

“A SERVICE OF PRAYERS AND THANKSGIVING FOR OUR NATION”

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Elkton United Methodist Church
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For the beauty of the land –

“O beautiful for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain,
For purple mounted majesties above the fruited plain!”

In just a few minutes we'll be singing those words as we remember and give thanks for God's gift of the beauty of our country. From sea to shining sea, America is indeed, beautiful. These pictures provide just a glimpse of the beauty – mountains, farmlands, deserts, waterfalls, volcanoes, glaciers, rivers, bays. All across America – beauty.

It's all around us every day and too often we take it for granted. How many times have all of us driven up Main Street here and gone past the Cow Pond (the real name is Howards Pond) and not even looked at it? Yet, drive by there early some morning when the mist is rising up from it at the break of dawn and it's breathtaking. America's beauty.

We are so blessed – the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, Mt. McKinley, Hawaii, the Everglades, Iowa farms, Minnesota's lakes, Maine's rocky coast. The list goes on and on – beauty, beauty, beauty. And in our own backyard, the beautiful Chesapeake.

If I went around this room and asked, each of us would have our own favorite place of beauty in this country, a place special to our hearts – for our family the Finger Lakes of New York, for others, I know, the Outer Banks of North Carolina, the Keys in Florida, Deep Creek Lake in western Maryland, Canaan Valley in West Virginia, western Pennsylvania to many others – well, the list goes on and on. Places of beauty in our country dear to us.

Thank God for the beauty of our country. May we care for it that generations to come may enjoy it as well. Let us pray:

O Lord our God, for the beauty of America, we give you thanks. You have created beauty everywhere – mountains, rivers, farmlands and plains. You bless our lives with this land as we live on it and as we are blessed by it. Stir up in us a care for the land that we will be good stewards of this great gift you have given us. And slow us down Lord, that we will daily notice it, that we will daily stop and see the beauty with which you've surrounded us here in America. Thank you O God, for the beauty of our land. Amen.

Hymn – “America the Beautiful”

For the people –

When I was a child, we sang a little song in Sunday School that went like this: “Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world, red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in His sight, Jesus loves the little children of the world.” Well, we could just as well sing that song about the people of our country, because it describes us well – red, yellow, black, white – that’s who we are in America, many-hued, diverse in so many ways. A people drawn together from all parts of our world over the hundreds of years of our history. We are young and old, we are many-colored, we speak many languages, we worship in many ways.

We have lots of opinions and we’re not afraid to share them, and because of our freedom, we can. We are blessed to live in a country that has freedom of expression, so we hold many opinions and we share them with each other – sometimes in good ways, sometimes not. We have wonderful traditions from our various backgrounds and we share them as well.

We speak with different accents – they “pahk cahs in Haavaad Yaad” in Boston, have “a cup of coffee” in New York, “Yo Adrienne” it up in Philadelphia, love the O’s down in Bawlmer, and “See y’all” down South – and we’re all part of the same big wonderful country.

There are 325 million people in our country, and God has blessed every one of us by being here. On this Independence Day weekend, may we, each and every one of us, give thanks for the blessing of being a part of this country.

Let us pray:

God of us all, we pray for all of the people of the United States of America. We are a wonderfully diverse country, blessed in so many ways by living here. We have freedoms others in the world only dream of. We can worship freely, speak freely, vote in elections, share our opinions. We have access to so many good things, and in so many ways can better ourselves. Lord, may we never take these gifts for granted. And Lord, as those who have received these gifts from you, may we always find ways to share them with others, because Lord, we know that a lot of people in this country are suffering. Though all live in freedom, many live in want and need. Keep our eyes open to see the needs of those around us and our hearts open to do something about it. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Hymn – “We are God’s People”

For our leaders –

Well, you can't turn on the television or pick up a newspaper these days without reading about our country's leaders – it is an election year, after all! But if you do turn on the tv or pick up a paper, you know that we need to pray for our leaders now more than ever!

While this is an election year, that's not what I want to us to focus on per se this morning. I want us to think about our nation's leaders in general – all of those people who offer themselves up for public service. There are thousands and thousands of them across our country – from national leaders, all the way down to mayors and council members of the smallest villages in our land. And all of them are sacrificing something to serve.

They are sacrificing time, they endure seemingly endless criticism, they are constantly bombarded with people clamoring for their attention. Public service is not easy. No one does it to get rich, they do it to serve their fellow citizens. Sometimes we forget that. Sometimes we are hard on our leaders, and never give them the benefit of the doubt. Most of our leaders, the vast majority of them, are good people, citizens committed to their communities and our country, and they give far more than we ever know. Most of all, they do the best job they can.

We need to pray for them – all the time. We need to pray that they will turn to God for wisdom and strength, for courage to do the right thing, to care for the common good. They need to know that we stand with them as they do their job. It wouldn't hurt for us, every once in a while to write to them and let them know they have our support, to thank them for their sacrificial service.

But for now, let us turn to God and pray for our nation's and our community's leaders.

Almighty and merciful God, we pray for our leaders this morning – for our nation's leaders and our leaders here at home. We give you thanks for them all, that they are sacrificing so much to serve us. Theirs is sometimes a thankless task, so we ask you to give them what they need to do their work. Fill them with strength and courage, surround them with your presence and peace. Put within them a care for the common good, and most of all, a desire to seek and do your will. When they face unfair criticism, Lord, give them the strength to keep on. When they are weary, build them up. O Lord our God, we pray for our leaders that, most of all, they would be the people you want them to be, and do what you want them to do. For we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

For those who protect us –

Friends, we could not live the lives we live here in this country without those who protect us and we remember them now – members of the military, police officers, firefighters and rescue personnel. We are so blessed to all have of these people caring for us around the clock, seven days a week, 24 hours a day. Their sole purpose when they get out of bed in the morning, is taking care of us, keeping us safe, keeping us free. They are everywhere – in deserts in the Middle East, on aircraft carriers on the ocean, rescuing pleasure boaters in trouble on our waters, flying patrols over enemy territory. They ride in ambulances and on fire trucks. They are ready at a moment's notice to care for us. Their entire focus is on us, and we dare never forget that.

Some of them spend enormous amounts of time away from their families – deployed for months on end. Every one of them puts their life on the line every day. So they should be part of our prayers every day as well. Prayers of thanksgiving that they are giving their lives in service. Prayers of courage for the things they face every day. Prayers of strength and endurance for the long hours and sometimes grueling tasks. Prayers that they might know of our prayers and support for them.

We remember also those who paid the ultimate price to protect us – those who gave their very lives. They left behind families who were never the same. But they left behind a safer place because they served.

So today we pray for all who protect us in any way. Let us pray:

Almighty God, we give you thanks and praise for all who protect us in this country every day. They serve in the military, on police forces, on ambulances and rescue squads. They are ever vigilant, always seeking to keep us safe and free. We pray for them all O God that you would them safe. Guard and guide them in their work. Give them strength for the many difficult situations they face. When they must be away from loved ones, remind them of your presence with them. If they are injured, heal their bodies and restore them to wholeness. Somehow Lord, in your mystery, this day, in this moment cause all who protect us to know of our gratefulness, our love and our prayers. We pray for all who protect us in this country in the name of the great protector of us all, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

For peace –

It is a difficult thing to look at the news these day, isn't it? There seems to be strife everywhere – some of it merely irritating, some of it life threatening. Sadly, way too often, terrorism rears its ugly head, taking lives, destroying security, wounding us all. War still rages in places around our world – it never seems to end. Violence plagues our cities, and even our towns. Drugs and crime run rampant, and too often we want to lock ourselves behind closed doors for safety. Oh, how we need peace. And we need peace in our human relationships. This election season is but a microcosm of the sad way we seem to deal with one another – name calling, mistrust, cynicism, mean-spiritedness. Oh, how we need peace.

So we turn to God in prayer for peace for our beloved country and its citizens. For it will only come through him, through his power to change things. And then it will only come through each of us, as individually we strive to live in peace with one another and the world.

Though sometimes things look dire and we wonder if peace will ever reign, as Christians we know it will, because God is still on the throne, and with him, all things are possible. So we put our trust in him, and we follow as disciples Jesus, the Prince of Peace, knowing that one day, the lion will lie down with the lamb, and all will be well.

In the meantime, we lift these our prayers for peace for our country and for all the world.

Let us pray:

God of love, we pray to you on this Independence Day weekend for peace – peace for our world, peace for our nation, peace for our lives. It is a tall order – chaos seems to reign everywhere these days, so we ask you to keep ever before us the promise and possibility of peace. Stir up within us all hope for a better future, and help each one of us to be people of peace – in our words, our actions, our attitudes, our prayers. May we leave this place to walk on paths of peace and justice for all. May it be so. Amen.