

AMERICA UNDER GOD
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Sunday in Ordinary Time
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Listen to this and see if you can tell what's missing.

I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the republic for which it stands, one nation, indivisible with liberty and justice for all.

What's missing?

That's right. "Under God" is missing.

As you may know, those two words were added in 1954. They were not in the original version.

The original pledge was written in 1892 by Francis Bellamy, a Baptist minister. And here's something Glenn Beck and members of the Tea Party might not know: Bellamy was a *socialist*. Oh my! Will they ever recite it again?!

In the 1950s, as the cold war between the so-called Free West and the Communist East heated up, a movement arose to add "under God" to the pledge. What a Baptist minister started a Presbyterian minister would finish.

On February 7, 1954, while President Eisenhower sat in "Abraham Lincoln's pew" at New York Ave. Presbyterian Church, the church's pastor, George Docherty, delivered a sermon based on the Gettysburg Address entitled "A New Birth of Freedom." Docherty cited Lincoln's words "under God" as words that set the United States apart from all other nations.

Docherty said our nation's might was not in military arms but in its spirit. However, the sentiments of the Pledge of Allegiance, he noted, could be those of any nation including the Soviet Union. "There is something missing in the pledge, and what's missing is the characteristic and definitive factor in the American way of life. To omit the words 'under God' in the pledge of allegiance is to omit the definitive character of the American way of life."

Only America was "under God."

I don't know but I'm guessing that the citizens of England, France, Italy, Germany, Brazil, Mexico, Canada, Ethiopia, and India—to name just a few—might be surprised to learn their nations were not "under God." But then Docherty was a preacher and preachers, don't you know, are fond of hyperbole. In fact, I may be the one and only preacher who absolutely positively never ever uses hyperbole to make a point.

On February 8, 1954, a bill to add "under God" to the pledge was introduced in Congress. Eisenhower signed it into law on Flag Day, June 14, 1954. It's been controversial ever since in large part because of the First Amendment, which prohibits Congress from "establishing" any religion.

I can see why people would object but in one sense it's really not that big a deal. After all the 9th circuit court of appeals in California ruled this past March that "under God" could stay in the pledge in part because "God" was merely an "ornamental" word, which is to say, it's nothing but a sound.

In one sense America—like all nations—is "under God" the way all nations are under gravity. That's hardly news or a distinctive claim. America can no more

defy or escape natural laws than it can defy or escape moral laws, as Thomas Jefferson realized long ago.

God who gave us life gave us liberty. Can the liberties of a nation be secure when we have removed a conviction that these liberties are the gift of God? Those words are inscribed on the Jefferson Monument. Then comes this next line: I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, and his justice will not sleep forever.

What about his country made Jefferson tremble?

There's a clue in the next two lines. *Commerce between master and slave is despotism. Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate than that these people are to be free.*

Even though Jefferson himself was a big time slave owner he was wise enough and humble enough to know that slavery was a grave injustice and that his beloved country would pay a price for it. It did and still does. We reap what we sow. That's the moral law. Sow violence; reap violence.

And what price will our beloved country pay for its imperialistic expansion at the expense of vulnerable peoples and nations? What price will America pay for its more than 700 military bases in more than 150 countries? America may not meet the literal definition of "empire," but what other country has military bases on every single continent. Imagine how we'd feel if China built an air force base in Iowa. Would we feel secure? Would we feel resentful?

What price will America pay for its continuing imperialistic ventures? And what price will America pay for its support of undemocratic rulers who repress their people with our guns and tanks in exchange for cheap oil? And what price will America pay for favoring the rich and powerful in this land at the expense of the poor and dispossessed?

I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just.

By his own admission Jefferson wasn't a Christian. But he had high respect—even fear—for the moral law as portrayed in the Judeo Christian tradition of wisdom. No nation, not even his own, could claim exemption. He knew that and said so.

Jefferson didn't like everything he read in the Bible. In fact he created his own Bible by taking scissors and cutting out all the unsavory passages, which left him with a Bible of about 50 pages, mostly the ethical teachings of Jesus. Jefferson didn't like everything in the Bible but he knew it inside and out and I have a feeling he knew the Old Testament book of Amos.

Amos was a patriot and a prophet who felt compelled to deliver a message to the ruling elite of Israel 700 years before Jesus was born. The nation of Israel thought itself special, exceptional, and chosen not unlike the modern state of Israel. Ancient Israel thought itself "under God" like no other nation.

In Amos' day many in Israel had grown rich at the expense of the poor. The economic infrastructure, rules, and regulations had been rigged for a long time. And then along came Amos to deliver a message from God to the smug, wealthy, and pious elite of Israel—to those who had been "born on third base but thought they'd hit a triple."

Here's Amos 8:1-12 with a few of my own comments and embellishments woven in.

This is what the Lord GOD showed me: a basket of summer fruit.

"Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A basket of ripened summer fruit." Then the LORD said to me, "The *end* [which in Hebrew sounds like the word for *ripen fruit* about to go rotten] has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass them by, which is to say, I will no longer spare them as I spared them in Egypt when I *passed over* their houses and slew the firstborn children of the Egyptians.

The songs of the temple shall become wailings in that day," says the Lord GOD; "the dead bodies shall be many, cast out in every place. Hush. Be silent!"

Now hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying, "When will the new moon and the Sabbath be over so that we may sell grain?" Or, as we might say: when will market restraints be removed so we can make a killing. "We will make the *ephah* (measures) small and the *shekel* (price) high. We will practice deceit with false balances, weights, measures and information."

"We will buy the poor for silver and the needy for a mere pair of sandals. We will even sell the droppings or gleanings of wheat that were intended for the poor of the land," which is to say, the few goods and services the poor once could expect will be taken from them and sold. Everything will have a price tag.

The LORD has sworn: "Surely I will never forget any of their deeds. I will turn your feasts into mourning, and all your songs into lamentation.

"The time is surely coming, says the Lord GOD, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD.

They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the LORD, but they shall not find it."

That's a pretty bleak prognosis. But remember: Amos was a preacher of sorts and so he might have been guilty of hyperbole to make his point: *no nation, no matter how pious the rhetoric, gets a free pass.*

As you can see, and as Thomas Jefferson certainly saw, it's a fearsome thing to be under that kind of God. But, as it turns out, there's more to God than justice. And that's a good thing. Otherwise we'd all be doom.

I'm not sure what anyone means by "God" in "one nation under God." It could mean all sorts of things. But it does seem presumptuous and something Christians might refrain from saying lest we take God's name in vain.

There are many kinds of gods including the god of War, Empire and Money. That is not the God our Lord Jesus Christ revealed and manifested.

The God that Jesus invites us to serve with all our heart, mind and strength is a God of love and compassion, a God who suffers with the crucified victims of this world, a God who offers grace upon grace that we might repent and amend our personal and national ways in order to be more loving, merciful and just to each other. This is not a God so much to "believe in" as it is a way of life to be lived. God not as a noun, but a verb—doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with each other.

If that's the kind of God America pledges to live under than I for one can feel a whole lot more hopeful. After all, only one thing is needful. And that is love. Be still and let the God of love fill your hearts, open your eyes and strengthen your hands and feet.