

I'm going to start a sentence, and see how many of you can fill in the blank, and how far you could go. We the People.... How many of you had to memorize the Preamble to the Constitution when you were in school? That was my 8th grade history task. I think I only succeeded because of SchoolHouse Rock. Anyone remember those short cartoons that aired on ABC Saturday mornings? I understand they still show them occasionally, but those of us who lived our formative years in the 1970s remember this show well. There's a whole generation of people who can only remember the Preamble to the Constitution if we sing it.

*We the people, In order to form a more perfect union,  
Establish justice, insure domestic tranquility,  
Provide for the common defense, Promote the general welfare and  
Secure the blessings of liberty To ourselves and our posterity  
Do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.*

That song drilled those words into the consciousnesses of 1000's of America's youth. They sum up the desires of a people, bound not by blood or nationality, race or creed; but bound by an idea, an ideal, that freedom and democracy could be the bond that secures a nation together. That is the beauty and strength of our Constitution. We are bound together by WORDS. Those who drafted our Constitution 235 years ago envisioned the potential and promise for the posterity of all generations that would follow. Concepts like freedom, justice, equality and democracy. These words hold us together. But they are also fragile. For if we abuse or ignore them, then that which holds us together fail.

From my earliest childhood, I have always loved the 4th of July: parades, ice-cream, fireworks, John Philip Souza music, and singing patriotic hymns that still make me cry. It is a day to celebrate our land and its freedoms. The 4th of July often brings out our deepest feelings of gratitude and love for our land, as well as hopefulness, doesn't it. It is not just celebrations or opportunities for flag-waving; it is also a time for reflection and even confession of the tension between our high hopes and dreams and the reality that we often fail one another in this great country.

While we may declare "God Bless America" this weekend, I am reticent to join God and country too closely. Theocracy can be dangerous for any nation. While I found my eyes welling with tears when Aretha Franklin sang "God Bless America" for President Obama's inauguration, I also started a spiritual practice of uttering my own prayer of God Blesses - God Bless Australia, Kenya, Afghanistan, India, Canada, Chile, & Brazil, & Iraq, & Ethiopia..." As many God Blesses as I can remember, and when I run out of memory, I chalk it up to God Bless the world - asking God's providence, blessing and healing on the world as a whole.

I think about the words at the base of the Statue of Liberty:

*Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,*

*The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*

Those words remind me of the passage today. I wonder if the Jewish author, Emma Lazarus, borrowed the thought from Jesus when he said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

Today we celebrate more than our independence and freedom. When we enter into worship, we give witness to the truth that we are citizens not only of a specific country, but citizens of a commonwealth wider than the nation of our birth. We the People of God are Christians without borders. We love our country, but so do the citizens of other lands, even those we may hear described as our enemies. Can we embody the words of Abraham Lincoln, that we pray not for God to be on our side, but to be on God's side?

While gratefully singing America, the Beautiful in a moment, we will also lift our voices at the end of the service, singing "This is My Song", as a call to affirm all peoples and an inspiration to truly seek liberty and justice for all.

Today I will sing the traditional patriotic hymns and I will honor those who have served our nation, but I will also sing hymns of peace, and add peace crusaders and justice seekers to my prayers. So may We the People of the U.S. and also as We the People of God - may our prayer be: God bless America! and God bless all the earth's peoples! God bless our good earth! Thanks be to God.

*This is my song, oh God of all the nations, a song of peace for lands afar and mine.  
This is my home, the country where my heart is;  
here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine;  
but other hearts in other lands are beating with hopes and dreams as true and high as mine*

*My country's skies are bluer than the ocean, and sunlight beams on clover leaf and pine.  
But other lands have sunlight too and clover, and skies are everywhere as blue as mine.  
This is my song, thou God of all the nations; a song of peace for their land and for mine.*

*This is my prayer, O Lord of all earth's kingdoms:  
Thy kingdom come on earth thy will be done.  
Let Christ be lifted up till all shall serve him, And hearts united learn to live as one.  
Oh hear my prayer, thou God of all the nations; Myself I give thee; let thy will be done.*

*God of love, you have brought us into community with people of every time and place through your Son Jesus Christ. We give you thanks and praise for this gift. Open the hearts of all your people that we may see our differences as a joyful expression of your never-ending creation. Instill in us a spirit of acceptance and understanding that we may be Christ to our nation and our world. **Amen.***

