

## The Possibility of America: 250 Years and Counting

Sunday, April 19, 2026  
Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, preaching  
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

### MUSIC

*Hymns:* This Land Is Your Land (Woody Guthrie, 1940), #159 This Is My Song (O God of all the Nations), #121 We'll Build a Land. *Special Music:* Everything Is Possible (choral, L. Morris), All of Us Need All of Us to Make It (choral, Dodd & Soto), Shenandoah (piano, American folk tune, arr. J. Althouse).

### READINGS

*The first reading is the Preamble to the Declaration of Independence of the United States. I will read it without changing any of the original words.*

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation." We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men 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. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

*The next reading is part of the poem "Let America Be America Again," written in 1935, during the Great Depression, by the African American poet Langston Hughes.*

Let America be America again.  
Let it be the dream it used to be.  
Let it be the pioneer on the plain  
Seeking a home where he himself is free.

(America never was America to me.)

Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed—  
Let it be that great strong land of love  
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme  
That any man be crushed by one above.

(It never was America to me.)

O, let my land be a land where Liberty  
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,  
But opportunity is real, and life is free,  
Equality is in the air we breathe.

(There's never been equality for me,  
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")

O, yes,  
I say it plain,  
America never was America to me,  
And yet I swear this oath—  
America will be!

## SERMON

The United States will celebrate the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its independence on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. But why wait till July? Today is also a holiday. In eight states, mostly in New England, April 19 is called Patriots' Day [Patriot's Day in Maine!]. It commemorates the first battle of the Revolution. In April of 1775, the Redcoats, or British Army, marched on Lexington and Concord and two other villages beyond the City of Boston. They were going there to seize weapons and ammunition from rebel militias. Warned by Paul Revere on his nighttime ride, the rebels were able to fight the British off. Indeed, they chased them back to Boston and kept them under siege for a year.

Today, the grass of the town common or green in each of those villages is lush and well kept; by one of them the river flows in peace. Two Unitarian Universalist congregations face those central greens, and they have been there since before 1775. Today, on this Patriots' Day afternoon, volunteers in those congregations are probably setting out punch and cookies for the commemoration and not hiding from the Redcoats.

So much turmoil had led up to that battle. For more than 60 years most of settlers of America saw themselves as loyal British colonists. In the 13 colonies, white men could elect local assemblies, which were supported by their taxes. The big decisions, however, were made by King George III in London and were carried out by the royal governor in each colony. The King rejected laws made in colonies if he disagreed with them. Sometimes he dissolved their legislatures. His army quartered soldiers in family homes without permission. The King had some Americans arrested and shipped to England to stand trial without a jury.

After King George's treasury had been depleted by the Seven Years' War [which Britain had won], his Parliament imposed a series of taxes. The most outrageous for the colonists was the Stamp Act of 1765, which required a tax to be paid on all printed materials and paper products, even playing cards and dice. Protests and riots broke out among the colonists. They shouted *No Taxation without Representation*. They called for a boycott of British and Irish imports. In response, British troops began an occupation of Boston, starting in 1768. It didn't end until 1776, after the colonial rebels had laid siege to the city for a year. The recent PBS television series produced by Ken Burns about the American Revolution calls it our country's first civil war. Friends and families were divided over it. Rebels conducted surveillance of their neighbors for suspected loyalty to the King. They persecuted royal employees and other loyalists by tarring and feathering, a disgusting form of public torture.<sup>1</sup> Across the Atlantic Ocean, the British debated whether to reconcile with the colonists. There were divided votes about it in Parliament. King George was firm, however. He felt the rebels didn't appreciate how prosperous their colonies had made their lives.<sup>2</sup>

Following a string of Britain's abuses, and especially after the war began, some town and city councils adopted their own versions of a Declaration of Independence from England. But the greatest fuel for a break with England came from Tom Paine. In early 1776, he wrote a pamphlet entitled *Common Sense*. Paine's essay was read by as many as half of the colonists--read by them or read to them.<sup>3</sup> He listed several objections to King George, similar to the list of grievances that the Declaration would include in July, six months later. Paine argued that until our colonies declared independence from England, we could not relate as a nation to other countries. We would always be English subjects in open revolt, and not a country. Near the end

of his essay, Paine wrote a sentence which soars with idealism. He said: “We have it in our power to begin the world over again.”

Five men made up the drafting committee for a Declaration, with Thomas Jefferson as the lead author. Meeting in Philadelphia as the Continental Congress, representatives of the colonies debated the draft, revised it, and approved it. And they signed it, risking execution for treason. Then the Declaration was circulated around the colonies to motivate more people to join the fight. At City Hall Park in New York, for example, General George Washington had it read aloud to his weary troops, some of them wearing uniforms, but others in their own clothing, some with rifles, others only with pitchforks. Now fired up again, they pulled down an enormous metal statue of King George on a horse. They hacked the sculpture apart and sent the metal to be melted down for musket balls.

Two Unitarians signed the Declaration They were Thomas Jefferson of Virginia, who held many slaves, and John Adams of Massachusetts, who was morally opposed to slavery. Of all the 56 white men who signed the Declaration of Independence, 41 were slaveholders. There had been words against slavery in some drafts, but the Continental Congress left it out of the final version for the sake of unity between colonies of the north and south. This compromise remains a tragic feature of our founding.

Of course there are many ugly aspects of our history, as well as moments of glory. Being patriotic—loving your country—does not keep you from grieving the tragic aspects of your history or criticizing its current flaws. Nationalism, on the other hand, is an ideology of the superiority of one’s country over all others. As we can see from the current federal administration, this ideology can be hostile and violent. To me, patriotism is like being part of a family. For good or ill, you can’t choose your family’s history. And you can’t change your family members’ actions or attitudes. But if you’re fortunate, you can find reasons to love your family. In this vein, patriotism is a love that includes both pride and heartbreak.

The resilient patriotism of Langston Hughes is astounding when we consider that wrote his poem “Let America Be America Again” in 1935, when African Americans lived under the burden of legal segregation enforced by mob violence. Also in 1935, people suffered from economic ruin in the Great Depression. Langston Hughes both named our country’s flaws, and he envisioned the possibilities that remained for this country. Hughes wrote:

O, yes,  
I say it plain,  
America never was America to me,  
And yet I swear this oath—  
America will be!

Here are some of my own sources of grief as a patriotic American. I grieve the lives lost and misery endured by indigenous nations and tribes since early colonial days due to armed massacres, deadly epidemics, broken U.S. treaties, brutal relocations, and forced assimilation.

I grieve the cruelty of chattel slavery which began in colonial times with kidnappings in Africa. Legal enslavement of Black adults and children persisted from generation to generation in this country until 1865. This was followed by a century of legal segregation and oppression. I grieve the ongoing legacy of systemic racism which burdens and endangers countless Americans of color in our own time.

And of course I grieve what is happening under the current presidential administration. By numerous actions, this regime violates our Constitution, the rule of law, and basic human decency. I grieve the dismantling of so much of what I love about this country.

The current national crisis is a good reason to name some things that we do love about the United States. Here are several of mine.

I'm grateful that every citizen has the right to vote, even though in California elections it's tiring to wade through dozens of Ballot Propositions. I'm grateful for candidates and office holders who show moral courage, especially in times of crisis. I love the freedom of the press and our journalists who are dedicated to finding out the truth and holding officials to account. I give thanks for to the freedom of religion and this nation's religious variety.

I love the diversity which immigration brings to my country. I cherish getting to know so many people who have come here for new opportunities, a new start, or just for survival. They bring their talents, labors, languages, cuisines, and cultures. What the poet Walt Whitman wrote about America is even more true today than it was in 1855: "Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations."

I treasure this country's literature and its architecture. I enjoy its contributions to the world of music, like African American spirituals, Gospel music, jazz, blues, rock and roll, and the American Song Book, including Broadway. I'm in awe of the geographic sweep of this country, with so many landscapes to behold. I'm proud of our national parks, state parks, and historic sites in every city and small town. I'm grateful for the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act of the 1970s. I love the Postal Service. I give thanks for the Space Program and the Medicare Program, only one of which I'm qualified for.

To be sure, other countries have expanded the embrace of equality and freedom to include Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender people. This includes countries in Europe, a few in Asia, plus Mexico and Canada. Yet I am proud that it was courageous members of *this* nation who launched the global movement for equal protection under the law.

I believe that loving your country means caring about the people who reside in it. It means respecting our diversity of individual differences, working for the common good, and providing enough opportunities to enable every person to survive and flourish. Finally, I value the possibility of what more this country can become.

This possibility was embedded in the Declaration, even though its drafters couldn't imagine it. American history professor Constantin Dierks points out that the phrase "All men are created equal" had a very narrow meaning for its authors. That is, after monarchies and aristocracies had ruled human beings for centuries, our founders rejected rule by kings. They asserted that a nation could flourish when governed by the consent of the people. This was a radical assertion. After all, it created a republic. For the founders, however, its purpose was narrow.

Yet in the centuries that followed, other Americans have declared that our founding document held even greater possibilities.

Professor Dierks puts it this way: “Is the word *equality* going to be a small word or a big word? Is the word *freedom* a small word or a big word?” It is up to the people to enlarge the meaning of these sacred words.<sup>4</sup>

In generation after generation, lovers of justice and liberty have revealed new power in these words.

Here’s an example. The first convention for women’s rights in this country was held in 1848, 72 years after Independence. It took place in Seneca Falls, New York. That Convention’s Declaration of Sentiments asserted that men and women were created equal. And like the Declaration of Independence, it provided a list of grievances regarding the suppression of women’s equality and freedom. It demanded voting rights and property rights as well as access to education and employment. The women of that convention made *equality* a big word.

In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln revealed more possibilities residing in the Preamble to the Declaration when he delivered his address at the Civil War Battlefield Cemetery. He said this:

“Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth, upon this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived, and so dedicated, can long endure.” He made *equality* a big word.

Near the conclusion of the pamphlet *Common Sense*, Tom Paine wrote: “We have it in our power to begin the world over again.” Did he know the range of possibilities held within that sentence? Well, it doesn’t matter if he did or not. It matters that we know. It matters that we keep the faith in the sacred possibility of equality, as we continue to pursue liberty and justice for all. It matters that we keep the faith in one another. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup>*The American Revolution* (Ken Burns, Botstein, David Schmidt, producers), episodes 1 and 2, watched live on KVIE PBS, November 16 and 17, 2025. <https://www.pbs.org/kenburns/the-american-revolution>

<sup>2</sup>*Lucy Worsley Investigates: The American Revolution*, watched live on KVIE PBS, April 7 and 14, 2026. <https://www.kvie.org/programs/lucy-worsley-investigates/?watch=season-3-preview-rzqpmo>

<sup>3</sup> Bill of Rights Foundation website accessed April 18, 2026.

<sup>4</sup>“Food for Thought,” webinar about the Declaration of Independence, hosted by Indiana University Alumni Association, featuring Konstantin Dierks, Ph.D., attended live on March 4, 2026.