This weekend, our nation celebrates the anniversary of our independence from the British Empire. That independence—not just the specific occasion of declaring our national sovereignty, but the very ideal of being able to stand on our own without the help or oversight of anyone else—is dear to us. Independence is in our blood; we call ourselves the “land of the free,” and we take it as our duty to export and share that freedom across the globe.

We adore our freedom. It is what makes us who we are. To our credit, the great American experiment has given birth to greater freedoms and liberties in many parts of the world over the last two centuries as foreign countries and peoples have realized the value and the power of such freedom. However, on this holiday celebrating the freedom that makes us who we are, it is worth remembering that freedom itself has a dark side: to be free—truly and completely free—necessarily means having the freedom to destroy oneself.

Unfortunately, at this moment in history, it is all too easy to come up with examples of this kind of dark freedom. As we exercise our right to personal autonomy, resisting the orders from our governors and the pleas of our healthcare workers to stay at home and to wear masks if we must be in public, our national rate of infection and the COVID death toll has continued to rise at an alarming rate, a rate far higher than any other developed nation. We are free to destroy ourselves.

150 years ago, our nation went to war with itself over the extent of freedoms, over the right for states to decide for themselves whether or not to hold other human beings in slavery. Racism is the lasting legacy of that freedom to which we so tightly held to own the lives of our fellow humans, a legacy that is even now plucking at the seams of our national peace and unity. We are free to destroy ourselves.

As climates change, weather patterns shift and ice caps melt, as species go extinct due to the loss of their habitats, we debate whether or not there is even a problem. We could curb our consumption, we could choose to invest in industry and energy that will leave a lighter mark on our world, but we are too content with our personal cars and our on-demand lifestyle. We would rather have the freedom to live the lives we want to live for the time we have left than to give up some of that freedom to buy ourselves more time. We are free to destroy ourselves.

I could go on, but you get the picture. From the very opening verses of Genesis, scripture tells the story of God giving humankind the most precious gift there is—free will—and of humanity immediately using that gift to set ourselves against God. Having the freedom to make our own choices and decisions means having the freedom to make the wrong ones. It is our predilection for making this poor choices that haunts us, that seems to entrap us in a downward spiral of destruction and despair.

This predilection for destruction is what Paul calls sin. This sin enslaves us, he says; we may think we are free, but we are not free at all; no more free than the gambler in the casino who is always only just one hand away from winning it all. We may think that we are in control, but the truth is that the house always wins. Even as we think we are exercising our freedom, we so often find that we are only tightening the rope around our own necks.

As Paul describes his own struggle with sin, he is actually writing about Israel. We know from Paul’s letter to the Phillipians that he was “blameless according to the Law,” he clearly didn’t feel that obedience to the law was beyond him. Israel, however, though it had been given God’s law by Moses, and though they delighted in the law, had failed to keep it. Perhaps some could, like Paul, but the nation as a whole found that the law by itself was insufficient to make people righteous. And even the people like Paul who kept the entire law their whole lives sometimes woke up to find that their zeal for God’s law was itself what caused them to sin against God by becoming self-righteous and even persecuting and killing other people in the name of God.

It is this realization that prompts Paul to cry out, “Wretched man that I am! Who will save me from this body of sin?” I think that it is our own experience with this same conundrum that makes Paul’s letter to the Romans so compelling. Like Israel, the United States is a nation that delights in the law; only our law is freedom. And yet, our national devotion to freedom has not made us more free; it has resulted in slavery, in rampant consumerism, in crushing indebtedness, in crippling poverty, in renowned xenophobia.

In our national Declaration of Independence, we proclaim that, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal;” and yet this is clearly not the case. At the time of that writing, Black men were only considered to be equal to three-fifths of a white man. This is to say nothing of the relative worth of women to men. 200 years later, the self-evidence of this claim is dubious, at best, as we continue to debate the relative worth of people who are homosexual or transgendered, people who come from “shithole countries” or who do not have homes to live in or who don’t look like they belong in our neighborhoods. If this is the legacy of a country founded on the principle of freedom, then where can our hope lie?

Paul goes to great pains in his letter to the Romans to make the point that the law is not the problem. The law comes from God and is holy, just and good. Neither is Israel the problem. Their inability to keep God’s law is not due to their special infidelity or an ethnic lack of morality. Rather, Paul says, the problem that Israel has is the same problem that all humanity has, the same problem even that America has. Our problem is sin: that inexorable pull we have to our own destruction.

With Paul, we might well cry “Who will save us from this body of sin?” There is a long line of politicians, holy men and snake-oil salesmen ready to sell us the answer, people making the claim that, “I alone can fix this.” I guarantee you they are all wrong. There is no one person, no one solution, no one legislation or political system or philosophy that can save us from ourselves. There is no silver bullet, no magic technological breakthrough that will make everything better, no leader who can finally give us what we need. Even if there were, we are too unwilling to give up our freedom to accept it.

When Jesus sent out the 12 apostles, he told them to proclaim this message: “The kingdom of heaven has come near,” and he gave them the power to cure disease, cleanse lepers and raise the dead. Equipped with that power and that message, they went out and returned as failures. In the section of our gospel lesson omitted today, Jesus rebukes the Galilian towns of Bethsaida, Chorazin and even Capernaum, Jesus’ own adopted home, for their rejection of his message.

But then he turns to God and gives thanks. “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.” It is not the wise or intelligent who have it figured out; the powerful are not the ones who can save us from the mess we’re in. It is the vulnerable, the unpretentious, the naive who have seen the truth. These “infants” understand what the intelligent and wise and powerful do not because they are under no illusions that they can accomplish this on their own.

To these beat-up, bedraggled and burnt-out people, Jesus makes this invitation: “Come to me, you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” A yoke, you may know, is the harness worn by work animals which allows them to pull wagons or plows. The promise Jesus makes is not to remove our burdens, but to replace them with his own.

If being free means having the ability to choose one’s own destruction, it also means having the ability not to. Although the wise and intelligent may think they have it all figured out, refusing any help from the “infants” of the world, the naive and foolish may be ready to roll up our sleeves and slip into the yoke alongside Jesus because we recognize that he is here to help. Taking his yoke upon ourselves is not about giving up freedom; it’s about using our freedom in a way that is beneficial not only to ourselves, but to the whole of God’s world. We can choose to wear masks, to drive less, to help our neighbors in need. We can choose to vote against our party or become active in anti-racism work or pack food backpacks for kids.

On this holiday celebrating freedom, perhaps it is good to remember that freedom isn’t just about what we are freed from, but what we are freed for. We celebrate not because we were freed from colonial rule, but because we were freed for working to better ourselves and our world. We have a long way to go in that regard, both as Americans and as Christians; but that is why Jesus invites us to yoke up beside him, to learn from him over the long haul as we work together to announce the coming of God’s kingdom.