

## Notes on “Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory”

I was torn over including a piece of music that glorifies war in a Memorial Day service. After all, Memorial Day is meant to be a time to honor those military personnel who died while serving in the U.S. armed forces. Then I looked closer into the history of this “Battle Hymn”.

“The Battle Hymn of the Republic”, its alternate title, was born out of the struggles of the Civil War. It was written as a pro-union, anti-slavery rallying cry in late 1861. Julia Ward Howe was asked to pen “more elevated” lyrics to the tune “John Brown’s Body”, a satirical campfire song composed and sung by the troops to keep up their spirits. Years after the Civil War ended, it was Howe who began the tradition of a Mother’s Day of Peace, urging women to “rise up through the ashes and devastation” to advocate for the end to fighting.

In the 162 years since it was written, “The Battle Hymn” has become a second anthem in the U.S. African-American troops during the Civil War added lyrics to make it their own: “We’re done with hoeing cotton, we’re done with hoeing corn / We’re colored Yankee soldiers just as sure as you were born.” Suffragists, union organizers, civil rights activists all sang individualized versions.

The song has been sung to memorialize the assassinated leaders John F. Kennedy and Robert Kennedy. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s last address before he was shot ended with the words, “Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.” Five American presidents sang the song at a memorial for 9/11 at the National Cathedral. It was sung at my own father’s funeral. The song was also used by Anita Bryant at her anti-gay rallies, and by white nationalists as a war cry.

As Andrew Limbong wrote for NPR, ““The Battle Hymn of the Republic” is an anthem that belongs to everybody. But what really matters is what they’re singing it for.”