

**“What Does God Ask of Us?”**

**Micah 6:1-8; Matthew 24:31-46**

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**Micah 6:1-8**

Hear what the Lord says:

Rise, plead your case before the mountains,  
and let the hills hear your voice.

Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the Lord,  
and you enduring foundations of the earth;  
for the Lord has a controversy with his people,  
and he will contend with Israel.

‘O my people, what have I done to you?

In what have I wearied you? Answer me!

For I brought you up from the land of Egypt,  
and redeemed you from the house of slavery;  
and I sent before you Moses,  
Aaron, and Miriam.

O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised,  
what Balaam son of Beor answered him,  
and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal,  
that you may know the saving acts of the Lord.’

‘With what shall I come before the Lord,  
and bow myself before God on high?

Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings,  
with calves a year old?

Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,  
with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?

Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
and what does the Lord require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God?

### **Matthew 24:31-46**

‘When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

Then he will say to those at his left hand, “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” Then they also will answer, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” Then he will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’

### **Sermon**

It was the late 1800s in America -- the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Katharine Lee Bates wrote the lyrics to “America the Beautiful” – the song which Lisa and Rylee sang earlier in our service. The lyrics/poem took shape as she took a cross-country train journey literally from “**sea to shining sea.**”

While on this journey she discovered the beauty of diverse settings across America. Gazing upon Pike’s Peak from Colorado Springs, Colorado, in 1893, Katharine Lee Bates wrote of “**purple mountain majesties.**” As she traveled, she **saw “amber waves of grain”** in the

farmlands. She traveled through Chicago, Illinois, at the time of the World's Fair that year. There she saw the exhibit of white gleaming buildings – **“alabaster cities gleam,”** representing the hope for prosperity in the nation.

While Katharine Lee Bates saw and celebrated the beauty of land and sea and sky, of cities and rural communities, she also was aware of the internal flaws of our nation. We hear this in “America the Beautiful,” as well.”

Bates was an English professor at Wellesley College in Massachusetts. Before her cross-country journey, Bates and her “female colleagues at Wellesley opened Denison Settlement House in Boston in 1892, which supported immigrant women and helped them organize for labor rights. They also advocated for the full equality of women, African Americans, Native Americans and other minorities, justice for workers, a welcoming attitude toward immigrants, and world peace.” Katharine Bates believed that the absence of equality for all people in America constituted a **“flaw”** that needed to be **“mended,”** and she noted this in the popular patriotic hymn. Bates knew many of the flaws of our nation and dreamed of gleaming **“alabaster cities undimmed by human tears”** – tears which were caused by poverty, prejudice, injustice, and war.” (“America the Beautiful,” Dan Rather, Elliot Kirschner, and Team Steady, January 24, 2021)

In “America the Beautiful,” Bates alluded to the “Gilded Age” of the 1870s to the late 1890s – an era of “rapid expansion of industrialization in America” when many immigrants came to work and an era of great wealth for many but also poverty for many others. Bates penned these words: **“America! America! May God thy gold refine, till all success be nobleness and every gain divine.”** Her first draft also included the words “May God thy gold refine, till selfish gain no longer stains the banner of the free,” words she later moderated. (“The forgotten meaning of 'America the Beautiful,’” John de Graaf, July 3, 2025.)

Katharine Bates certainly recognized the good and noble attributes of America and Americans. She honored in her song **“heroes proved in liberating strife, who more than self their country loved, and mercy more than life.”** For Bates, she was thinking of those who fought in the Revolutionary and Civil Wars. She would live to hear about a group of American soldiers who sang her hymn “O Beautiful for Spacious Skies” to mark the end of World War I. With this hymn, she honored the noble sacrifice of those who served – even died – for the nation. She prayed for

all of us that God would **“crown our good with brotherhood – with servanthood – from sea to shining sea.”**

Many of you know that our youngest son is in the Army. He became close to nine other guys during Basic Training and Infantry School. At their graduation, we met all the parents of his friend group. We have all kept in touch since then through a group text chain. It's been a way of supporting one another.

This weekend, the parents were sharing text updates on our sons. One mom shared that she and her husband had given their son his great-grandfather's small New Testament. His great-grandfather was a gunner in a B-17 and was himself gunned down over Germany and taken as a Prisoner of War. Before his deployment, he'd taken a miniature New Testament and sewn it into his bomber jacket. While he was a POW for several months, stacked with his fellow POWs like sardines in railroad box cars, being starved to death, he would take out the Bible. There was just enough light through the wooden slats of the railroad car to read scripture to all the prisoners and keep them motivated. In the small Bible, he noted the number of days he was held captive and the location. After being released, he never left a scrap on his plate since he knew what it meant to be truly starved. **“Heroes proved in liberating strife, who ‘more than self their country loved, and mercy more than life.’”**

Katharine Lee Bates' words celebrate and challenge our nation to this day. It's no wonder that some have proposed that “O Beautiful for Spacious Skies” be our national anthem.

Bates, of course, was not the only prophetic voice to speak to a nation. She was not the only person to challenge nations of the world toward servanthood, sacrifice, self-control, nobility, concern for the poor and marginalized, and hope. She was not the only person to challenge a nation and explain what God asks of us – what God requires of us.

Long ago, the prophet Micah spoke to the nation of Israel. Micah says: “The Lord has a controversy with this people, and he will contend with Israel.” In our passage for today, Micah is prophesying against Israel for thinking their religiosity was enough. Religious traditions and actions are fine. They can be good and meaningful. But Micah says that being religious in your words only isn't what God requires of individuals or a nation. Faithfulness to God requires action. “What does the Lord require of you?” Micah says: “To do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” Another translation puts it this way: “But God has already made it plain how to live, what to do, what God is looking for in men and women. It's quite simple: Do what is fair and just to your neighbor, be

compassionate and loyal in your love, and don't take yourself too seriously – take God seriously.” (*The Message*)

Micah went on to say this: “Do you expect me to overlook obscene wealth you’ve piled up by cheating and fraud? Do you think I’ll tolerate shady deals and shifty scheming? I’m tired of the violent rich bullying their way with bluffs and lies . . . You have lived by the standards of your king, Omri, the decadent lifestyle of the family of Ahab.” (Micah 6:10-12, 16) Micah was also calling the people of old to invite God to “refine their gold, till all success be nobleness and every gain divine.” He called them away from greed and exploitation of others.

Jesus also spoke prophetically in Matthew 25 – often referred to as “The Judgment of the Nations.” Not all Bible scholars agree about who “the nations” are in this passage. It’s uncomfortable to think about God judging nations, including our own. It’s important to remember what Jesus says in this passage about the nature of the judgment – the basis upon which the nations will be judged. According to these words of Jesus, God will judge the nations on the basis of how they showed mercy – how they showed mercy to toward the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned. God will judge the nations – ours included – based on how we have shown or not shown mercy to our fellow human beings. Micah’s words may have been on Jesus’ mind as he spoke. “It’s quite simple: Do what is fair and just to your neighbor, be compassionate and loyal in your love, and don’t take yourself too seriously – take God seriously.” (Micah 6:8, *The Message*)

I believe Katharine Lee Bates had this in mind when she wrote the words to “America the Beautiful.” When Bates says: **“America! America! God shed his grace on thee . . .”** she is asking for God’s grace to help us do what God asks of us, not for some badge of privilege. No, this grace is pled for to help us love and show mercy, to crown any good with brotherhood . . . compassion and kindness to our fellow human beings. She is pleading for the grace needed for our nation to care for “the least of these our brothers and sisters” so that those human tears of suffering will no longer dim our nation. She is pleading for the grace needed to be self-controlled as we deal with other nations and to understand that with liberty comes great responsibility. She is pleading with God to shed grace upon us by refining our gold, transforming our riches and our successes for noble purposes. America! America! God shed his grace on us.

This week I read this quote: **“ANCHOR YOURSELF SO DEEPLY IN LOVE THAT NO MICROPHONE, PLATFORM, OR PULPIT CAN TEACH YOU TO DESPISE YOUR NEIGHBOR.”** (Pastor Brandon post)

What does God require of us? Mercy, justice, kindness, humility, love. May God anchor us so deeply in love that no one can convince us to despise anyone. May God anchor our nation so deeply in love that no one can convince us to despise anyone.

“And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

What does the Lord require of us? Jesus said: “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

May it be so with us . . . from sea to shining sea.

Lyrics to “O Beautiful for Spacious Skies”/”America the Beautiful”

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!

O beautiful for heroes proved in liberating strife,  
who more than self their country loved, and mercy more than life!  
America! America! God mend thine every flaw;  
confirm thy soul in self-control, thy liberty in law!

O beautiful for patriot dream that sees beyond the years  
thine alabaster cities gleam, undimmed by human tears!  
America! America! May God thy gold refine  
till all success be nobleness and every gain divine!