holy nation, God's own people...*"

It's still the most pressing question.

God calls the church to become a unique moral community that displays as best it can God's character and love.

Qualities like moral purity, faithfulness, honesty, kindness, care, generosity, hospitality, humility, justice and peacemaking set Christians apart as 'different': *Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*"

Just as the guns fell silent on this day so many years ago, allowing people to hear the sounds of hope and promise again, God puts his trust in us, to remember that true peace comes not from victory on the battlefield but through justice and abundant life for all people of the world.

I think the words of the Franciscan Benediction say it well:

*May God bless us with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that we may live deep within our hearts.*

*May God bless us with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that we may work for justice, freedom, and peace.*

*May God bless us with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, hunger, and war, so that we may reach out our hands to comfort them and turn their pain into joy.*

*And may God bless us with enough foolishness to believe that we can make a difference in this world, so that we can do what others claim cannot be done, to bring justice and kindness to all our children and the poor.*

You are the ones chosen by God, trusted for the high calling to do God's work and to tell others and to live what God has done for the world in Jesus Christ.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.