

**Message Delivered at Christ Church
Saturday & Sunday, July 3rd & 4th, 2010
TEXTS: Psalm 145:1-9; Deuteronomy 10:17-21; Matthew 5:43-48
“America the Beautiful” by Katherine Lee Bates
Delivered by Paul A. Johnson**

Katherine Lee Bates was born in a town called Falmouth, Massachusetts in 1859. She was the youngest of five children, and called “Katie” by her mother. She was the daughter of a Presbyterian minister. But at the time of her birth, he was gravely ill. When she was less than a month old, he died.

I don’t know much about Bates’ life growing up, but clearly she was gifted with a strong character and an affection for learning. She graduated from high school, and then enrolled at what was then a brand new college for women called Wellesley. In 1880 she was a member of Wellesley’s second graduating class; in fact, she was president of that second graduating class.

Now that period of American history is called the Gilded Age. It’s called that because while things looked pretty good on the outside, underneath the shiny exterior of industrialization and economic growth lay political corruption, a mammoth disparity between rich and poor, and hidden social forces that would soon be unleashed in conflicts between management and labor; farms and cities; an economic depression in 1894; and a political realignment the effects of which are still felt today.

How much of this unrest was part of Bates’ life is something we don’t really know. But still, it was the world she lived in.

Bates studied literature at Wellesley. It’s what she loved. And upon graduation, she returned to the college as an assistant professor of English and became a poet and author in her own right. To begin with, she mostly wrote children’s books, and is credited with being the first person to introduce the character of “Mrs. Santa Claus.”

About 1889, a couple things happened in Bates’ life. The first is that she got sick. She got such a bad case of the flu—influenza, really—that she had to go on convalescent leave from the college. And second, she got tenure, and became a full professor. It was a watershed time for her; a time of reflection. She decided that she had outgrown children’s literature, and turned to more sophisticated writing and criticism.

And still she wrote poetry.

By that time in her life, she had traveled overseas at least once...had studied at Oxford...and she would travel overseas several more times in her life. But in 1893, she went in the opposite direction, and went out west to spend a year teaching at Colorado College.

Presumably she traveled the way everyone else did back then...by train...stopping in New York, and Pittsburgh, and Cleveland, and Chicago; all those cities trains go through headed west...and through the fields of corn in Illinois and wheat in Iowa. And like tourists in Colorado will do, one weekend she took a journey to Pike’s Peak. Most of the way to the top of the mountain she took a covered wagon, but in the end had to walk the last little bit. When she arrived, she did what you do at the top of a mountain...she looked around, and tried to gather in a majesty that really can’t be gathered in. If you’ve been to the top of a mountain, or laid on your back to look at the sky on a clear night away from the lights of Short Pump, or stood on the

beach at Nags Head as the sun comes over the horizon, you know what it's like; and how real and awesome God can be.

For many of us, experiences such as these leave us speechless. But poets...moments of mystery such as these lead them to write poetry; sometimes, depending on their spiritual bent, even, prayers. So while it is that over the years she would revise the poetic prayer inspired by this visit to Pike's Peak, the story is that right there, on the top of that mountain, these lines came to her: "O beautiful for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain." The rest would be scribbled quickly on a notepad over the next few days.

The poem was published a couple years later in a weekly church magazine called "The Congregationalist," and a few years after that was first put to music using a tune written by a musician named Silas G. Pratt. Pratt, at that time, was America's best known operatic composer; and believed himself to be not only the most famous American composer, but the best American composer, as well. He wasn't, however, as good as he thought he was. Not only are his operas never sung any more neither is his tune for "America the Beautiful." For several years, Bates' words were put to all sorts of music, including "Auld Lang Syne." Thankfully, her words finally were attached to the tune for a hymn called "O Dear Mother Jerusalem," written by an Episcopal organist named Samuel Augustus Ward.

The poem and the song quickly became immensely popular, though not without some derision. Critics thought the use of the word "beautiful" a bit kitschy. But while she revised the poem throughout her lifetime, that word she never changed. It is, she believed with the poet's conviction, exactly the right word to gather in everything she saw and experienced between a Boston suburb in the east, the top of a mountain in the west, and God...present everywhere, and in between.

Almost the whole time it's been around, it's been part of our national lexicon of songs. And while for almost fifty years there's been debate about it replacing the Star Spangled Banner as our national anthem, it has proven itself to have its own set of legs. It took on a life of its own after September 11, 2001. Few could sing "thine alabaster cities gleam, undimmed by human tears" the same way after what we saw on television that day. When a nation driven to its knees looked for something to say that connected us both to the Lord and one another, we found it in a song that is not blustery, prideful, or belligerent; but instead measured, humble, and beseeching...essentially a prayer...a psalm, really...both in words and in tone.

For me, at least, Irving Berlin's "God Bless America" has always sort of sounded like a command we are giving to the Almighty. The words of Bates...an intelligent and insightful woman writing in a time when she couldn't even vote, in many ways living on the edges of society and well ahead of her time...combined with Ward's music—together they beseech, and hold in delicate balance both what is right among us and what is still incomplete...goodness, yes; but still in need of grace, and still awaiting true brotherhood to crown our common life; heroes proved in liberating strife, yes; but still begging God to mend the flaws among us, and increase virtues such as self-control. And while it is we easily understand heroes who love their country more than they love themselves—that is, after all, one of the things that makes them heroes—to suggest, as she does, that it is also commendable to value mercy over life is a reinterpretation of the heroic virtues that should give each of us pause and that makes Jesus smile.

It is the Fourth of July, everybody, and I hope you have fun this weekend; and that you celebrate however it is you celebrate. It's a birthday, and birthdays are times to enjoy. Like millions of others today, we'll make our sacrifice over the hot coals of a Weber Grill, and then

go watch some fireworks. We'll have a flag hanging outside our front door, and linger beside a swimming pool watching families younger than ours play all those games.

For those of us who pay attention, we'll pause for a few moments and give thanks for freedom, and our national aspiration to such lofty values and virtues as liberty and justice not just for the privileged—who throughout history have always enjoyed the benefit of the doubt—but for all. Like every other people, we don't live into these values all the time. We make some horrible and harmful mistakes. May we be blessed with a long memory. But when it is we fall short, one of the reasons is that our expectations are so high.

And because it's Independence Day, later in this worship service we will sing this prayer Bates wrote. We've sung it at other times in worship...mostly on Thanksgiving. But everybody should be prayed for special on their birthday, so today we'll pray special for our nation.

In the Episcopal tradition this day is what's called a Holy Day. That means it is a day set aside for special observance, when we gather on purpose to give thanks, hear the scriptures, share in the table, and say our prayers. It is a way in our tradition we recognize that there is a power greater than the people or its government, to which we are answerable, and that this greater power loves not just America but, as the psalmist writes, all people...including, as Jesus reminds us, our enemies. We begin our day this way to remember that this land, and the values we seek to live into, were not created by us; that we were once all strangers; that we have received more than we sometimes want to admit. It is a way we are reminded that among our civic duties is that of praying for our nation that we might walk humbly, and do justice; show compassion, as the psalmist writes, in a way that vaguely mirrors how our Lord does; and possibly even love mercy more than life as Katharine Lee Bates so eloquently and succinctly puts it.

Bates continued at Wellesley, and helped turn it into one of the liveliest and most progressive places of learning for women in the world. She wrote thirty-two books in her lifetime. Some were travel books, and she eventually returned to her passion of children's literature. But always there was the poetry. And always there is this poem we'll sing in a few minutes and that so gently gathers together the beseeching of an entire nation...not just a poem, really, but a psalm written on behalf of a people; so certainly, a psalm appropriate for us to pray today.

Blessings to you this day, friends. May it be for each of us a most Holy Fourth of July.

America the Beautiful

Words by Katherine Lee Bates; Music by Samuel Augustus Ward

O beautiful for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain,
for purple mountain majesties above the fruited plain!
America! America! God shed his grace on thee,
and crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea.

O beautiful for heroes proved in liberating strife,
Who more than self their country loved, and mercy more than life!
America! America! God mend thine every flaw,
confirm thy soul in self-control, thy liberty in law.

O beautiful for patriot dream that sees beyond the years

thine alabaster cities gleam, undimmed by human tears!
America! America! God shed his grace on thee,
and crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea.