

**COMMEMORATION OF
WASHINGTON: A DISCOURSE (ON
THE NEW HOLIDAY,) PREACHED IN
HARVARD CHURCH, CHARLESTOWN,
ON SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 1857**

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Commemoration of Washington: A Discourse (on the New Holiday,) Preached in Harvard Church, Charlestown, on Sunday, February 22, 1857 by George E. Ellis

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GEORGE E. ELLIS

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Commemoration of Washington.

DISCOURSE

(ON THE NEW HOLIDAY,)

PREACHED IN

HARVARD CHURCH, CHARLESTOWN,

ON SUNDAY FEBRUARY 22, 1857.

BY *Edward*
GEORGE E. ELLIS.

CHARLESTOWN:
ABRAM E. CUTTER.
1857.

DISCOURSE.

LUKE VII: 4-5.

"He was worthy for whom we should do this, for he LOVED our nation." *

OUR State, our whole nation in fact, has inaugurated a new holiday. Popular feeling and legislative enactments have decided that, henceforward, the birthday of Washington shall be treated as a public festival. There is no opposing feeling, no remonstrance to the measure. It carries with it a general consent of sympathy. He is felt to be worthy for whom we are to do this; for he loved our nation; he made it a nation. And yet it is a great tribute! The highest public homage which the people of the whole earth render to the Supreme Being is in consecrating to him a weekly Sabbath; in rescuing one day in each week from common uses, and calling it holy to God. The power of the religious sentiment in general, and in its particular and specific directions, has also been strikingly manifested in the setting up of yearly holidays among tribes, peoples and nations.

* I have ventured here to transgress a rule, the right terms of which I most heartily accept, and for trifling with which I make this apology; a rule which censures the application of a Scripture text for constructive uses, and forbids a change of its phraseology except to correct it. The two words distinguished by the type were substituted for those in the Scripture sentence, under a strong temptation found in the admirable fitness of the sentiment for the use desired.

Strong faith and fresh feeling, and a real or supposed authority, an occasion, an adequate purpose are required to make the mark on such a day, to establish it, to win its first regard in spontaneous sentiment. Masses of men and women require a reason for such an observance. They will not suspend their toil nor forego their private pleasure, to weep or to rejoice, to lament or to dance, unless they know why they should do so, and can answer with their hearts to the call upon them. Once established, with a good reason, a sufficient occasion, the day will retain by national or religious associations the claim which it first advanced. Pleasant hopes will anticipate its coming, and happy memories will linger after its departure. So were the three great Jewish Feasts consecrated. The observance of them by the people was the most signal token not only of their firm belief in their religion, but also that they had good reasons for that belief in the occurrence of events, in the facts which those days commemorated. So the Passover, and the Feasts of Tabernacles and of Pentecost carried with them the warrant on a people's faith and love.

Thus Patriotism—the sentiment which, next to Religion, has the most power on the common, human heart—consecrates its high, annual festivals, and gives them the names of great or good men, or dates them in the calendar by the occasions furnished in a revolution, a battle, or a victory. If we were to follow out in thought the process by which any

such public festive day wins a full and hearty recognition, we should find many interesting suggestions on the way, upon which, however, we cannot now dwell. Some space of time is generally needed to secure such a result, even where the occasion is of itself most worthy of commemoration. Especially is this so when it is proposed to make any one day a holiday, or a holyday, in commemoration of the birth, the character, and the services of a distinguished man. Two processes must have transpired before that purpose can triumph. The trial-test of time must have proved the man himself to have been worthy of the honor; that is the first condition; and the second is, that a whole people must be so well informed upon the merits of the case, and so able and ready to appreciate the high character or the high services to be commemorated, as to enter heartily into the spirit of the day. Then, when those conditions are met, it certainly is a noble and exalted tribute which is offered to a human being, in giving to him a day in each year in the long succession of rolling seasons. What could be more impressive than the spectacle—the fact? Behold how it addresses us! Millions are arrested in their various pursuits, and an occasion is given to them free, not forced, to which they may attach a common interest. If, according to our ages, condition and knowledge, we ask the reason of it, we are answered, just according to our ages, condition and

knowledge. The mature in mind and culture, who are well informed about the great men and the great events of history, can answer for themselves. They can compare the man for whom our high tribute is asked with the world's other honored magnates, and say if either of them deserves that the day of his birth should be commemorated by a whole people, surely Washington deserves it. If the child asks the reason the parent must satisfy him according to the child's capacity. And so this is a lofty and noble tribute paid to a human being. It is a great honor to a man to live honorably in history; to be kept alive in the memory of successive generations by a book—the companion of quiet hours, the resource of solitude, the theme of silent thought. But it is a higher honor to have the almanac, the homely counsellor of every household, enter his name in the calendar of the year, affixed to one day as a national holiday. That honor, in this age of the world, cannot be won except by the chiefest among the worthiest. There is one of the tests for marking the world's progress in spite of our hopelessness at times, over its abounding and its seemingly undiminished evils. The world once deified its bloodiest heroes. Many of those serene planets which float so sweetly above us by night in a fair sky, still bear the names of the gods and goddesses of a foul mythology. It was an easy thing to give a human name to an unconscious star; it

is not easy now to win homage to human greatness, unless the aroma of high virtue makes the incense of our praise.

Some of us, indeed, cannot but regret that, in connection with the inauguration of a holiday on Washington's birthday, our communities had not been prepared to honor and enjoy such an occasion in more befitting and appropriate ways than those which, for the most part, characterize our holidays. It seems that a mere clatter of noise, bells and cannon, is thought essential by our magistrates. Poor invalids and sufferers wish it could be otherwise. They think it hard enough for them to be confined from the general pleasure of the day, without having their racked nerves jarred by such a senseless clatter. But it must be so till the community are educated to something better. And something better will come from the observance of this day. The name, the man, the honor associated with it, will help largely to elevate and improve the method of its observance. That is one of the best uses of a holiday, that if its occasion is a noble one, its influences, its uses, and its spirit, will ennoble and improve those who enjoy it, and will invent a befitting method for its observance. As time rolls on this day will be more and more honored, and more becomingly observed. The lapse of years which, heretofore, have gathered only marvellous and mythical legends about the memory of great men, will but more faithfully define and

authenticate the just honors of Washington. The spirit of the man will enter into the day, and cause that all that is said and done upon it shall be in keeping with his simple dignity, his noble grandeur of heart and life. As taste and art advance in our communities, statues of him will rise in halls and parks, and on this day they will be hung with fresh garlands, and processions of the young will pass before them, while the lips of the eloquent make the cold effigies of marble, or of bronze, to live with the beaming glory of the praise offered to him whose mortal form it copies.

We may rejoice that by the precession of times and seasons, the birthday of Washington will fall at regular periods of years upon the Christian Sabbath—the day already marked by a higher consecration. Ministers of religion need not shrink from the theme which to-day suggests itself to them. The space of time which the Roman Church requires should intervene after the death of one of its more revered disciples, before it will entertain the question of canonizing a mortal of the earth into a saint of the calendar, has already passed since Washington was laid in his honored grave. That old Church, with the same strange mixture of truth and fable, of reason and folly which attaches to all its functions, requires that a candidate for canonization should not only be proved to have done eminent services in the name of God for humanity, but also to have wrought miracles. If we were content to