

July 3rd is on the cusp of being the 4th of July and we have certain thoughts associated with that being our Nation's birthday, the day of our independence. I have certainly come to understand that that means different things to different people. There have been many attempts to bring the enormity, the colossal nature, of the United States of America coming into being into graspable focus so all could share a common thought on what it means. 2 such successes were "Rip Van Winkle" written by Washington Irving and published in 1819. Then Edward Everett Hale wrote and published "The Man Without a Country" in 1863.

In Irving's book, Rip Van Winkle was a Dutch descendant living in the New York Catskill Mountain region who took his rifle and dog hunting one day. He found some elfish creatures (part of the Dutch mythology) who enticed him to imbibe their drink and he fell asleep. When he woke up his dog was gone, his rifle was a rusted mess and he now had a long, grey beard! What happened? He made his way back to town and saw things, and people, he didn't recognize. When he inquired about things it was apparent that he was a madman who thought King George was still their ruler! It was figured out that Rip was in fact who he said he was and that he had been missing and presumed dead for 20 years. This gave Irving the slate to enumerate the battle for, and the progress of, the new USA. How they now had a Republic dedicated to the advancement of the people and not an extension of Romantic European notions of Divine Right for the rulers.

In 1863 the USA was torn in half by those who believed they had Divine Right to do so. Hale dreamed up a story about a man, Philip Nolan (No Land, right?), who as a young USA Army Lieutenant was charged at trial as aiding and abetting Aaron Burr to commit treason. Nolan was outraged that America would be so callous as to think it could set limits on what men could do to further themselves and was no better than any other nation. When Nolan expressed his disgust with the USA and said he never wanted to hear anything about it ever again, the judge took note of that statement. The judge condemned Nolan to living out the rest of his natural life aboard ship at sea with no coming back to land and all who had contact with him were forbidden to mention anything about the USA.

The historical trial of Aaron Burr was in 1807 so Hale had 56 years of USA history to weave his story around to bring it up to the 1863 publishing date. People read it and thought Philip Nolan was a real person as Hale recounted all the progress of the USA and the Navy's attempt to keep Nolan unaware. People could see Nolan for the fool he was to throw his citizenship away and be totally aloof from the great progress America made in the world and their lives. Hale succeeded in generating great pathos for the USA and its fight with the

Confederate minded as the story tried hard to keep the insane oratory and slaughter by the Confederates from Nolan.

Rip Van Winkle and Philip Nolan, "The Man Without a Country," represented those who didn't really connect the dots of American history to see the big picture of what was at stake for their nation. Irving and Hale used individual contrivances to lay out that context for their readers. As sad as it may be that there are people who ignore and/or completely throw away their own political lives it is even worse than that! There are many who ignore and/or throw away their spiritual lives as well. Most go through life growing old without even knowing that they exist in a profound state of opportunity for living in the presence of God. Many others see God's presence and say they don't want anything to do with it. Keep it away from them. They don't want it. They don't need it. Don't say anything about it. It's. Not. For. Them.

I'd like to use this occasion of independence to focus on "The Greatest Story Ever Told." The story of Christ. Let's go to the Gospel of John and the 5th chapter to read a concise synopsis of what a life in the presence of God looks like. These 15 verses tell the what, where, how, why and, most importantly, the who of any great story line. Most of these verses are Christ Himself talking. Here's John 5:18-32 & 39:

18) For this reason therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God.

19) Therefore Jesus answered and was saying to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner.

20) "For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing; and the Father will show Him greater works than these, so that you will marvel.

21) "For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom He wishes.

22) "For not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgement to the Son,

23) so that all will honor the Son even as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him.

24) "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgement, but has passed out of death into life.

25) "Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.

- 26) "For just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself;
- 27) and He gave Him authority to execute judgement, because He is the son of Man.
- 28) "Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice,
- 29) and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgement.
- 30) "I can do nothing on My own initiative. As I hear, I judge; and My judgement is just, because I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.
- 31) "If I alone testify about Myself, My testimony is not true.
- 32) "There is another who testifies of Me, and I know that the testimony which He gives about Me is true.
- 39) "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me;"

Life in the presence of God is life in obedience to Christ. Jesus Christ has been given to us as a living example of Godliness and is in fact "God with us." It is not up to us to re-imagine how to get in God's good graces as His grace has been directed to, in and through Christ. We ignore and/or seek alternative paths to God at our own peril.

Christ lived the life we need as example. Christ taught the words we need to mature in our development as upright beings. Christ sacrificed Himself to take away the concern we have for our own unworthiness. Christ did it all for us and we need only to seek, know and live in this "Way" of life. Our acceptance and participation is required. Christ's great sacrifice on our behalf must not be ignored. He asked that we honor Him in observing His sacrifice by eating the loaf that represents His physical body broken and abused for us and drinking the cup representing His blood shed. His life drained from Him for us. His words to us were, "Do this in remembrance of Me." This we do at this time.