

“Keeping the Republic”
July 5, 2026

Joshua 4:1-7
Luke 14:27-32

So, here we are, the fireworks over, the celebrations and the Jazz Festival wrapping up—one day into our nation’s next 250 years. Here we are.

But where is that?

Where have we been—and where are we going?

These are, as Thomas Paine wrote in December of 1776, times that try our souls. We are a nation much more divided than we were when we celebrated our Bicentennial fifty years ago. We look at this nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all are created equal and we find ourselves wondering with Abraham Lincoln whether a nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure.

You remember, of course, the question that Elizabeth Willing Powel asked of Benjamin Franklin at the conclusion of the Constitutional Convention in 1787: “Well, Doctor, what have we got, a republic or a monarchy?”

The good doctor famously replied: “A republic, if you can keep it.”

250 years into this experiment, how do we keep the republic?

I found an unexpected starting place in that somewhat unfamiliar story of the Hebrew people crossing the River Jordan to enter the Promised Land. As I said before reading this lesson, in this story—and in all of the book of Joshua—we find an idealized account of a long and violent process. And, yes, it is but one example of history being written by the victors.

For this account to speak to us and help us today, we need not get bogged down in questions about what happened and what didn’t happen, trying bring 21st century standards for history to a text from the 7th century BC that tells of events some seven hundred years before it was written.

Let us enter that ancient story as we heard it so that it might shape our thinking and imagination in our time.

After being brought out of slavery in Egypt, crossing the Red Sea on dry land, after some 40 years of wilderness wandering, and the death of Moses, the Hebrew people are finally led into a new land. To get there, they cross the Jordan River, which, like the Red Sea, is parted by a mighty act of God.

Joshua is then told to select twelve men, each of whom would take one stone from the dry riverbed. These stones would be a sign, pointing to what God had done. They were to be a lasting memorial seen through the ages. So, Joshua tells the people: “When your children ask in time to come, ‘What do those stones mean to you?’ then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off in front of the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it crossed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off.”

The story continues, saying Joshua set up those stones and “they are there to this day.”

Again, we don't know what happened to those stones.

But we can imagine.

We can imagine the children of future generations seeing them and being told of God's faithful care for the Hebrew people, bringing them safely into a new land, a land flowing with milk and honey, at land that would be theirs.

We can imagine the children of future generations seeing these stones and being told, as chapter four concludes: "how strong is the hand of the Lord; and thus you will always stand in awe of the Lord your God."

The stones were a memorial—not simply a reminder. The stones would evoke love and devotion as the people reflected on their past.

But we can imagine something else as well, can't we? We can imagine in future generations the children of the conquered people would also see these stones. We can imagine them seeing the stones and remembering the violence and blood and death of conquest, the collapse of the walls of Jericho, the conquest of the south and the north, the redistribution of land.

We can imagine that one's history influenced how one looked at those stones.

This weekend, this year, we mark and celebrate the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the beginning of our nation. We ask: "What does this Declaration mean to you?" And we realize that its meanings are myriad.

For many, it evokes love and devotion as we reflect on our past, calling people to a new birth of freedom.

Certainly, this call to independence, with its bold assertion that all people are created equal and endowed their Creator with certain unalienable rights including life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is a great, world-changing vision.

The subjects of King George III accused him of, among other things, "obstructing the Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners; refusing to pass other [laws] to encourage their migrations hither....[making] Judges dependent on his Will alone...[sending] swarms of Officers to harrass our people...[and keeping] among us, in times of peace, Standing Armies."

To all of this, and more, they rightly said "No Kings." And we in this nation that came forth from that Declaration are right to celebrate that document and this nation.

At the same time, we remember those over the centuries who have read these words and found less reason to celebrate.

Thomas Jefferson's document disparaged the indigenous people of this land. And the coming century would bring a full-on assault on them.

Even before Jefferson put ink to parchment, in March of 1776, Abigail Adams wrote to John, imagining a forthcoming document and encouraging him to: "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." She warned: "Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could..."

and concluded: “That your Sex are Naturally Tyrannical is a Truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute.”

And in the draft list of the causes which impelled the Continental Congress to separate from Great Britain, Jefferson included the charge that the King was abetting the slave trade in the colonies. Those words didn’t make it into the Declaration. Jefferson would later blame the delegates from South Carolina and Georgia for the removal of that complaint against the King. But he did not blame them alone. He also faulted the northern delegates who represented merchants who at that time were themselves involved in the Transatlantic slave trade.

In the ensuing decades, others looked at the Declaration and wondered what it meant as well.

Seventy-six years later Frederick Douglass famously asked: “What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim.”

The Declaration was like a heap of stones, reminding him of oppression and slavery.

Many have looked at the Declaration of Independence and, asking what it meant, answered that the nation it birthed showed no self-evident equality, no right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for the indigenous, for the enslaved, for women, for the poor. It was, as Martin Luther King, Jr. said, a promissory note on which America had defaulted.

The author and signers of the Declaration were flawed human beings, men of their times. As we see them from our time, with our own flawed perspectives, their lives were filled with troubling inconsistencies, giving birth to a troubled, struggling nation. This, too, is the tragic meaning of this document.

And yet, out of their failings, those who signed this flawed document pledged in support of that Declaration their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor. They counted the cost, which was death, their own deaths, if they and this document failed.

And here’s the thing: the document hasn’t failed. And it still calls us to the cause of human equality and liberty that it proclaimed.

Nothing in the Declaration of Independence is legally binding. Yet, it provides something as important as the rule of law. Even with its fundamental sins of omission, it provides the vision for us as a nation. It gives us an identity as an American people—native born and immigrant—to guide us in the way we might go. The vision of self-evident truths, of rights held by all people continually raises our sight beyond what is so that we can constantly move toward what might be.

Yes, limited vision meant that many of people in this land perished without knowing the freedom that was declared.

But in increasing numbers over time—enough people were able to see what *was* self-evident. Enough people caught the vision of the equality of all people that those words have continued to prod and challenge, continued to inspire and encourage us in our evolving 250-year struggle for freedom and equality.

We fought a Civil War, we marched for women's suffrage, we faced jail and injustice and violence and murder, we debated and voted and petitioned and protested out of the faith that is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

We keep coming back to the life-giving guidance of the Declaration of Independence and its self-evident truths, that Abraham Lincoln called "a rebuke and a stumbling-block to tyranny and oppression."

Because of this, we can celebrate the slow but certain spread of freedom in our nation and the people and the sacrifices that have made this possible. We can celebrate this nation.

For we are a nation, as Lyndon Johnson said, surprisingly paraphrasing Bob Dylan, we are nation "busy being born, not busy dying."

There are—and there will always be—birth pains.

Yet even in the pain and the toil, and in the particular anxiety of these days, let us celebrate the slow but certain spread of freedom in our nation and the people and the sacrifices that have made this possible. Let us celebrate and call our own state to renew its long history of supporting the basic rights of people, from outlawing slavery while we were still a territory back in 1839, to our welcoming of refugees in the 1970's and '80's, to our own Supreme Court's decision that allowed full marriage equality for all people years before that right was affirmed for all people in our nation.

Let us keep reading the Declaration of Independence and asking "What does this mean?" It will guide in our continuing quest for equality and liberty.

Let us celebrate and give thanks for the toil and blood and treasure that allowed this nation to take our first steps to freedom.

Let us celebrate and give thanks for the toil and blood and treasure that secured that freedom for all people.

And from these days of celebration and thanksgiving, let us renew our own commitments and efforts to keeping this republic, so that this imperfect nation with our flawed leaders and flawed citizens might continue to move forward in freedom.