

Sixth Sunday of Easter, Sunday, May 1, 2016, Year C

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: 2 Chronicles 7:14

"An Appeal To Heaven"

How often have you heard this Bible verse? *"If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land."* This verse from 2 Chronicles 7:14 is quite often used and prayed to seek revival; to seek new life when coming in to a community, a church or a country. I find it interesting that hardly anyone looks at the following verse – verse 15: *"Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayers offered in this place."* It is clear to me that when we seek God, turning away from sinful ways – and truly seek Him – not only will He keep His promise to forgive our sin and heal our country – but He will keep on listening, watching and caring for those who turn to Him. I believe there is no better time to seek God's grace, mercy and forgiveness for our country than right now – and we need to take the opportunity to gather as a community this Thursday, May 5, our National Day of Prayer. True – every day should be our national day of prayer – but we need to take the opportunity to gather in His Name and make an appeal to heaven on behalf of our country. Jesus said *"when two or three are gathered together in My Name, there I am in the midst of them."* (Matthew 18:20)

"An appeal to heaven" is a term that you will be hearing more and more about – and even seeing it on a flag – such as this. It is older than our country. This flag is significant because copies of it have flown over our nation at its birthing. It was not the stars and stripes, but it is a flag commissioned by our first president, George Washington, before the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

Before the Revolutionary War actually began, General Washington formed and financed America's first Navy and commissioned them to sail with this flag flying overhead on each ship. During the American Revolution, an evergreen tree on a white standard could be seen flying in Massachusetts and before too long, it flew throughout all thirteen colonies.

The words "An Appeal to Heaven" became the declared statement over the nation as this flag flew throughout battlefields and military campsites. This flag led the American Revolution's grossly outnumbered and under-resourced troops into battle repeatedly as they fought and won the war for America's freedom. This flag's history is extensive and quite profound!

At a recent meeting of our Coffee County Ministerial Association, John Butler, the associate pastor of First Baptist Church, introduced this flag to all of us, (I may have seen it before but I had no idea of its significance) and its connection with the upcoming National Day of Prayer, this Thursday, May Fifth. I really felt the presence of the Holy Spirit in connection with this flag upon hearing its meaning. Though I was seeing this flag for the first time, I sensed its weighty significance – and I knew that I needed to tell you about it.

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The flag which features a pine tree flag with the motto "An Appeal to Heaven," was originally used by a squadron of six cruisers commissioned under General George Washington's authority as commander in chief of the Continental Army in October 1775. It was also used by the state of Massachusetts navy vessels, and even was used by privateers who were sailing from the colony of Massachusetts.

The design of the flag came from General Washington's secretary, Colonel Joseph Reed. In a letter dated October 20, 1775 Colonel Reed suggested a "flag with a white background and a tree in the middle, the motto "AN APPEAL TO HEAVEN" be used for the ships Washington commissioned. The Massachusetts General Court established the flag of their state navy on July 26, 1776 with a resolution that stated in part, "that the Colors be a white Flag, with a green Pine Tree, and an Inscription, "An Appeal to Heaven."

The pine tree had been for a long time a New England symbol which was centered on the Flag of New England flown by colonial merchant ships dating as far back as 1686. Leading up to the Revolutionary War it became a symbol of Colonial fury and resistance. Why?

The white pine found in New England, specifically the eastern white pine with heights of over 150 feet, was used mostly for constructing masts in shipbuilding. Twenty years after arrival in the new world, the Pilgrims harvested and exported these pines as far as Madagascar. Due to lack of supply of suitable lumber on the island of Great Britain, England reserved all 24 inch diameter trees by a Surveyor of the King's Woods who would in turn appoint deputies to survey and place the broad arrow symbol on the tree from three hatchet marks which meant they no longer belonged to the property owner – but were the property of the King. Colonists were forced to leave these marked trees, and then had to purchase a royal license to harvest their own trees not marked with the broad arrow. We often think of the old saying "taxation without representation" right? And of course the Boston Tea Party – well it got to where the colonists were driven to ignore this mandate from the king which claimed their own trees and severely stole their profits – leading to the Pine Tree Riot in 1772, where a New Hampshire mill owner leading other mill owners and townsmen assaulted the Sheriff and his Deputy sent to arrest him by giving him one lash with a tree switch for every tree which the mill owners were fined, cutting the ears, manes, and tails off their horses, and forced them out of town through a jeering crowd. This was one of the first acts of forceful protest against British policies. We often don't hear about this – but we hear about Lexington and Concord and the well-known Boston Tea Party. This was three years before open warfare began at the Battles of Lexington and Concord.

With the pine tree's significance to the Colonists and since the flag was to fly over Colonial warships, the pine gave them an suitable and biting symbol flying on the top of the very structure the British had sought to harvest the white pine for.

The phrase is "*An Appeal to Heaven*" was a call for revolution used by British philosopher John Locke in two of his writings which contested the theory of the divine right of kings. There is a

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lot of history coming at you this morning but we need to understand this - and how this symbol has been used since before the beginning of our nation. Locke's works were well-known and often quoted by colonial leaders, being the most quoted authority on government in the 16 years prior to American independence. Thomas Jefferson was even accused of borrowing from Locke in certain sections of the Declaration of Independence. Even Patrick Henry used the phrase "*An Appeal to Heaven*" in his famous Liberty or Death speech, and it was used again by the Second Continental Congress in the Declaration of Independence.

The phrase symbolizes the need to seek divine intervention and blessing when all else seems to fail. Our young people today reminded us that when we are in need, we can call on God! We as Christians recognize prayer is a part of our daily lives – if not constantly in conversation with the Lord – recognizing Him as our source of peace, grace, and blessing.

In today's Holy Gospel, Jesus confers a special blessing on His followers: "*If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. He who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me. "All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you."* Jesus gives us His peace – which passes all understanding – and reminds us that we belong to His family and as believers He has made His home in us – where we can speak to Him and make our own appeal to heaven, through faith in Him.

He stands with us, through our faith in Him, knowing that the promises of a new heaven and a new earth that He showed us in today's reading from Revelation are true, just as are His words from Joel: "*I am the LORD your God, and that there is no other; never again will my people be shamed.*" (Joel 2:27)

Jesus implores us to bring our worries to God, who cares for His people; we are to bring the worries and troubles of our family, our friends, our community and our nation making an appeal to heaven: "*But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.*" (Matthew 6:33-34)

Once again, I invite you to join me this Thursday, May 5th – the breakfast is from 7 to 8 AM at First Baptist, and then from noon to 1 PM at the Coffee County Courthouse in the first floor Jury Room, as we gather as a community to indeed seek God's love, blessing and mercy on us, our community, on our church and our nation. The details of our National Day of Prayer events are in your bulletin. To God be the Praise and the Glory – Forever and Ever! Amen.

AN APPEAL TO HEAVEN

