

The Rev. Renee L. Fenner  
St. Barnabas Episcopal Church  
6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost/Year C/ Independence Day  
July 4, 2010  
Text: Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

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.*

It has been two weeks now since I moved into my new apartment here in Florissant. The other evening I finally had the chance to relax and watch the sky as the sun began to set from my living room window. I was reminded of a trip to Colorado some years ago and visions of the sun rising and setting from atop Denver's snowcapped mountains came back. I, thought too, of how often I saw the sun rise and set from where I stood on the coastal beaches of Bay St. Louis, MS, the sun shimmering upon the gulf waters. As the sky began to show its array colors here at home, I thought to myself how awesome is God's paintbox and how awesome God is! Katherine Bates, who wrote the lyrics to "America the Beautiful" must have felt the same way.

In 1895, at the age of thirty-three, Katherine Lee Bates, an English professor at Wellesley College, took a train trip to Colorado Springs, Colorado, to teach a short summer school session at Colorado College. As she made her way across the country, several of the sights on her trip inspired her and they found their way into her poem. These included the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, the "White City" with its promise of the future contained within its alabaster buildings; the wheat fields of America's heartland Kansas, through which her train was riding on July 16; and the majestic view of the Great Plains from high atop Zebulon's Pikes Peak in Colorado.

It was on the pinnacle of that mountain that the words of the poem started to come to her, and she wrote them down upon returning to her hotel room. Miss Bates' poem was initially published two years later in *The Congregationalist*, to commemorate the Fourth of July.

There were several pieces of music that were first adapted to the poem however, a hymn tune written by Samuel A. Ward, an American composer and organist for Grace Episcopal Church in Newark, NJ, was finally chosen to accompany the words. Ward's music combined with Bates' poem were first published together in 1910 and titled, *America the Beautiful*.

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

This song remains one of the most beloved and popular of the many American patriotic songs sung today. We sing it in remembrance of what God in God's grace has done and continues to do in this land we so dearly love. And on this Independence Day we remember that our freedom was bought with a price as blood was shed and countless lives were lost. On this Independence Day we remember the clarion voices that rang out for freedom and justice and we remember the voices that still speak to us today to remind us that the task is not over, that there is still more work to be done here as well as abroad.

It is by God's grace that has made this country what it is and it is God's grace that leads and enfolds us in our daily walk. God's grace continues to inspire us when we feel that we cannot go on. God's grace soothes our pains and comforts us in our sorrows. It is God's grace that promises to fill our every need.

There is a story about a pilgrim who was on his journey home and had traveled through beautiful green valleys, and rested in the cool of the day. But after a while his journey carried him through the desert, which was without water, shade or even a cool breeze. Soon, he began to thirst and he cried out to God: "Lord, I'm thirsty. Help me find water." In response he heard the Lord reply: "My Grace is sufficient." God led him to a pile of rocks and told him to pick up one and carry it. Troubled by the additional burden, the traveler, called out to God: "Lord, I'm thirsty!" Again his answer was: "My Grace is sufficient." God showed him a large dried gourd and told him to carry it. Nearly exhausted, the pilgrim carried the rock and the gourd, frustrated with God. "I asked for water and he made my load heavier by adding a rock. I asked again and all he gave me was an empty gourd." Under the cover of night the pilgrim stopped and rested against what appeared to be a large tree. He cried out to God that he could not go on. As he closed his eyes, completely drained, God's response was the same: "My

Grace is sufficient for thee." When the pilgrim opened his eyes the next morning he was laying against a great cactus, bulging with juices. God said, "Take the rock and cut the cactus. Take the gourd and catch the juices as they flow. When you have finished, fill your gourd and it will be enough to carry you home." The pilgrim gave thanks to God and rejoiced for truly God's Grace was sufficient for his need.

Today's Gospel echoes the theme of of God's grace and the sufficiency of it as we heard Jesus' directions to the seventy disciples. The work of spreading the word about the Kingdom of God would be difficult. They are to proclaim the love, forgiveness and reconciliation that God is accomplishing in Jesus. And they were to be agents of God by which the power of evil would be overcome. Not a short order. In all of this, they were to travel light. They are to "carry no purse, no bag, no sandals." Eugene Peterson's version of the New Testament, *The Message*, puts it this way: "On your way! But be careful-this is hazardous work. You're like lambs in a wolf pack. Travel light. Comb and toothbrush and no extra luggage (pg. 143)." In other words, 'take only what you need and God will supply the rest.'

We know how the story unfolded for the disciples as it is recorded in the Book of Acts and in the continual unfolding of Christian history. The Spirit of God and the grace of God keeps us fit to do "the holy stuff" as one writer put it. God continues to call us to be new "agents", the evangelists, preachers and teachers in order that the gospel be heard. God continues to call us as God's ambassadors, instruments who continue to follow in the footsteps of those who walked before us. Like the disciples, our instructions have not changed. 'Go and share the Good News'. Plain and simple. And the joy with which the seventy showed in their return will be ours as well, knowing that *our* "names are written in heaven". As we go, remember:

God's grace will be sufficient when the going gets rough.

God's grace will be sufficient when we are tempted to give up.

God's grace will be sufficient when we feel that we may not be duly qualified or lack certain skills and abilities.

God's grace will be sufficient when we want to say, 'we tried that already.'

May God continue to shed God's grace on us, on our country from sea to shining sea! Amen.