

What was I thinking?

July 4, 2021



God and Country

July 4, Independence Day, and this year it's on a Sunday. We want to honor and celebrate our country, but what's appropriate in worship? I've been hearing the usual arguments between church musicians over what music is appropriate and what is not, and it's not surprising that we don't agree. Some want a full-on patriotic show with everything but fireworks (I hope!), while others say it has no place in worship. Can we celebrate our nation without exalting nation over God? According to Carl P. Daw, Jr., author of the companion to our new Presbyterian Hymnal, believes that could be a violation of the First Commandment. So, is there an appropriate and tasteful way to celebrate our country in worship? Of course there is.

In Sunday's service, the prelude, offertory, and postlude are all by American composers. Robert Powell, who composed the prelude, lives in South Carolina. The offertory, a piece I learned about in a virtual conference just a few weeks ago, is by a California composer. The postlude, *Fanfare on "Eternal Father, Strong to Save,"* is by a composer who lives in Tennessee. Our Song of Gathering is set to a shape note tune, a tradition popular in old American singing schools. The hymn before communion, *Let Us Break Bread Together*, is an African-American spiritual, and we know spirituals are a great and uniquely American gift to the world. Our communion liturgy is set to American folk tune, arranged by an American composer. America has and continues to make great contributions to the world of music.

OK, but are we going to do anything really patriotic? Yes. Our Presbyterian hymnals include great patriotic hymns. Our final hymn Sunday, the well-known *O Beautiful for*

Spacious Skies, was inspired by the author's visit to Pike's Peak in the late 1800s after teaching a summer course in Colorado. Her time at the summit was brief, but it was enough to inspire Katherine Lee Bates to start writing a text. The first version, published on July 4, 1895, started with this stanza:

O beautiful for halcyon skies,
For amber waves of grain,
For purple mountain majesties
Above the enameled plain!
America! America! God shed his grace on thee!
Till souls wax fair as earth and air
And music-hearted sea!

Obviously, the words have changed over time. Sometimes we get upset when we think something's been changed from the way it was "originally written," but we don't realize the way we learned it might not be the way it was originally written. Carl Daw points out that "America! America!" should be sung "longingly and with deep affection, mindful of this country's need of God's protection and direction."

Speaking of protection, we're not singing *Eternal Father, Strong to Save* since we did it not long ago, but I have been working on a new organ piece based on the tune for the postlude. The piece will make use of our new Antiphonal Organ, which was given by Dr. Bill Barry and Brita Barry in honor of the United States Military Academy. The hymn is often called the "Navy Hymn," but it goes beyond just being that. It is a prayer for God to guide and protect those who travel, especially by sea, "from rock and tempest, fire and foe, protect them wheresoe'er they go." That can be a prayer for those literally traveling, as many of us do in the summer, but it can also be symbolic for all of us traveling on life's journey. We have faced many tempests and we will have more, together and individually. We need God's protection and guidance as individuals, as a church, as a country, and for all the world.



If you're looking for fireworks, we're not going to be doing that in church, though I have sometimes played some of Handel's *Fireworks Music* for July 4th. A fireworks display accompanied by music is not a new idea. I'm sure you can find that in a number of places this weekend. On Sunday morning, we'll celebrate our country, and we'll continue to ask for God's prayers and guidance.

God be with you till we meet again.

John