

## **The Celebration of Yahweh's Kingship: How We Honor the Fourth of July**

By **Debbie Gish**

**Debbie Gish is a Kingdom Now member  
and a founding member of Church of the Sojourners,  
an intentional Christian church community in San Francisco.  
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We have an odd tradition at Church of the Sojourners: The Celebration of Yahweh's Kingship. It started about ten years ago at the inspiration of one of our members and is worth some explanation.

After spending most of the 1980s learning about the many sad and shameful things the United States had done in and to other countries over the years, I had become thoroughly disillusioned with my country. So when the idea was proposed of celebrating Yahweh's Kingship instead of America's independence, I was glad. I was ready to make a statement "against" the evils of my country. But this year, especially in the wake of September 11<sup>th</sup> and the unfaceable sorrow and tragedy enveloping our world, I am longing desperately for something to be "for." Something worth living and dying "for."

Both Advent and Lent are times of longing and waiting, one for the birth of the Messiah and one for the Risen Lord. Since Sept 11<sup>th</sup>, I feel like I have been in a Lenten longing, a longing and waiting for the Coming Kingdom of God. Hallmark and America's market economy have worked very hard to make Christmas and Easter their holidays. Success is not yet theirs, but their progress is impressive. We at Church of the Sojourners have decided to claim 4<sup>th</sup> of July as our new holiday. We have made it a holiday of celebration and of testimony. In this celebration we gather together to testify to the fact that our Lord reigns as King.

On July 4<sup>th</sup> we acknowledge our longing and celebrate our citizenship. We are citizens of a country without national borders, without language requirements, without ethnic distinction, without a human army to defend it. We are neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. We are not citizens in a democracy; we are citizens of a theocracy. We have a king, the triune God, and we are His subjects. We are fellow heirs and citizens of the Kingdom of God.

This is not a kingdom whose monarch establishes his reign by conquering weaker peoples and imposing his lordship. We have a king who created us from scratch in beauty and wonder and walked among us in the garden. This is a king who in the face of national rebellion by His people, walked in love to the execution chamber on their behalf.

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This is a king who welcomes new subjects with open arms, arms stretching out wide on the cross of love. His kingdom is celestial and terrestrial. It is both invisible and clearly visible. Jesus, our Lord and King. The Church, His subjects and citizens.

But where's the rub? Why choose the 4<sup>th</sup> of July to have this celebration?

Because in this kingdom, we are not permitted dual citizenship. By accepting the invitation to nationalize into the kingdom of God, we are renouncing all other loyalties. By choosing this day to celebrate Yahweh's kingship, we are symbolically and concretely declaring our ultimate allegiance. It may appear to be a statement "against" the United States, but in fact it is a statement "for" the Kingdom of God.

This may be deeply offensive to many, but for some the idea of not pledging our allegiance to the United States is not a difficult call. Nationalism or patriotism may not be the idol we are tempted to bow to, although it has become clear this year that it is a significant idol in the American church. However, this does not mean that we as a Church or we as individuals are free from competing allegiances. Options abound. We are not automatically protected from the lure of competing loyalties. Questioning where our allegiance lies requires us to examine ourselves honestly.

It's a question of how our time is spent. It's a question of where our thoughts are directed. It's a question of where our hearts are moving. To a deaf person who is all eyes observing our actions, where would he say our allegiances lie? To a mind reader listening in on our internal monologue, where would she say our thoughts pay homage? To our King and Lord who walks beside us, where would He say your heart finds its home? This is not a pass/fail test, but questions to help us determine which direction the river of the heart is flowing. The direction and strength of the wind may make it seem like the water is flowing one way, but that may just be a surface illusion. Today's passing distraction or the pressure to conform (whether to good things or bad), may make us float temporarily in one direction or another. The real question is, what is happening below the surface of the water? May God help us remain steadfast in His course.

We at Church of the Sojourners are seeking to move the center of our life together towards prayer and hospitality. Prayer as single-minded worship and hospitality as open-handed faith.

Worship: Adoration, thanksgiving, prayer. Worship is all these things, but in thinking about the 4<sup>th</sup> of July and the Celebration of Yahweh's Kingship, I realized that worship can also be either a declaration of allegiance or an act of treason.

Why was Jesus crucified? For healing? For feeding the masses? For being an inspirational speaker? No, He claimed to be the King of the Jews. He was perceived as a threat by both the Jewish and the Roman authorities. Although He was not a threat in the same way they believed Him to be, He was a threat nonetheless. They were right to

notice that He was recruiting for the God movement. They were right that allegiances were switching. To follow Jesus in His day was a very dangerous political act. It was clear who they were serving, and it was not Caesar. That is what made it an act of treason. By bowing towards our new Lord and King, we commit treason in the eyes of the principalities and powers.

Bowing is a very foreign concept for us. I can hardly do so in the privacy of my room. Muslims bowing in public and together towards Mecca is a mind-boggling phenomenon. It is a nearly impossible concept to grasp as post-modern westerners. However, recovering the reverence, the awe, the recognition of God as King that bowing symbolizes is something we must long to understand. Part of what is at the heart of worship is found there. As Jesus was transfigured before His disciples, God made it clear that Jesus is the only one we are to bow to.

Likewise, worship by the gathered people of God is a corporate and public statement of our allegiance to Christ our King. By doing so on July 4<sup>th</sup>, it is a small but hopefully significant statement that I am a citizen of one country, God's country. And I don't mean America!

**Hospitality:** In a wild and wonderful way, hospitality is also a loyal act of proud citizenship in Christ's kingdom. Through hospitality we are bearing witness to the nature of our sovereign King who welcomes, not excludes, the stranger and foreigner. When He throws a feast, He invites those on the highways and byways. When He forms a people, He tells them to be a blessing to the nations. This kingdom has the aroma of inclusion, as Jon Stock writes. There are no armed border patrolmen. There are no FBI agents looking for traitors. There are no fighter pilots protecting our freedom in Christ. We will not be asked to take up arms in her defense. This kingdom needs no defending. The battle has been won in sacrifice. We may be asked to give up our lives. Rather, we have been asked to give up our lives. We are free to give freely because we are free to die. In Christ, death no longer has a power over us, so we are free to love our way, not force our way. We are free to keep the door ajar in expectant hospitality and welcome those that God brings our way.

We have a long way to go to become truly worshipful and hospitable citizens of this kingdom. But may we proudly pledge our allegiance to this incomparable King and be grateful to be accepted into His citizenry, with all our cowardice and weakness. All other loyalty options pale before this one. It is not a very difficult choice to make, although it will cost us our lives in a thousand little and big ways.

May we as the Body of Christ live and die in celebration of Yahweh's kingship. May we participate as wholehearted, unfettered, fully-equipped citizens in His kingdom. May we bow before Him this July 4<sup>th</sup> and every day in allegiance-defining worship.