



# Watch Hill Chapel

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Rev. Elsberry  
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## AMERICA'S SONG

A sermon preached on Sunday, July 5, 2020, at The Watch Hill Chapel by The Reverend Terence L. Elsberry, Priest Associate, Christ Church in Greenwich, Connecticut.

***God, bless America, land that we love. Stand beside her and guide her through this dark night of her soul. Guide her with the light from above.--AMEN***

**I Now's the time for us to tell the story again.**

**Now's the time for us to sing the song again. Now's the time for us to pray the prayer again—and keep praying it. Not since the Civil War have we as a nation needed to sing the song and pray the prayer more than today.**

**We need to sing the song to ourselves: the song of freedom. The song of hope. The song of promise. The song of healing. The song of America. We need to remind ourselves who we are and how we got here. And we need to pray the prayer: God, bless America.**

## II OURS IS A MOVING ON SONG

We've always been moving on. Some came for freedom and gain. Came from England South, to name a colony Virginia after the Virgin Queen. They were the great Sea Wolves—Drake and Raleigh and Hawkins with his ship called “Jesus.” Traders, explorers, adventurers, Anglicans.

The others came for freedom of a different kind, freedom not to find land or wealth but freedom to worship God as they chose. They came from England north to found the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

North and South they came for freedom. It was freedom that pierced their hearts, that drove their souls, that sometimes broke their bodies and all too often took their lives.

Still they came. They never stopped. Movement. Motion. Action. All defined America. If America's a noun, might it also be a verb?

The first Thanksgiving Day was celebrated by the northern movers. They knew how to thank God, these men and women and children. They'd seen the worst, these who'd survived the worst.

So they sang a song of thanks. They fell to their knees on the shores of New England, they prayed their thanks with their backs to the old country and with their faces to the still unexplored new. Anything was possible.

Right that they should thank God. The idea began with Him in the first place. Only God could imagine a nation that so lines up with His idea that every single person is created in His image—created, therefore, EQUAL.

Then God whispered in the ears of a bunch of brilliant, mettlesome giants we remember as our Founding Fathers. He whispered the same message He'd whispered to the cavaliers of the sea and to the Holy people of the New England shore.

He whispered freedom. And they listened, these disparate men of genius; these risk-takers, these founders and they formed a blueprint of democracy.

They used God's own idea: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.”

**They affirmed *E pluribus unum*: out of many ONE! I look out there and I see a lot of pluribus these days. Let's build more unum.**

In the greatest of the great, we had our first president: Washington. The general who led us to victory against the British, the president who set the stage for how to live as a new kind of people. In Washington we had our first president. We also had brilliant, humble selfless, WISE leadership. In

Washington, we had not a politician, we had a leader, we had a hero. **We need more heroes as leaders.**

### III MOVING ON, ALWAYS MOVING ON

Eli Whitney came up with the cotton gin. He was only 31. No surprise. What's the average age of Silicon Valley?

America: movement, action, youth, vigor, ingenuity, boldness, risk-taking. That was us! Is it still?

The move was on. In the 1830s: revival. The Great Awakening. Thousands of people got religion. We need revival today. We need more of us to discover where our real power lies

A lot of people found the Lord, but a whole lot wanted gold, too. The gold rush of 1849 wasn't a movement, it was a stampede. The Wild West was laid open. In the miner's wake, came the NEW pilgrims: settlers. THEIR Mayflowers, the Conestoga wagons, had wheels. THEIR sea? Endless rolling waves of prairie grass, the unimaginable stretches of soaring mountains and spreading valleys.

Then the awful, deep-bedded canker, present from the beginning, erupted. Then the serpent, slavery, twisted around the table of the Constitution signers, could no longer be ignored. The divisions present from the beginning—division over slavery, division over State's Rights versus a strong central government—erupted at last.

War raged. Blood soaked the Southern soil. The flower of our young manhood fell in battle. Then Vicksburg. Gettysburg. Such tragedy. Such loss. Such grief. Brothers killing brothers. Would we survive?

We had ANOTHER hero as president. Abe Lincoln found no pleasure in Southern defeat. He said, "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right, as God gives us the right, let us bind up the nation's wounds." He said, "This nation, under God, shall have a new burst of freedom . . . government of the people, for the people, by the people, shall not perish from the earth."

**We believe it today, don't we? We know it's true. America's dream will last. Maybe we'll even find leaders like Abraham, like George again.**

### IV HEALING TOOK A LONG TIME

President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. The slaves were freed at last—but from Reconstruction came Jim Crow. Egregious acts of racial cruelty. All these years later, we're making progress. More will come, must come. ALL are created equal.

Still we moved on. The Golden Spike was struck. Rails joined the two shores.

Now the tragedy was that our native predecessors, the indigenous ones, whose land this was before Jamestown, before Plymouth, were cruelly thrust aside.

But progress would not be stopped. Ether relieved pain. McCormick's threshing machine did ten times the work of one man. Alexander Bell: the telephone. Edison: electricity. Eastman: photography. The Wright Brothers: flight. Henry Ford: a model T for every garage.

The move was on. Through Ellis Island flowed the new Americans. The City rose like an unearthly dream; skyscrapers soaring "a thousand houses high," epitomizing opportunity, enterprise, prosperity, grit, know how, success. AMERICAN virtues.

In 1920, women finally got the vote. In twenty-nine, the Stock Market crashed, the Great Depression socked the country. Banks folded, thousands of unemployed, the Dust Bowl lifting Mid-Western soil and Mid-western people (human grains of dust) west to California, the newest land of golden opportunity.

We came through it. We prayed. When FDR said, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself," a whole lot of people believed him.

We kept coming through—two world wars and Korea—when our men and boys were sent overseas to save democracy. And they did. Thank you, our beloved Vets: our forever heroes.

Like Washington, another war hero turned president, a guy with a broad Midwestern face and a cockeyed grin, presided over the Fifties. I like Ike! A nation at peace. Prosperous. The freeway system linked us as we'd never been linked.

### IV THE SIXTIES WERE SOMETHING ELSE.

"I have a dream!" cried Martin Luther King, Jr., and gave his life for it.

Elvis. The Beatles. Sputnik. The Peace Corps. The Cold War. Khrushchev pounding his shoe on the table: "We will bury you!"

**Nobody buries America. Nobody from without. Only we can do that from within. That's why we must sing the song, tell the story, pray the prayer, LIVE the original intent of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.**

Our young president cried on the day of his inauguration: "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country." **Good words. Are we still asking?**

Men walked on the moon: "One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind."

A cloud settled over us. The Assassinations. Our own kids marching against their government. Kent State. Viet Nam. Watergate.

We came through. Because the fabric of America is tough, supple, resilient. A fabric designed by God rewoven in every generation by Americans.

We survived and knew prosperity beyond any seen in the history of the world.

A movie star from Illinois, Ronald Reagan, walked into the White House and proclaimed: "Morning in America." Another new beginning. He turned to the Russian premier and said, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall." And the Berlin Wall came tumbling down, the Cold War over.

Still we moved on. Medical research saved and prolonged lives as never before. Technology gave us the information superhighway. Billions of people connected in ways that were beyond imagining. We became the greatest multi-cultural society ever known. Hear every language. See every religion practiced. In America.

**V THEN ON A BRILLIANT, BRIGHT SEPTEMBER DAY, IT ALL GROUND TO A HALT. 9/11.**

Who are these people? How could they commit such atrocities? Why did they take so many innocent lives? So

many of our loved ones? Why do they hate us? The new age of terrorism begins.

Look at us today. Americans shooting innocent fellow Americans—many of them children. The worsening effects of climate change. A desperate refugee problem. Political animosity. Anger. Division.

Then the Pandemic hits, robbing enormous numbers of precious lives, throwing people out of their jobs and livelihood. And while we're still in the midst of the Covid-19 upheaval there's more: another eruption of the racial issue.

If ever we needed to pray the prayer, it's now. The times call for fervent prayer. The God who created us equal, who inspired our ancestors with the thirst for freedom for all, for unity among many has not deserted us. It's time to come to Him and sing the old song and pray the old prayer, as never before: God, please heal, please save, please bless America, land that we love.