From Psalm, 19, we hear these words:

*The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge.*

The Psalmist praised the greater glory of God as seen in the beauty of His creation...a creation that speaks of God’s handiwork, a creation that teaches us of God’s grace and love that is beyond our understanding.

As we celebrate our nation’s birth this July, we are reminded of how we have been blessed with freedom and the beauty of God’s creation from sea to shining sea. And a hymn that proclaims God’s blessings on our nation and the hopes of our future is the subject of today’s sermon, *America The Beautiful.*

The hymn itself is inspired by magnificent vistas reaching from New England to the Rockies to our own backyard.
In 1892, the United States observed the 400th anniversary of the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus. As part of the celebration, the city of Chicago sponsored a World’s Fair which carried over into the next year. In the summer of 1893 a group of professors from Wellesley College near Boston visited the exposition on their way to teach summer school in Colorado.

One of those teachers was Katherine Lee Bates, who taught English and who would author the words of *America the Beautiful*. Bates, was born in 1859, in Falmouth, Massachusetts. Her father, William, was minister of the Congregational church and her mother, Cornelia, was a schoolteacher. William Bates died only a month after Katherine was born, placing the family in dire financial straits. Despite their impoverished situation and the necessity of long hours of work, Cornelia Bates worked hard to provide her children with a good education.
During Katherine’s high school years, she discovered that a new college for women was being built in the nearby town of Wellesley. She was accepted to the college in 1876 and enrolled in Wellesley's second graduating class.

Katherine Bates was elected by her fellow students to serve on the committee that drafted the class constitution and she was voted class president.

During her student days at Wellesley, she decided to become an educator, an ambition she would fulfill in that very school. She also began to demonstrate her poetic abilities during this time.

After her graduation in 1880, she became a member of the English department at Wellesley, where she would remain for the rest of her career.

Other famous graduates of Wellesley would include the First Lady of the Republic of China, Madame Chiang Kai-Shek; the first female U.S. secretary of state, Madelyn Albright; journalist and ABC evening news anchor, Diane Sawyer and former secretary of state, Hillary Clinton.
Katherine Bates left a permanent stamp on the style and quality of education at the college, earning the respect and affection of both fellow teachers and students for her innovative ideas.

Bates found time to compile an impressive number of publications during her career. She wrote more than forty books including poetry, children's literature, anthologies, and literary histories. Her work earned her a reputation as a noted scholar in literature.

This all sets the stage for how America the Beautiful became one of the most cherished and recognized hymns of all time. So admired for its simple melody and peace-loving message, there have been efforts since its creation to have it replace the Star Spangled Banner as this country’s national anthem.

So at age 36, Katherine Bates began her journey to Colorado with fellow teachers. As her train passed by Niagara Falls and Chicago, through Kansas to Colorado, she saw an exuberant land hurtling toward a vibrant but uncertain future, a rural nation awakening to industrial leadership.
Her stop in Chicago at the World’s Fair featured the "White City" with its promise of the future contained within its alabaster buildings. As her train chugged across Kansas, she said, “My New England eyes delighted in the wind-waved gold of the vast wheat fields.” So impressive was this sight that the words, “amber waves of rain” would find their way into her poem.

After summer school ended but before returning to New England, Katherine and her fellow teachers decided to visit Pike’s Peak, an elevation of 14,000 feet. She later wrote:

“We hired a prairie wagon. Near the top we had to leave the wagon and go the rest of the way on mules. I was very tired. But when I saw the view, I felt a great joy. Her “one ecstatic gaze” at the panoramic view across the continent was a revelation. “Most glorious scenery I ever beheld,” she wrote in her diary. “All the wonder of America seemed displayed there....
“It was then and there, as I was looking out over the sea-like expanse of the fertile country spreading away so far under those ample skies, that the opening lines of the hymn floated into my mind. When we left Colorado Springs the four stanzas were penciled in my notebook.”

To Katherine Bates, America’s possibilities seemed limitless.

But soon her work as a teacher at Wellesley absorbed her time and attention and the notebook was laid aside. She said, “I do not remember paying heed to these verses until the second summer following, when I copied them out and sent them to The Congregationalist, where they first appeared in [the Boston weekly newspaper] July 4, 1895.”

The poem attracted an unexpected amount of attention. And in 1904, Katherine rewrote parts of it, trying to make the words more simple and direct.
The amended version first appeared in the *Boston Evening Transcript*, November 19, 1904.

But the poem did not become a hymn until a melody was added. Several existing pieces of music were adapted to the poem. One of these tunes was written by Horatio Parker of Yale University. That’s according to *The Stories of Hymns in the Methodist Sunday School Hymnal*, published in 1912. However, the hymn tune that would become the melody we know today was composed by Samuel A. Ward.

Samuel Ward spent his life selling musical supplies, pianos and organs. He originally composed the melody for a different hymn, not for *America the Beautiful*.

The story goes that the tune came to him while he was on a ferryboat trip in 1882 from Coney Island back to his home in New York City. He had captured the tune in his head and was anxious to write it down. But there was no paper in sight.
You’ve heard stories about people giving the shirts off their back? Well Ward’s fellow passenger and friend, Harold Martin, gave the cuff off his shirt and Ward used it to write down the tune. I’m sure Mrs. Martin was not amused. I can hear her now. “Harold, where is the cuff to your shirt?” Harold responds, “Oh, I gave it to Sam so he could write a tune on it.”

Actually the melody Ward composed was for a hymn called, *O Mother Dear, Jerusalem*. It first appeared in the Episcopal Hymnal in 1892, then in the Presbyterian Hymnal in 1895. Ward’s son-in-law said that the tune was composed in the memory of Ward’s oldest daughter.

Ward died, not knowing the national stature his music would attain. His tune was first applied to the hymn a year after his death in 1904 and published in 1910. It wasn’t until two years later that Ward’s widow gave official permission for the tune to be used with this text.
Over the past 100 years, there have been legal efforts to make *America the Beautiful* the national anthem or equal to *The Star-Spangled Banner*. These efforts increased, especially during the Kennedy Administration.

*America the Beautiful* is preferred for various reasons. It’s easier to sing, more melodic, more adaptable to new orchestrations and it is easily recognizable. Others prefer *America the Beautiful* over *The Star-Spangled Banner* because it contains less war-oriented imagery. Yet others prefer *The Star-Spangled Banner* because it does contain war-oriented imagery. Regardless, *America the Beautiful* is held in high esteem by a large number of Americans.

The popularity of the hymn’s melody reaches beyond the borders of the United States. For some unknown reason it holds a special attraction for the Chinese. The melody was used in the school song of the former University of Shanghai, which closed in 1952. It is currently used in school songs by Shanghai Alumni Primary School in Hong Kong and Hujiang High School in Taiwan.
When President Nixon visited China in 1972, this melody was played as the welcome music. Back in the U.S., the song has entered the Hot Country Song Charts several times over the years and grew in popularity following the 9/11 attacks.

Bates did not let her fame as the author of America the Beautiful distract her from her duties at Wellesley. She continued an active career as a scholar, teacher and administrator until her retirement in 1925.

During her 45-year career, she would be awarded the degree of Doctor of Literature from Oberlin College. A second honorary degree would be conferred, along with a Doctor of Laws from Wellesley.

Her family was an important part of her professional and personal life throughout these years. Her sister, Jane, assisted with household chores and typing Katherine’s manuscripts. Her mother helped to translate Spanish literature and folktales for her books. Katherine often entertained at her home, hosting gatherings for students and colleagues.
Noted literary guests included the poets Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg and William Butler Yeats.

She continued her own writing after her retirement, producing a number of articles and book reviews as well as a collection of poetry, *The Pilgrim Ship*, which was published in 1926.

Dr. Bates was well-traveled, gracious, witty, popular, and scholarly without being pretentious.

After a series of illnesses in her final years, she died of pneumonia in 1929, in Wellesley.

While her literary studies and translations remain a respected body of work, it is her poem *America the Beautiful* that has become her most memorable contribution to American literature.

The praises for the natural and spiritual resources of the United States contained in her verses captured a sense of national identity and pride that continues to resonate in the American imagination.

The first verse indeed celebrates the physical beauty of the land, the purple mountains of the Rockies, the fertile farmland stretching across the
continent. The “amber waves of grain” were golden fields of wheat, waving in the hot summer wind and glowing in the sun.

The “pilgrim feet” of course belong to our country’s founders, but the “thoroughfare for freedom” they beat “across the wilderness” is not an unblemished path to glory. Bates was well aware of the near annihilation of Native Americans, which was why she immediately prayed for help, both divine and human. And the verse ends:

America! America!

God mend thine every flaw,

Confirm thy soul in self-control,

Thy liberty in law!

It is a radical notion. She is saying America is not perfect, and we must tame our free spirit with “self-control”; we must ground our precious freedom in the reason of law. That is, law made by government.
Verse three begins with a rousing tribute to our uniformed defenders – those “Who more than self their country loved, And mercy more than life!” Here she refers to the brave souls who fought the wars that produced a nation and those who have fought in every war since.

But it’s the end of this verse that makes this poem into more than just a pastoral song of praise.

America! America!

May God thy gold refine

Till all success be nobleness

And every gain divine!

Bates didn’t know about investment bankers, but you could probably make the case that they would have been included in her anger at the greed of the Gilded Age. She wanted the profiteers to channel their earnings into nobler causes. Bates did not oppose material success – she was awed by the century’s progress – so this may be the only national song to put profit right up there with patriotism.
And, finally, what does the fourth verse say?

O beautiful for patriot dream
That sees beyond the years
Thine alabaster cities gleam
Undimmed by human tears!

Those “alabaster cities” are simply the utopian vision of harmony and beauty that Bates saw at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair – the cluster of buildings painted bright white and lighted by thousands of newly invented incandescent bulbs. It was her hope for the future – a dream “undimmed” by the reality of the poverty and hopelessness she saw in many American cities.

Katharine Lee Bates was not only a poet, but a social activist, an American patriot and world pacifist. She wanted to unite people “from the Pacific to the Atlantic, to include all the nations and all the people and for God to “crown this good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea.”

Amen