

“My Eyes have seen the Glory: Reclaiming Memorial Day”

Luke 24: 44-53

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Will you pray with me? God as we, your people and your witnesses, struggle in these days and these VERY scary times to remember with joy and to look forward with hope, I pray that my sermon today will be good and pleasing to you, O God, our Rock and our redeemer.

Saints and how we remember them in our UCC tradition are not as formalized as in some other Christian traditions, but there are some who have left a lasting imprint on our lives whom we might describe as saints of the progressive church. On this Eve of Memorial Day, I would like to begin this morning by memorializing someone you might not of heard of before—at least not by name. Let me tell the story, oft forgotten from the pages of history books, about one very brave woman. Born to a family of austere Calvinists, converted to our cousins in the Unitarian Church, she lived her 19th Century life in New England surrounded by the most progressive, creative, and foreword thinking people (Congregationalists and Unitarians) of the 19th Century.

The person I would like to memorialize today was a prolific Unitarian preacher, a champion of social justice and civil rights, the leader of the first convention of Unitarian Clergywomen in history starting in 1875, the president, and one of the founders of the Massachusetts Women’s Suffrage Organization. She was the first woman to become a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, one of the founds of Mothers’ Day as an anti-war struggle¹, the longtime editor of the national Women’s Journal, a devout abolitionist who saw slavery as a corporate national sin, believer in the potential of humanity to do better, a hero of the suffrage movement for women, an anti-war champion, and a global pacifist who defined (in all ways) being progressive for her time. She sounds like someone we would all want to know and emulate at Plymouth doesn’t she? Her name was Julia Ward Howe², and today we know her mostly for a modest poem she wrote by candlelight in the middle of a dreary night during the saddest time in our national memory.

You see...Julia had spent a day walking through the mud of the camps of Union Soldiers on the banks of the Potomac River. She was witnessing the wretched conditions, witnessing, bearing witness to the stories and the conversations of hope for a freer more ethical country. She saw the countless fires burning at twilight, and she heard a song about John Brown the Union soldiers sang to keep their hopes up and to remember the cause of freedom and union for which they risked it all. From her pen that night, after her tour, she took the tune the soldiers has created as a marching anthem and put new words to it...

“My eyes have seen the Glory of the coming of the Lord...who is tramping out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored, and has loosed the fateful lighting of a terrible swift sword, God’s truth is marching on.... In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea, with a glory in whose bosom that transfigures you and me; as Christ died to make us holy, *let*

¹ <http://www.uuworld.org/articles/mothers-day-peace-as-julia-ward-howe-intended>

² <http://uudb.org/articles/juliawardhowe.html>

us die to make all free... while God is marching on... Glory Glory Hallelujah. Glory Glory Hallelujah. Glory Glory Hallelujah. God's Truth is marching on."³

And we thought all this time that the Battle Hymn of the Republic was a hymn written for and by conservatives meant to convey some dreaded manifest destiny or sense of domineering military might! This is the meaning that we have been told to take from this hymn. When I told my friend and colleague, The Rev. Dr. Mark Lee that I would be preaching a Memorial Day sermon using this hymn, he said, "Yeah, I always remember this hymn as sung by Anita Bryant [at anti-LGBT rallies in Florida] and at Republican National Conventions. It always makes me uncomfortable..."

While this is how we feel about this hymn today, in fact, it was written by a radical abolitionist, suffragette, the pacifist founder of Mother's Day as a song of hope for what she believed the cause and point of our national identity could be: freedom, liberation, equality, and progress for all people. She bore witness to that vision with her own life story. That is why Julia cries out with the voice of the soldiers, and the suffragettes, and the abolitionists, and the witnesses for a better tomorrow where all are free: **Glory, Glory Hallelujah! Amen!** Hymns often have a life of their own, like any text in a religious context, but the historians are united in their view that this hymn is an anthem of liberation that claims God's realm and purpose is for justice and freedom.

The funny thing is that while, the religious left (us) misunderstand this anthem because we associate it with the military or with oppression, the religious right has started to uncover its true meaning and Unitarian/ Progressive New England origin! Oh my! One particularly ambitious Evangelical blogger has made it his mission to rid every "true Bible Believing" household and church of this supposedly "godless" hymn. He writes in his blog, "The Truth About the Battle Hymn of the Republic," that, "The hundred circling camps were the Union Army camps that Mrs. Howe toured at President Lincoln's invitation. She actually imagined the watch-fires of the camps to be altars built to God! 'By the dim and flaring lamps' in the camps, she was able to read God's 'righteous sentence' on the South.... What a travesty that the words of this woman have found such loving acceptance in Bible-believing churches! What a travesty that they stir emotions of patriotic fervor to unparalleled heights of ecstasy in the congregations that sing this 'hymn'! It should never be sung by any Christian in any church anywhere, North or South."⁴

Oh, the irony!

So, UCC friends, if the religious right has decided they are done with this hymn, and it SURE sounds like they are, maybe it is time for us to reclaim it again as the anthem for social justice and freedom it was intended to be. In a time when vision is lost and we seem to have lost a sense of what it means to be Progressively Patriotic rather than just pessimistically progressive (complaining and talking about how much better everything was in 1968), maybe the idea of hope and vision for liberation that Ward Howe expresses can inspire something in us again?

³ This version comes from the UCC's *New Century Hymnal*, which has made some inclusive adjustments.

⁴ <http://rediscoveringthebible.com/BattleHymn.html>

I guess this I am asking: “What do we see of Christ working in and through our world that makes us want to...no... need to shout GLORY GLORY HALLELUJAH!? If Julia could find the words to proclaim that hope in the middle of the carnage of the civil war, a far darker and scarier time than today, then certainly we can find a way to proclaim hope in 2017?

Progressives are supposed to be the ones with a vision and a hope a PURPOSE for now so that a future can be imagined—one in which God’s truth of freedom and peace is marching onward. That is our role. Where did those cool progressive people go? Have you seen them? We need to find them.

Julia Ward Howe was a prophetic witness for her time seeing the truth underling the rhetoric and confusion of war. She cries out to us through the years.... My eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the realm of God! It isn’t about country—it is about greater meaning and purpose. Glory Glory Hallelujah!

In today’s scripture lesson, The Ascension According to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus’ last words to his disciples aren’t “The Great Commission” as in Matthew or the Disciples running away in fear as in Mark (multiple endings), but Luke has a much simpler and more joyful departure for Jesus. As he leaves earth, according to the story, Luke doesn’t have Jesus give a long speech, offer profound instructions or another parable, no. Jesus simply says, “**You are my witnesses...**And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” You are my witnesses. He doesn’t say, “You are my Christians,” or, “You are my namesake.” We are witnesses to grace and Gospel.

We are the witnesses to suburb, obstinate, determined hope that the arc of the universe bends towards justice and freedom. The eyes of our hearts have seen this Glory! We are called to be the visionaries for Christ. That is the title Jesus gives us: **The United Church of Witness.** It is our eyes that HAVE already seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!

Our eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord when on July 4, 1776 a group of eclectic delegates signed a simple document of independence with the idea that all people should be free to self-government, human rights, and democracy. Glory, Glory, Halleluiah! [Congregation prompted by preacher to reply with **Glory, Glory Halleluiah!**]

Our eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord when on January 1, 1863 Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation ending slavery and setting us on a long road towards justice and freedom that we are still traveling today. **Glory, Glory, Halleluiah!**

Our eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord when on August 18, 1920, fewer than 100 years ago, the 19th Amendment was ratified and women gained universal suffrage and the right to vote! **Glory, Glory, Halleluiah!**

Our eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord when on October 24, 1945 when the United Nations was founded under Eleanor Roosevelt’s leadership and the world began to nobly attempt resolving conflicts and humanitarian issues without constant wars. **Glory, Glory, Halleluiah!**

Our eyes have seen the glory with the 1954 Brown Vs. Board of Education decision that ended school segregation. **Glory, Glory Halleluiah!**

Our eyes have seen the glory with the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, The Voting Rights Act of 1965! **Glory, Glory, Halleluiah!**

Our eyes have seen the glory with the fall of the Berlin wall. **Glory Glory Halleluiah!**

Our eyes have seen the glory with the 1996 Good Friday Peace Accords in Northern Ireland; ending generations of conflict on the streets on Belfast. **Glory Glory Halleluiah!**

Our eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord when in January of 2017 the Women's March took place (the largest civil rights march in history to date). **Glory Glory Halleluiah!**

Our eyes saw the glory of the coming of the Lord with the outcome of the court's decision in 2013 with United States vs. Windsor when marriage was expanded to allow people like me to be married with recognition and respect so people like ME could get married. **Glory, Glory Halleluiah!**

With all of the above mentioned movements for freedom and equality and justice, guess which denomination and tradition was integrally connected and witness and present and progressive and there? Guess who was there for all of these? The United Church of Witness. We remained optimistic, through the many setbacks equal or more in number than the progress weighed heavily on our faith and our strength, Christians who remained progressively patriotic and progressively witnesses for the hope they knew was there, and they endured.

Today, we reclaim the progressive meaning and legacy of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” for we too have a vision for “glory, glory, and halleluiah” in our time: Hope... growth... justice... and equality that our land, our home, our country as American Christians is yet capable of achieving. This is the best way to honor our ancestors we remember tomorrow who sacrificed in wars with a sense of purpose. We will not give-up our legacy to the pessimistic progressivism that pervades and temps us away from that hope. We cannot allow one person, one corrupt Cesar, to change our mission of hope and to take away our national pride or identity.

May we find a way to reclaim not only this song, for it is simply an example (a trope or totem) of the many ways we have lost hope or had something potentially strengthening taken away, but also a sense of progressive patriotism **rather than surrendering our national identity to those who would carry us away from God's Realm of justice and inclusion.** May we indeed live-up to our pledge and truly learn to be a place with liberty and justice for all—and that, my friends, takes witnesses like you, like us, and like those we will form to take our place in this great caravan of history. Glory, Glory, Halleluijah!

Years later, at Julia Ward Howe's funeral in Cambridge, Massachusetts, over 4,000 of the country's most progressive, visionary, and hopeful people gathered together—and with determination and trembling voices, tears running down their stern New England faces, they sang in unison the words they knew so well—Glory Glory Halleluiah, Glory Glory Halluah... Glory Glory Halluajiah... God's Truth is marching on. Amen.