

250th Anniversary

Isaiah 51: 1-6
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July 19, 2026

A few weeks ago we celebrated July 4th which is a national holiday.

Why July 4th?

July 4th, 1776 is when the Second Continental Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence.

The United States is celebrating and commemorating its 250th anniversary of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence. The 250th is called the Semi quincennial.

As we have heard from Isaiah 51:1
Listen to me, you who follow after righteousness
You who seek the Lord
Look to the rock from which you were hewn
And to the hole of the pit from which you were dug

Isaiah ben Amoz was an 8th century prophet in the Kingdom of Judah. He ministered for over 50 years during the reigns of four Judean kings, Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah.

The book of Isaiah is one of the most significant and profound manuscripts of the Old Testament, widely celebrated for its eloquence, vivid imagery, and detailed messianic prophecies. History credits Isiah with the first 39 chapters but it appears that there were two other collaborators.

Isaiah lived during the westward expansion of the Neo Assyrian Empire and witnessed the destruction of the northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 BC. Isaiah preached against social injustice, idolatry and foreign alliances urging the kings of Judah to trust solely in Yahweh.

In our bible reading God is comforting the exiled Israelites calling them to remember their heritage comparing the nature of the physical world with God's eternal and unfailing salvation.

We are privileged to be able to celebrate and honor that from which we have come

The Declaration of Independence formally announced that the thirteen American colonies were severing political ties with Great Britain to become independent sovereign states.

It declares that “all men are created equal” and possess unalienable rights. Including “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness

It establishes that governments are created to protect these rights and derive their just power solely from the agreement of the citizens

It outlines that if any government becomes destructive to these rights the people have the duty to alter or abolish it and institute a new one

Religion provided the moral framework and philosophical justification for the revolution and anchored the claim that human rights are God given and not granted by a King. The Declaration of Independence provided a unifying cry for a righteous cause.

Five men drafted the text of the Declaration of Independence: including Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Robert R. Livingston, and Roger Sherman
All five of these men had deeply religious roots.

From Psalm 33:12

Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord
The people He has chosen as His own inheritance

Thomas Jefferson – raised Anglican

Later became a Christian Deist or Unitarian

Deists believe that God created the universe but does not intervene in its affairs.

John Adams – raised as Congregationalist – was the church of Massachusetts

Later Unitarian

Benjamin Franklin – raised as a strict Puritan

Later a Deist

Robert Livingston – raised associated with Episcopalians

Had roots as Presbyterian and Dutch Reformed

Later Protestant Christian

Roger Sherman – Devout Congregationalist

Deeply religious Calvinist

What about John Hancock?

When viewing the Declaration of Independence his signature is most prominent.

John Hancock was a devout Congregationalist deeply influenced by his Puritan heritage

John Hancock was President of the Second Continental Congress and the first person to sign the Declaration of Independence although the date seems to be uncertain.

Scholars argue about the dates of many of these activities but It appears that delegates began to sign the Declaration on August 2, 1776, and it took nearly six months to get all the signatures.

Would you sign a document risking being hanged or shot by a firing squad?

We sign relatively mundane things on a routine basis. For example, checks to pay our bills and credit card purchases. Not so routinely, we have mortgages, licenses and work-related documents.

In all fifty-six delegates to the Continental Congress signed the Declaration of Independence. It is hard for me to imagine signing a document that risked losing my personal assets let alone being executed by hanging or firing squad. But the signers were doing just that. The British considered it an “act of treason”.

Nine of the signers perished from physical hardships and illness caused by the harsh conditions of the War. Twelve had their houses burned to the ground. Seventeen lost everything they owned.

Not one of the 56 defected, their honor and their country remained intact!

The Declaration served two major purposes:

1. Justified the revolution to the rest of the world
2. Rallied the colonists by listing specific grievances against King George III

On July 8, 2026 at Independence National Historical Park in Philadelphia there was a public reading of the Declaration of Independence reenacting the Reading of Colonel John Nixon on July 8th, 1776

There were two delegates to the Continental Congress that were ordained ministers. John Witherspoon, a delegate from New Jersey was an ordained Presbyterian minister and Frederick Augustus Mühlenberg, was a Lutheran minister. John Witherspoon, was an active clergyman and the only college president to sign the Declaration. Witherspoon became president of a small Presbyterian college in New Jersey in the year 1768. We now know that institution as Princeton University. He personally taught courses in divinity and moral philosophy. Witherspoon considered a moral philosophy vital for ministers, lawyers and those holding positions in government.

In the Bible reading from Isaiah, God is speaking to the faithful remnant of Israel. He offers comfort and urges them to “Listen to me” while reminding them of His power and promises.

In that passage Zion is a reference to the city of Jerusalem and the whole land of Israel. The city of Zion lies in ruins and the land of Israel has been reduced to an almost uninhabited wilderness.

The Bible frequently calls communities to remember the milestones where God has sustained them. The Israelites established festivals to remember God’s faithfulness. A 250th anniversary is a time to count our blessings, and to honor and commemorate our forefathers.

When we are facing difficulty or the unknown looking back at God's goodness is a huge faith boost as we heard in Psalm 145. When we look back and see all the personal, practical details God orchestrated for us as well as the miraculous things he's done, we reconfirm that God is good and that he's good to us.

It is interesting to note that the British often referred to the Revolution as a "Presbyterian revolt" due to the heavy involvement of Scots-Irish Presbyterians in the Continental Congress and military. The Scots-Irish heavily influenced colonial culture. It is thought that there were 12 Presbyterians among the 56 original signers. The tradition emphasizes "grateful stewardship" of the nation's liberties noting that reformed theology heavily influences the checks-and-balances found in the US Constitution.

Of the 56 delegates to the Continental Congress four were from New York state.

William Floyd: Born: 12 December 1734, Brookhaven, NY

William Floyd was a prominent NY delegate representing Long Island for both the first and second Continental Congress's. He served as a Major General in the NYS Militia. His estate was confiscated by the British after they won the Battle of Long Island in 1776. The property was used as a base for cavalry units.

Francis Lewis: Born: 21 March 1713, Llandaff, Wales

He was educated at the prestigious Westminster School in London and Francis Lewis heavily financed the Revolutionary cause. He immigrated to the United States in 1735 and built a highly successful mercantile business. He became an activist against the British taxation policies. He paid a heavy price for his rebellion when the British invaded his estate in Whitestone Queens, looting his property and arresting his wife Elizabeth who was subjected to harsh imprisonment severely ruining her health and leading to her death in 1779.

Phillip Livingston: Born: 15 January 1716, Albany, NY

Phillip Livingston was a prominent NY merchant representing NYS. He was a graduate of Yale and established a highly successful mercantile business in NYC. His properties were seized and converted into barracks and military hospitals. Phillip's brother Robert was Presbyterian and one of the five that drafted the DOI.

Lewis Morris: Born: 8 April 1726, West Chester County, NY

Lewis Morris was a wealthy New York landowner and militia brigadier general. He was one of the more colorful signers living a scandalous high-stakes life defined by dangerous affairs, a wooden leg and wild European adventures. Morris is also known for being the author of the Preamble to the Constitution. He suffered significant personal losses when British forces ravaged his properties and forced his family into temporary exile.

Many delegates to the Continental Congress suffered devastating personal and financial losses during the American Revolution. Some delegates bankrupted themselves funding the war and others faced direct retaliation from the British forces including imprisonment, the destruction of their homes, and loss of their businesses.

In a time where talk of rights dominate our political discourse, a focus on duties is indispensable in order to remind citizens of the responsibilities they owe toward each other and their posterity.

What do we find in the Bible about personal responsibility?

The Bible emphasizes that individual believers have a profound Spiritual and civic responsibility to their nation.

Micah 6:8

He has shown you, O man what is good
And what does the Lord require of you
But to do justly to love mercy and walk humbly with your God

Matthew 5:13-16

You are the salt of the earth but if salt loses its flavor, how shall
It be seasoned?
It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out
And trampled underfoot by men
You are the light of the world, A city that is set on a hill cannot
Be hidden
Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket,
but on a lamp stand,
and it gives light to all who are in the house
Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good
Works and glorify your Father in heaven

The signers mutual pledge to themselves to sacrifice their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor for the cause of independence shows that these men took seriously their duties to the people of a new nation.

Compared to the signers of the Declaration, we lead comfortable lives but it is no less important that we take a lesson and renew our own personal responsibilities.

THANK YOU for listening.