

**The Rev. Victoria Kirk Mouradian
Sermon for Thanksgiving Eve 2014**

Today we gather for Thanksgiving to celebrate our many blessings, especially those we enjoy by belonging to this country. At the heart of it, we recognize our opportunities that our forefathers made possible. Many of us are the offspring of those who sought a better life or a greater adventure. Others of us may have descended from those who were given no choice but to serve others. In time, in spite of their circumstances, our forefathers were able to pave the way for our freedom. It has taken almost four hundred years to smooth out the wrinkles of what democracy promised: freedom of speech, separation of church and state, freedom of religious expression, governing power in the hands of the majority, and especially, the guarantee that all are created equal. Some of our freedoms have been fully recognized and some are still a work in progress. Whatever the case, we live in a country where life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are held dear.

It reminds me of what the chosen people of Israel wanted. Suffering from years of oppression under the Pharaoh of Egypt, they wanted a better life. God finally delivered them from their distress. He appointed Moses to lead them out of Egypt to a promised land where they could thrive and be without want. As inhabitants of this land, they would prosper and become a mighty nation, a light to

attract others to God. Moses led them to the brink of this promised land, a land of milk and honey. Israel would lack nothing and but they were never to forget what God had done for them. As a sign of remembrance, Israel was to keep God's commandments and never to claim responsibility for their abundance.

To our forefathers, I'm sure our country conjured up images of the Promised Land, a land of wonder and abundance, natural beauty and resources, a land where freedom and brotherhood could coexist. The sheer vastness of our country with its varied topography and untold possibilities provided the fruit of countless dreams. Our national song, *America the Beautiful* provides such imagery. *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 brother-hood from sea to shining sea.*

If we implore God, as our national song says, to shed his grace on us and bring us together in brotherhood, then what do you think God expects from us? God expected Israel to be faithful, which meant Israel was to keep God's commandments. But in our case, God did not make a special covenant with our forefathers to found this country. God did not appoint one leader to bring boatloads of settlers to our eastern shores and give them a unified battle plan. Many who arrived did so in search of religious freedom, but many others were

simply opportunists. Many who hungered for God's blessing in their settlement had to recall what Jesus emphasized in his earthly ministry: two basic commandments – love God above all else and love neighbor as self. Others simply pushed on ahead with singular goals. The outcome, however achieved, was the coming together of a nation which would become the freest, most powerful, and richest country in the world...but not without flaws. We have yet to live up to the fullness of our constitution.

Israel did not live up to its covenantal agreement with God. The Promised Land was lost and found over the centuries as history will attest. At this very moment Israel is ripe with strife. Through all its struggles for national identity, some of God's basic commands have seemingly been abandoned, in particular to love neighbor as self. This is not just forgotten by the collective people who call themselves Israel, but also by those who embrace other faiths and live in the country as well. True greatness lies only in the face of human respect.

Our own history is checkered. We have not been without war and prejudice, greed and selfishness. At the same time we have not been without democracy, religious freedom, public education, and a host of other liberties. We have achieved greatness in medicine and technology but we still need to improve

greatness of heart. In a country such as ours we have no excuse not to respect the dignity of every human being. Until we can provide jobs, shelter, food, education, and affordable medical care for all, we have not lived up to our potential. Until we can find peaceable means to help our international neighbor, we have not lived up to our potential. We give thanks for those in our history who have dedicated themselves to these goals and pray for those who have not yet realized the bigger picture.

Today there will be a multitude of Thanksgiving expressions. Some of us will gather with family and friends. Others may choose a day of quiet or a day of service. Some will fit in celebrations before or after work. Most will be drawn to the idea of a food feast. Others will settle into the joy of televised football. Some will play it. Some will reminisce about days past; some will ponder the courage of those first few who settled here. However you spend your day, take time to think over the many blessings you have received, the ordinary as well as the extraordinary. Think of what it means for you to live in a land with so much freedom and so many resources that you have been able to entertain your dreams. Then try to imagine what it would be like without them. Find the time to thank God for what is truly important: his unconditional love and the love of family and friends, for freedom and health and opportunity. Then ask God to help you discern

what you can do to help this country live up to its potential. And lastly, ask God to help us all grow in love so that the dignity of all human beings might be honored.

*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 brother-hood from sea to shining sea.
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! God shed his grace on thee,
and crown thy good with brother-hood from sea to shining sea.*

Amen.