

Rev. Sue Ellen Grudt  
July 5, 2020

*“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.”*

These beloved words were composed for July 4, Independence Day, 1895, by the esteemed American poet and professor Katharine Lee Bates as she criss-crossed our beautiful country for the first time by train, from New England out to the far West.

In 1910, this poem became the hit patriotic song we know today as “America, the Beautiful” with the addition of Samuel Ward’s perfect tune:

*“America, America,  
God shed His grace on thee,  
And crown thy good with brotherhood,  
from sea to shining sea.”*

Across the ocean in Verdun, France, on November 11, 1918, these same words were sung by several hundred cold, wet and war-weary American troops at precisely 11 o'clock in the morning. Following orders for peace in Europe at last, the soldiers had crawled over piles of decomposing bodies and skeletons still clothed in tattered uniforms; standing together in the misty, muddy, bloody French countryside, they laid down their gas masks, they laid down their rifles and other heavy artillery as these brave men acknowledged forever the cease-fire of the four year terror of World War I.

Our troops reportedly all sang spontaneously:

*“America, America, God shed His grace on thee,  
And crown thy good, with brotherhood  
from sea to shining sea.”*

In our first reading today, the Old Testament prophet, Zechariah, is also seeking God’s grace and peaceful relief from the horrific 200 plus years of wars and enslaving exiles, foreign army invasions and their accompanying oppressions of his Judean people.

Zechariah, writing in about the year 520 B.C., offers them and us a message of hope and promise of a donkey riding, weapon shredding, peace bringing “*triumphant king*”, as the prophet describes this very familiar sounding coming savior in verse 9 today.

Zechariah writes of this messiah in verse 10 and I quote:

*“He shall command peace to the nations.  
His dominion shall be from... sea to sea.”*

Indeed, as Zechariah joyously reminds and also encourages his struggling, imprisoned listeners, divine help is coming.

God is in control of the “*nations*”, Zechariah reveals: from “sea to shining sea”-over all the land-and all that is in it. “*From the River*” meaning the Euphrates-the place of their imprisonment in Babylon- “*to the ends of the earth*”-all-the prophet says, even where they presently reside so unhappily-all are under God’s omnipotent rule and care. It’s going to be okay, Zechariah is saying. God has not forgotten you in this bad time, because He is the Lord of all time.

As King David so definitely emphasizes in our Psalm 145 today, the Lord’s “*Kingdom is everlasting;*” he sings. “*Your dominion endures throughout ALL ages.*” David continues. And, to best reveal the Lord’s sovereignty here, look how many times David, the shepherd boy turned King of Israel, uses the word “*all*” in this Psalm.

Can you count how many? I get 8 “*alls*” in 14 verses.

All His works are good, says the Psalm. His word is for All people. For all time-through all the ages. As I said, all kinds of “*all*”s here.

So, this Psalm is truly a powerfully personal and public testimony of our Lord’s total love for us! I especially like how in verse 8 David cleverly uses the word “*full*” or “*mawlay*” in ancient Hebrew to describe God’s empathy for his people’s suffering situation: We read there, “*The Lord is gracious and full of compassion*”-a very famous Scripture. “*Full*” here means what you would think-“*wholly satisfied*” or “*complete*”, but this very same word is also used to refer to a mother who is hugely pregnant-who is “*filled up*” – “*absolutely engulfed*”-“*full*” with a baby.

This deep, full, total, love of a parent for her child, then, is the kind of all-encompassing care and compassion God feels for us, His creation. For, all of it.

Relatedly, even the not- particularly -religious writer and editors of our country’s Declaration of Independence recognized in 1776, at least in theory, the inclusivity of the Lord’s love for all people when they wrote and published this in its second paragraph: “We hold these truths to be self-evident-that ALL men are created equal and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, including life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

Sometimes, these days, in the year of our Lord 2020, happiness might be a little hard to come by. It's perhaps more difficult to even believe God is with us and caring for us through these darker times in history. Have you wondered about that or felt that way lately? Or that God is ignoring us? That God is punishing you. You are not alone in those very normal ponderings.

'Cause 2020 has definitely not been easy so far, has it, with the scary worldwide viral pandemic and its accompanying unsettling quarantines, the increasing racial tensions in our cities and town, the worry over our kids' educations and the unemployment rate...our fears for our and our families' and friends' physical health and mental states with all this stress.

No, it has not been easy, friends.

It's been so hard not meeting here, in our church, to worship and pray and praise God together. God knows that. God understands that. He has not left us.

And, He is not punishing us.

Our world is a broken, sinful world. As St. Paul confesses in our 2<sup>nd</sup> reading today, we are sinful people, who do bad things we hate doing. And we struggle with that. What we do. What we say. How we act. And, worrying about the world is normal and human, but it is also sinful and human. "*Be anxious for nothing,*" Jesus commanded.

Because God is "*abounding*" in "*steadfast, everlasting love*" for us, Scripture says today and He will not forsake us, I promise you, my friends, no matter what happens in this world, our Creator cares. Deeply. Powerfully. As our divine Parent who is "filled up"- "full" of compassion and care for us.

In the meantime, I encourage all of us to rely on His Son, Jesus: He was God who came to earth to truly know us-He died for us on the cross and rose again- and now, through His holy and precious body and blood given and shed, He said, for ALL people, and through His Holy Spirit here on earth, Jesus understands-He relates to-He get- all we're going through, now and in the past and always..

In our Gospel lesson today from Matthew, Christ encourages all who were struggling then and now, to trust Him –to lean on Him in these lean times. He comforts us with these familiar words in verse 28:

*"Come to me, ALL you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest..."*

*"Come to me, All of you who are weary..."* Repeat this verse, several times a day, to remind you how good and faithful and loving God is to you and all the world.

Late one afternoon recently when it was really hot out, my dog, Sophie and I came back home from our usual walk down to our little lake.

I started to unload the dishwasher but then noticed Sophie was just pawing at her water dish and not drinking from it. I knew I had just filled it before we left with fresh cold water so I looked down in her dish.

And, there, frantically swimming from side to side of Sophie's water bowl was a little, tiny firefly. The sides of the dog's porcelain dish were too slippery for him to crawl out to safety.

So, I plucked the poor desperate little creature out of what probably seemed to it like a great raging sea of water with a spoon and set it far outside in the yard. He sat, resting for a long moment and I thought, "Oh, no, maybe I had killed it." But, then it flew away. And while it was too bright out to see its little light shine, I am hoping it did, eventually.

As Christ-ians, people of Jesus, we have to have such hope, my friends. We have to help bring God's love and grace to ALL the world in any little way we can.

To the very small and the large, the weak, the strong, the rich and poor, the black, brown and white alike-all brothers and sisters!

And, through His Holy Spirit, by what we say and more importantly, by what we do, we can deliver Christ's love and care and peace to the nations, across His great dominion which reaches from sea to sea.

*"America, America, God shed His grace on thee,  
And crown thy good with brotherhood  
from sea to shining sea."*

And, that's Good News. Amen.