

## “Songs of Freedom”

OPENING WORDS Psalm 100 Norman Fischer

### REFLECTIONS FOR ALL AGES

Every American knows the song Yankee Doodle Dandy. Grown ups know it. Kids know it. And probably most people know a little of the story. The song was sung by British officers in the period leading up to the War for Independence, to make fun of the poorly equipped, ill clothed and ragged militiamen of the Thirteen Colonies fighting for self government and freedom from British rule. In the slang of the day, a "doodle" was a doofus or a dummy. The song went like this:

Yankee doodle went to town a riding on a pony.  
Stuck a feather in his hat and called it macaroni.

That verse about macaroni always confused me as a child, until I learned that "macaroni" referred to the fancy epaulets proper British officers wore on their uniforms. All that gold braid looked like macaroni or spaghetti. So the song was mocking, ridiculing the American soldiers who didn't have any fancy uniforms to fight in, just hand made clothes from home spun cloth.

Of course, the Americans embraced the song and made it their own during the Revolutionary War, turning it back on those who had used it as a joke. These Yankees might not be dressed fancy, but they could fight for what they believed. Following the Battle of Lexington and Concord, where the British had to run all the way back to Boston as farmers hidden behind trees and fences sent bullets whistling their way, one newspapers reported that now "Yankee Doodle sounds less sweet to their ears."

Since the beginning of our country, and before, Americans have been singing freedom songs, taking old tunes and writing new lyrics for new circumstances. For instance, our song for gathering this morning is one of the oldest ever sung on this continent, brought here by the Puritans in 1630, called the Old Hundredth (because it was a translation of Psalm 100 from the Bible, "Make a joyful noise unto the Lord.") The words we sang a few minutes ago are over four centuries old, inherited from our religious ancestors who came to this country seeking freedom to worship.

But as our understanding of freedom grows, we realize that old songs sometimes need to be updated. For instance, the Puritans did come to New England seeking religious freedom for themselves, but weren't eager to extend that same freedom to those of differing beliefs. The Minute Men were also fighting for freedom, but although there were thousands of African Americans in the Continental Army, including blacks at Lexington and Concord, the liberty they gained for the newly founded United States was very incomplete. So we are still

writing and learning new freedom songs, songs from other lands and peoples and cultures, songs like the one Martha is going to teach us now from South Africa---songs that express the hope that one day all people in all lands will be free.

## SONG

Unitarian Universalism might be described in a single sentence as the democratic method applied to religion. Ours is a faith where people where people are encouraged to think independently, speak openly and question freely. A faith where congregations are governed by their own members who elect their own leaders in town meeting style forums where everyone can participate. A faith grounded in the sovereignty of each individual to determine their own convictions with conscience as a guide.

Our roots are deeply intertwined with America's roots. So it's no accident that the first Unitarian church in these United States was King's Chapel, now one of the prominent stops on Boston's Freedom Trail. Founded in 1686, it was the first Episcopal Church in New England, literally the British monarch's spiritual outpost in the Massachusetts Colony that had separated from the mother country many years before. But the King's Chapel in 1776, the year of independence, found itself without a minister. For with the outbreak of revolution, the rector had fled with other British sympathizers into Canada, leaving the remaining congregation without a priest.

In this situation, the members of the church took a democratic initiative. They voted to invite James Freeman, a young graduate of Harvard, to become their pastor. And when Mr. Freeman explained that he would accept the invitation, but hesitated because he didn't believe all the creeds and dogmas in the Anglican Book of ~~Prayer, the congregation took another radical step. Together with their new minister, they began to re-write the prayer book to reflect their own convictions, not only eliminating prayers for the Royal Family and other remnants of political servitude, but also cutting the Athanasian Creed and other expressions of Trinitarian doctrine.

There was just one problem. James Freeman had never been ordained. And the ecclesiastical hierarchy, headed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, was not about to ordain this upstart Yankee. So the congregation did another very democratic thing. They seized the right to ordain their own minister. And so in 1787-the same year that the newly independent United States ratified a Constitution based upon the power of "we the people" to govern their own affairs, James Freeman became the first Unitarian minister in the first Unitarian church in the new world.

In 1799, Freeman edited a Collection of Psalms and Hymns for Public Worship which included the anthem we're now about to hear, the Hymn of the Seasons. Listen to the words, and you'll notice that the God it celebrates is Nature's

God-the same creator whom another early Unitarian named Thomas Jefferson said had endowed the human race with inalienable rights: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

## ANTHEM HYMN OF THE SEASONS

The United States was a religious medley, even in the eighteenth century. Quakers didn't fight in any large numbers, but adherents of almost every other denomination did. In John Adams' words, the Continental Army included "Roman Catholicks, English Episcopalians, Scotch and American Presbyterians, Methodists, Moravians, Anabaptists, German Lutherans, German Calvinists, Universalists, Arians, Priestleyans, Socinians, Independents, Deists and Atheists." But Adams himself, along with his wife Abigail, was a Unitarian, as were many others among the founding generation. Whatever their particular beliefs, though, almost all ~ Americans at that time saw themselves as fighting in God's cause, like the Universalist minister Elhanan Winchester, born in Brookline, Massachusetts in 1751. The hymn we sing now is from his collection, *Thirteen Hymns, Suited to the Present Times: Containing the Past, Present, and Future States of America, with Advice to Soldiers and Christians, Dedicated to the Inhabitants of the United Colonies*, published in 1776.

Brave soldiers attend to what I shall say,  
Your succor now lend and make no delay,  
Your foes are engaging your blood for to spill,  
And raving and raging and seeking your ill.

We'll fear not the rage of Britain, nor Hell,  
For God doth engage in Zion to dwell,  
He'll save us from strangers and keep us from harms,  
And shield us from dangers and slavery's arms.

Come let us then fight, the cause it is good,  
For freedom's our right and for it we've stood.  
Through God we shall conquer America's foes,  
Our captain is stronger than all who oppose.

But the Revolutionary generation was passing on. Jefferson and Adams both expired on July 4, 1826, the 50th anniversary of the great Declaration that they authored. James Monroe, the last president who served in the war for independence, also died on Independence Day five years later. James Freeman of King's Chapel joined the illustrious dead in 1835, and two years later, the good people of Concord, where the battle had begun on April 19, 1775, decided to memorialize their departing ancestors.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was a natural choice to write a hymn for the occasion. His grandfather, William Emerson, was the minister of the First Church in Concord, living in the parsonage or "Old Manse" as it was called, located

adjacent to the bridge where the shooting started. And after receiving news of the British advance from a Unitarian silversmith named Paul Revere, it was William Emerson who tolled the church bells summoning the Minute Men to protect the stores of guns and ammunition that had been assembled in the town armory. Grandson Waldo wrote the words, but seized upon an old and familiar New England melody for the tune to the Concord Hymn. Please stand now to join in singing Waldo's tribute to the heroes of the revolution, to the tune of Old Hundredth.

By the rude bridge that arched the flood,  
Their flag to April's breeze unfurled,  
Here once the embattled farmers stood  
And fired the shot heard round the world.

The foe long since in silence slept;  
Alike the conqueror silent sleeps;  
And Time the ruined bridge has swept  
Down the dark stream which seaward creeps.

On this green bank, by this soft stream,  
We set today the votive stone,  
That memory may their deed redeem,  
When, like our sires, our sons are gone.

Spirit, that made those heroes dare  
To die, and leave their children free,  
Bid Time and Nature gently spare  
The shaft we raise to them and Thee.

While Waldo revered the past, he was also busily overturning it, effecting a revolution in religion every bit as startling as the one his forebears started. Like his grandfather William, and his father of the same name who as minister of Boston's First Church gave the installation sermon for Samuel Clarke, our first minister here in Burlington, Ralph Waldo Emerson was a Unitarian clergyman. But he left the ministry deliberately, rejecting a church tradition that was still rooted in the Bible and the sacraments in favor of a new Transcendental spirituality: one that made every man his own priest, every individual a source of revelation that came from the inexhaustible sources of inner wisdom rather than ancient books or outworn rituals.

Emerson became the leader of an intellectual circle that included Henry Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Bronson Alcott and other luminaries more concerned with spiritual freedom than external liberty: The song we sing now reflects their passion for governing the inward realm.

Tutored by her own father Bronson as well as Thoreau, Louisa May Alcott was only

thirteen years old when she wrote this hymn in 1845 at the height of the Concord renaissance.

A little kingdom I possess, Where thoughts and feelings dwell;  
And very hard I find the task Of governing it well;  
For passion tempts and troubles me, a wayward will misleads;  
And selfishness its shadow casts on all my will and deeds.

How can I learn to rule myself To be the child I should-  
Honest and brave, nor ever tire Of trying to be good?  
How can I keep a sunny soul To shine along life's way?  
How can I tune my happy heart To sweetly sing all day?

I do not ask for any crown But that which all may win,  
Nor try to conquer any world Except the one within;  
Be Thou my guide until I find, Led by a tender hand,  
Thy happy kingdom in myself And dare to take command.

Just three years after Louisa's little hymn was written, Thoreau spent the night in jail in Concord for refusing to pay his taxes in protest of the Mexican War, seen by many as a Southern land grab to extend slavery into the West. "Why are you in there?" Emerson supposed asked his friend behind bars, to which Henry David replied "Why are you still out there," implying that inner liberty could never be secured while some men and women still wore chains. War clouds were gathering, and like the nation itself, religious liberals were divided. Joshua Young, the minister of this Society, for example, was fired for his activity in the Underground Railroad and for eulogizing John Brown, buried just across the lake in Elba, New York. Moral fault lines were cracking the country down the middle, dividing churches, fracturing families, and each person had to decide which side they came down on. No one captured the sense of ethical emergency than Unitarian poet James Russell Lowell in his hymn "Once To every Soul and Nation."

James himself was too old for combat, but his nephew Charles Russell Lowell was killed in action at Cedar Creek, and James was married to Josephine Shaw, the sister of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, another Unitarian who led one of the nation's first African American regiments into battle against Fort Wagner, South Carolina. Rallying the troops with a shout of "Forward, 54th!", he was shot through the heart and buried bootless alongside his black troops-intended as an insult by the fort's defenders, but a gesture that Shaw's father said would have made his son proud.

HYMN No. 119 Once to Every Soul and Nation

Blacks also participated in their own emancipation. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, for instance, was born free in 1825 in Baltimore, Maryland, but the ~-4 Fugitive Slave Law, enacted in 1850, put her in danger of being-sold into

bondage. It forced her into contact with the abolitionists and she became one of the movement's foremost lecturers, all the while publishing numerous books of poetry and essays. The anthem we hear now was written by Frances Harper after the war, when she was a member of the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia, titled "Songs for the People."

## ANTHEM SONGS FOR THE PEOPLE

With slavery a thing of the past, Harper turned her energy elsewhere. She worked closely with Susan B. Anthony, a member of the Unitarian church in Rochester, New York, to win women's access to the ballot box, but parted company Anthony over passage of the Fourteenth Amendment, which, together with the Fifteenth, granted the vote to black men but not to women. Recognizing the ever-present danger of lynching, she reasoned that the African-American community needed an immediate political voice. Women could wait, in her view.

Others were less patient, like Julia Ward Howe, leader of the New England Women's Suffrage Association. Howe became famous for writing the best known marching song of the Civil War era. She'd been visiting Washington D.C. together with her husband and their minister James Freeman Clarke from Boston's Unitarian Church of the Disciples, when she heard the troops singing about "John Brown's body mouldering in the grave." Reverend Clarke asked Julia if she could write some more uplifting lyrics, and when she awoke the next morning, the words were forming in her head. She sent them off to the Atlantic Monthly, which paid her four dollars for publication rights, and "Battle Hymn of the Republic" was born. But it was another Unitarian laywoman, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a socialist, labor organizer and peace activist who rewrote those words in 1911 to create a larger vision of freedom, more appropriate for a new century.

## HYMN FOR EQUAL SUFFRAGE

Day of hope and day of glory! After slavery and woe,  
Comes the dawn of woman's freedom,  
and the light shall grow and grow  
Until every man and woman equal liberty shall know,  
In Freedom marching on!  
Glory, glory hallelujah ... [repeat] ... In Freedom marching on!

Not for self but larger service, has our cry for freedom grown,.  
There is crime, disease and warfare in a world of man alone,  
In the name of love we're rising now to serve and save our own,  
Glory, glory hallelujah ... [repeat] ... As Peace comes marching on!

By every sweet and tender tie around our heartstring curled,  
In the cause of nobler motherhood is woman's flag unfurled,

Till every child shall know the joy and peace of mother's world-  
As Love comes marching on!  
Glory, glory hallelujah ... [repeat] ... As Love comes marching on!

We will help to make a pruning hook of every outgrown sword,  
We will help to knit the nations in continuing accord,  
In humanity made perfect in the glory of the Lord!  
And His world is marching on!  
Glory, glory hallelujah ... [repeat] ... And His world is marching on!

Some of you probably winced at the words "his world is marching on." Clearly, our understanding of what's required for women's full liberation has expanded since Gilman wrote that tune ninety-six years ago, and Unitarian Universalists today would never dream of describing God in purely masculine terms.

In the twentieth century, we learned to more fully embrace women's rights, gay rights, the rights of children, the rights of labor, reproductive rights, posterity rights, and much more. And as we've done so, our music has changed. On the shelf of my study, I have a variety of Unitarian and Universalist hymnals that I own: *The Beacon Song and Service Book* from 1935, *Hymns of the Spirit* from 1948, which I remember in our pews from the days when I was a child. From my teen and young adult past, there's *Hymns for the Celebration of Life*, published in 1964, and out of the raucous idealism of the late sixties *Songs of Faith in Man*, which included several tunes by a balladeer named Pete Seeger, currently a member of the UU Community Church of New York.

Seeger was probably the first to ever record the song "We Shall Overcome," which goes back to possibly a 1903 song by Rev. Charles Tindley of Philadelphia containing the repeated line "I'll overcome some day." Seeger (or someone else, he himself isn't sure and says that it may have been the Highlander Folk School's Septima Clark) changed "We will overcome" to "We shall overcome." Seeger sang it with others at the founding meeting of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in Raleigh, N.C., in 1960. He added some new verses (like "We'll walk hand in hand", "The whole wide world around"). And from there, it spread and became an anthem of southern African American labor and civil rights activism. Let's sing it now together.

HYMN No. 169 We Shall Overcome

In 1993, the Unitarian Universalist Association introduced our current hymnal, *Singing the Living Tradition*, a fitting title for a religion like ours. Our music is a living tradition, because it both changes and stays the same, always expanding the reach and range of freedom's chorus, but honoring and revering ~ those heroines and pathfinders from the past, from James Freeman and Ralph Waldo Emerson to Susan B. Anthony and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper on to the singers and songwriters of today, who have sought to defend outward liberty even as they aspired to an inward and spiritual grace.

Appropriate, then, that our closing words come from two Unitarian Universalist musicians, Mary Katherine Morn and Jason Shelton, whose anthem "*The Fire of Commitment*" appears in *Singing the Journey*, a supplement to our current hymn book released just two years ago.

From the light of days remembered burns a beacon bright and clear  
Guiding hands and hearts and spirits into faith set free from fear.  
When the fire of commitment sets our mind and soul ablaze,  
When our hunger and our passion meet to call us on our way,  
When we live with deep assurance of the flame that burns within,  
Then our promise finds fulfillment, and our future can begin.

ANTHEM THE FIRE OF COMMITMENT