

July 6, 2025

4th of July Weekend | *Beautiful*

Psalm 131:1-3; Psalm 133:1-3

Pastor Paul Dean

Several summers ago my family and I traveled out to Northern California to see the coastal redwoods. The journey took us through the plains and various mountain ranges and down along the northern pacific coast. America the beautiful... you know it.

It reminds me of another trip that was taken way back in 1893. A 33 year old college professor took a road trip, by train, from Massachusetts to Colorado. And along the way she collected her thoughts about the countryside and the people she encountered.

And as she sat at the top of Pikes Peak she was so moved by her experience that she wrote a poem. The poem was titled America and was first published in 1895. And then in 1910 a church organist set the lyrics to a tune and this poem became America the Beautiful, one of the best-known songs in our American culture.

Katharine Bates, this 33 year old professor was deeply inspired by the land she saw for the first time, can you imagine, its 1893, and to travel by train through the vast unpopulated land, most of it untouched by human hands. She was certainly inspired by what she saw out that train window. However, she would express that her deep inspiration came in her belief humanities fundamental faith in human brotherhood.

She believed that at the heart of each of us is the belief that we are deeply connected. And not only are we deeply connected but that is our desire. America is beautiful, not just because of our landscape. America is beautiful, because America is a bunch of people who care deeply for each other and are committed to the idea that we are in this together. Our scripture text speaks to us about our human connection.

Reading from The Message

Psalm 131 ¹God, I'm not trying to rule the roost, I don't want to be king of the mountain. I haven't meddled where I have no business or fantasized grandiose plans. ²I've kept my feet on the ground; I've cultivated a quiet heart. Like a baby content in its mother's arms, my soul is a baby content. ³Wait, Israel, for God. Wait with hope. Hope now; hope always!

Psalm 133 ¹How wonderful, how beautiful, when brothers and sisters get along! ²It's like costly anointing oil flowing down head and beard, flowing down Aaron's beard, flowing down the collar of his priestly robes. ³It's like the dew on Mount Hermon flowing down the slopes of Zion. Yes, that's where God commands the blessing, ordains eternal life.

I grew up in a family of 8 kids. Yes, it is true, how wonderful, how beautiful, when brothers and sisters get along. My parents can testify to that. About 25 years ago one of my brothers disappeared. He disappeared and disavowed the family. He called and told our parents that he was no longer a part of the family. He returned our Christmas cards and after a while we had no idea where he was living. It tore at the fabric of our family. But somehow, by God's grace, about 9 years ago he reemerged. I got an email one day – from my brother – asking if he could come visit. The earth moved that day.

After some investigation it was determined that yes this was our brother and yes, he did actually want to come visit. At first, I wasn't so sure. He had left a bad taste in all of our mouths. We were not sure who he was anymore. But my parents strongly encouraged us to welcome him. And so we did and it was an amazing reunion.

It felt a lot like Psalm 133. *How wonderful, how beautiful, when brothers and sisters get along!* It felt a lot like sitting at the top of Pike Peak and declaring that our world was beautiful again. Katharine Bates got it right. We do have this fundamental faith in human brotherhood and when she writes "God shed his grace on thee", it is God's grace that makes us beautiful.

However, what is also true is that as we reflect on this 4th of July weekend that America is not always beautiful. There are places in our great nation where human hands have wrought destruction upon our landscape. There are rivers filled with poison. There are mountains that no longer have peaks. There are forests that no longer have trees. Yes, it is true that humanity has a fundamental faith in human brotherhood, but it also is human. And humans do some ugly things. And if we were honest, we could sing America the Beautiful one day and we could also sing America the Ugly on other days.

And if we were to look at our world through the lens of Psalm 133 we would see where that ugliness comes. We are ugly when brothers and sisters don't get along. And I'm not talking about little spats with one another. I am talking about the deep and ugly effort to create division. This is not a new reality. Several thousand years ago the Psalmist wrote how beautiful it is when brothers and sister get along because they know how ugly it is when they don't. Our current American ugliness is amped up due to what we watch on tv or listen to on the radio but our current generation does not have exclusive rights to behaving badly.

Katharine Bates wrote her poem in the midst of sexist prejudice and discrimination. She couldn't vote. She had witnessed the ravages of the industrial revolution, had seen firsthand urban poverty and misery, and keenly wished for equality. When she wrote this poem it was during the depression of 1893. One of worst economic disasters in American history. Life expectancy was around 43 years of age. Child labor was wide spread in Industrial factories with many as young as 10 years old. But even in the midst of that ugliness, Somehow Bates was able to find her prophetic voice, yes even in the ugliness, America... the Beautiful.

But there is another constant in all of this. God's grace. Just as God's grace flowed over my family with the reunion of our brother... God's grace flows over us all. Bates was able to write that poem because she deeply believed in God's grace.

There is a repeated phrase in all four stanzas
"America! America! God shed his grace on thee".

And God is calling us all to receive it. To live in that Grace. And living in that Grace looks like Psalm 131.
1 God, I'm not trying to rule the roost, I don't want to be king of the mountain. I haven't meddled where I have no business or fantasized grandiose plans. 2 I've kept my feet on the ground; I've cultivated a quiet heart. Like a baby content in its mother's arms, my soul is a baby content. 3 Wait, Israel, for God. Wait with hope. Hope now; hope always!

Where is God calling you to be beautiful?