

Music Notes on “Once to Every Man and Nation”

“Once to every soul and nation comes the moment to decide, in the strife of truth with falsehood, for the good or evil side.”

This hymn is based on a poem called *The Present Crisis* written by James Russell Lowell, an abolitionist and the son of a Unitarian minister. He composed the verses in 1845, in response to the controversy surrounding the annexation of the Republic of Texas to the United States. It was thought that admitting Texas where slavery was sanctioned, would increase the power of the pro-slavery faction. The poem incorporates the principles of conscience and duty, calling people to side with good against evil and to be brave when confronting those in power who stood for falsehood.

In 1880, Thomas Williams took several stanzas of the poem and published it as a hymn. An updated version can be found in our gray hymnal, STLT #119.

In 1910, when the NAACP founding members were discussing a name for their new magazine they chose “The Crisis” based on the poems’ title. The poem and hymn were also important to Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who quoted passages in his sermons and speeches, including the one he gave at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. just days before he was assassinated. More recently, Dr. Barry Black, Chaplain of the US Senate, quoted from the poem in his opening prayer at the start of the second impeachment trial of the 45th president in 2021.

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