



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
The Reverend Peter Thompson, Vicar

Jerusalem the Beautiful

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, July 3, 2022

The Fourth Sunday After Pentecost

Based on Deuteronomy 10:17-21; Hebrews 11:8-16; Matthew 5:43-48

America, America, God mend thine every flaw! Amen.

It's a story you've probably heard before. In 1893, a professor of English at Wellesley College took the train out West to teach a summer course at Colorado College. The trip took several days, during which she beheld the full glory of the nation she called home: endless fields of wheat and stunning mountain ranges; the imposing Niagara Falls, with its towering sheets of water; an extensive World's Fair, complete with an impressive "alabaster city." The professor was heartened and inspired by the immense and diverse beauty of her country, and her creativity was sparked. On the top of Pike's Peak, in Colorado itself, the verses of "America the Beautiful" finally came to Katharine Lee Bates. Her resulting poem celebrated our country's natural wonders, praised the travelers who expanded its footprint and the warriors who kept it safe, and prayed for God's influence on this land we too call home.¹

We wouldn't have "America the Beautiful" as we know it today without Katharine Lee Bates and her stirring poetry, but the real story of "America the Beautiful" does not begin with Bates's trip to the West in 1893. It begins eleven years earlier, in 1882, in downtown Newark, New Jersey. It was there that Samuel A. Ward served as the organist of Grace Episcopal Church and owned a local music store. Ward was also a composer who wrote hymn tunes, and, for whatever reason, he felt drawn to "O Mother Dear, Jerusalem," an adaptation of a late-sixteenth century English poem that was itself a paraphrase of a medieval Latin text. The original Latin words, the initial sixteenth century paraphrase, and the eventual hymn that "O Mother Dear, Jerusalem" became all describe the heavenly city of John's Revelation in which troubles come to an end and joyous pleasures abound.²

A family legend would later claim that Ward wrote his melody for "O Mother Dear, Jerusalem" while on the ferry home from a trip to Coney Island. Whether or not that legend is true, Ward's tune made its official debut in the summer of 1882, when it was sung in Grace Church by a massed choir of 200 men and boys:

O Mother Dear, Jerusalem!
When shall I come to thee?
When shall my sorrows have an end?
Thy joys when shall I see?
O happy harbor of the saints!
O sweet and pleasant soil!
In thee no sorrow can be found,
Nor grief, nor care, nor toil.

¹ Lynn Sherr, *America The Beautiful: The Stirring True Story Behind Our Nation's Favorite Song*,

² "Mater Hierusalem, civitas sancta Dei," Hymnology Archive, ed. Chris Fenner. <https://www.hymnologyarchive.com/jerusalem-my-happy-home>.

Ward's tune, which was later named *Materna* after the text's reference to Jerusalem as mother, was not published as a setting of "America the Beautiful" until seven years after Ward's death in 1903. Though it would become one of the most recognizable of all patriotic songs, Ward himself never knew his melody as the tune for a nationalistic ode to the United States of America. For him, it was always a plaintive plea for a different country, a heavenly one, one beyond all the concerns and loyalties of this world.

In recent years, particularly after Colin Kaepernick started his protests in 2016, much ink has been spilled about the fate of "The Star-Spangled Banner," our national anthem. "The Star-Spangled Banner" has been our official national anthem for nearly a hundred years and an unofficial national anthem for much longer. It means a tremendous amount to many American citizens, particularly those who have served in our military. But it's also hard to sing, its use of violent imagery can be troubling, and a reference it makes to slavery in its little-sung third verse casts a shadow on the song's proclamation about "the land of the free." "The Star-Spangled Banner" has never not been controversial. If you don't believe me, I encourage you to look up Congressional records from the early twentieth century, when its potential status as a national anthem was debated vigorously and repeatedly turned down.³

For as long as "The Star-Spangled Banner" has been our national anthem, and even in the years before it was given official status, "America the Beautiful" has been proposed as a better alternative. It's more peaceful; it's more introspective; it's easier to sing. "America the Beautiful," at least in its full, uncensored form, is not without its faults: in admiring the Western pioneers, it does not acknowledge the horrors faced by Native Americans in their encounters with white settlers, and its mention of refining gold is seen by some as an endorsement of materialism. But I must admit that *America the Beautiful* is my own personal favorite of all the patriotic songs. I love its descriptions of natural imagery, and I particularly love how it implores God to mend our flaws and thus admits that we have them.

Yet, remembering that Samuel Ward originally wrote his tune as an ode to Jerusalem—and that he wrote it for a text that specifically envisions all the nations of the earth coming together in heaven above—I wonder what is lost when we reduce a hymn about what is otherworldly and multinational to a ballad about just one country on earth. How do we distort our understanding of what is truly sacred when we take a melody intended to extol paradise and make it a song of praise addressing one nation alone?

The acclaimed theologian Stanley Hauerwas, a Professor Emeritus at Duke University, is fond of telling Christian audiences that if "you worship in a church with an American flag" or "in which the Fourth of July is celebrated...your salvation is in doubt."⁴ Hauerwas uses deliberately hyperbolic rhetoric, and his perspective by no means represents the whole of the Christian tradition. The Church has mixed civic and ecclesiastical purposes for centuries—take, for example, Westminster Abbey—and multiple New Testament thinkers encouraged early Christians to respect political authority and participate in public life. Still, Hauerwas's provocative statements raise important questions about the ideal relationship between patriotism and the Church. Hauerwas worries about love of nation distracting from love of the divine, about the country becoming in the minds of Christians a second God, competing with, and even supplanting, the first. After all, if you have pledged allegiance to both the Church and the country, which one will win out when the going gets tough? During my years as a teenage acolyte, my fellow acolytes and I carried both the American flag and the Episcopal Church flag in procession on Sunday mornings. We were told to always keep the Church flag lower than the American flag because, according to the U.S. Flag Code, nothing should fly higher than the flag of the United States. Whatever the U.S. Flag code said, we were being taught that the United States was more sacred than the Episcopal Church, perhaps more sacred even than our Lord Jesus Christ himself.

The letter to the Hebrews characterizes the heroes of the Hebrew Bible as "strangers and foreigners on the earth," people who "are seeking a homeland," sojourners who "desire a better country, that is, a

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Star-Spangled_Banner.

⁴ Stanley Hauerwas, *Working with Words: On Learning to Speak Christian*, 116.

heavenly one.” The life of faith, the letter implies, requires a certain level of dissatisfaction with one’s earthly country, an acknowledgment that it is flawed and imperfect, a recognition that heaven has not yet been reached. As Christians, we can love the country in which we live—indeed, we should—but we are also called to look and think and act beyond our country’s confines, to imagine and work for a paradise in which people of every nation dwell together and thrive. The United States is not the Promised Land; only Jerusalem is. Our stay here is merely temporary; Jerusalem is our ultimate destiny, our true and final home.

O mother dear, Jerusalem!
When shall I come to thee?
When shall my sorrows have an end?
Thy joys when shall I see?
O happy harbor of the saints!
O sweet and pleasant soil!
In thee no sorrow can be found,
Nor grief, nor care, nor toil.

No murky cloud o’ershadows thee,
Nor gloom, nor darksome night;
But every soul shines as the sun:
For God himself gives light.
O my sweet home, Jerusalem!
Thy joys when shall I see?
The King that sitteth on thy throne
In His felicity?

Thy gardens and thy goodly walks
Continually are green,
Where grow such sweet and pleasant flowers
As nowhere else is seen.
Right through thy streets, with pleasing sound,
The living waters flow,
And on the banks on either side,
The trees of life do grow.

Those trees each month yield ripened fruit,
For ever more they spring,
And all the nations of the earth
To thee their honors bring.
O mother dear, Jerusalem!
When shall I come to thee?
When shall my sorrows have an end?
Thy joys when shall I see?

Amen.

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