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St. Paul's Episcopal Church
Fort Mill, SC
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May the message shared be the message needing to be heard, O Lord our strength and our redeemer.
Amen.

The scriptures appointed for today would make for an intriguing sermon; however, it is not often that July 4th falls on a Sunday. I began the week immersed in the scriptures. But as the week progressed, I found myself focused on Independence Day. Let us take this opportunity to set aside religion and politics and focus on God and country through prayer.

I do not recall a time when, God was not a part of my thoughts and celebration of our country's independence. On July 4, 1965, after singing every national hymn in the Baptist hymnal at church, I went home, decorated myself and my bicycle and had a one-kid parade to and from my grandmother's while singing: God of our Father's, O Beautiful for Spacious Skies, and of course our national anthem. When I arrived for the third time, my grandmother gave me a glass of lemonade and told me to go home and stop signing on the way.

In high school, my friends and I were contestants in the Miss North Carolina Fourth of July pageant, in Southport. We all knew who would win so it was a no-pressure, opportunity to do something different in the middle of the summer. I remember two things: being all decked out to ride in a fabulous convertible with your name on the door while smiling and waving to the parade crowd is neither fun nor glamorous. However, that evening during the pageant, each of us were asked an impromptu question. I do not remember the specific two-part question, but I do remember the lightning speed thought that passed through my mind, "What will people think if I answer this honestly." My answer... "I am grateful to live in a country where I can worship God without fear." They clapped. I was relieved since God was not exactly a hip topic in the 70's.

In 1986, I was standing on a sidewalk beside a church along the parade route when a very tall gentleman next to me asked, "We have kept our democracy now for 210 years. How much longer do you think we will be able to maintain it?" As I looked up to answer him, I saw the gleaming cross on the steeple of the church behind us.

On July 1, 2000, back in Southport, I was among the witnesses on the lawn of Fort Johnston as a group of immigrants including Charlie Two Shoes and his family took the Naturalization Oath of Allegiance to the United States of America to become citizens. There were tears in the eyes of everyone as the many of the Marine's from Love Company embraced Charlie who, in 1945 they had adopted at age 11 in China following World War II. The Marines were unable to bring Charlie to America as they had promised. In the 18 months from the time they had adopted him and their departure from China, Charlie had become proficient in English and converted to Christianity. During his adult years as allegiance to and restrictions by the communist regime increased, Charlie spent years in labor camps and on house arrest because, as he told everyone, "I would never denounce my friends or God. I never lost hope in my friends and I always believed God would answer my prayers."

The good news is God does answer prayers.

Let's us pray.

BCP, p. 820 – For the Nation
BCP, p. 823 – For Our Armed Services –
BCP, p. 838 – Thanksgiving for the Nation

To God be the glory. Amen