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A National Stretch

By the Rev. J. Randolph Alexander, Jr.

A memorable moment of taking my boys to baseball games at Yankee Stadium was always the singing of “God Bless America” during the seventh-inning stretch. It was a time to stand, to stretch, to regroup, and to focus on something bigger than just the game at hand. Both teams joined in as the rivalry seemed to matter a little less, and then, maybe, we would pay a little more attention to the others around us at the game.

Irving Berlin’s anthem has long spoken to me because it asks, directly, for God’s blessing on this country. To ask for that blessing and guidance implies, at least to me, that the nation is not, and has never been, perfect. We are in need of God’s direction, lest we veer off course.

I believe that blind patriotism, or “my country right or wrong,” is not really patriotism at all. The most authentic patriotism acknowledges times and places where the country has gone wrong and veered off course, while also praying for God’s grace, forgiveness, and new direction, as we reconnect to our original goals and ideals. It is work towards that elusive “more perfect

union.” I think it is clear to any who would take notice right now that our union needs much perfecting, as battle lines are drawn along demarcations of race, region, and political ideology.

I hope and pray that this Inauguration week will be a bit like a seventh-inning stretch for us all. May it be a time when we look up, look around, and find ourselves singing with people we might have come to think of as being on the other team. May we sing for God’s forgiveness and new blessing. May we marvel, with fresh eyes, at the (hopefully) peaceful transfer of power. May we pray that this country might, in ever-deepening ways, continue to be a tool used by God for peace, healing, and well-being in this wonderful world that is composed of nations God loves equally. And may it be a time, please God, that we re-commit to the common good, to loving our neighbors, and to healing our land.

I offer you several things for your contemplation at this important moment – a prayer from the *Book of Common Prayer*, a version of “God Bless America” sung by the U.S. Army Chorus Quartet at a Nationals’ game; the “The Star-Spangled Banner” performed by the U.S. Naval Academy Glee Club; and the anthem played at Buckingham Palace, ordered by Queen Elizabeth following the 9/11 terror attacks on America.

Indeed, may God bless America.

O Lord our Governor, whose glory is in all the world: We commend this nation to *thy* merciful care, that, being guided by *thy* Providence, we may dwell secure in *thy* peace. Grant to the President of the United States, the Governor of this Commonwealth, and to all in authority, wisdom and strength to know and to do *thy* will. Fill them with the love of truth and righteousness, and make them ever mindful of their calling to serve this people in *thy* fear; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who *liveth* and *reigneth* with *thee* and the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end. *Amen.* (page 820)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m2pPfQ17Q6M>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x qtjrh6WI>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ToECtXPMvNM>