The Sweet June Days are here! And they herald a time when holidays are imminent and undeniable. Already, the month of May has hinted at this kind of season, with Mayday celebrations around the world, Cinco de Mayo in Mexico and the US, and May Two-Four here in Canada; holidaying is a thing!

This weekend, Quebec is gearing up for its national feast: la Saint-Jean-Baptiste, just as the rest of us gear up for Canada Day next weekend, and our neighbours to the south prepare for Independence Day. And many in this city and this congregation will also be ready to join the Pride festivities next week.

Yes, my friends, as holiday time arrives, these Holy Days proclaim: the summer—it is on!

And amid the celebration in these dates, a voice cries out in the wilderness, making way to declare: “You gotta fight for your right to party!”

In singing that iconic motto, I think The Beastie Boys were on to something. Party time is a wonderful thing, but there’s a story behind our holidays, a sacred history that makes these days holy.

A staple of these holidays is the oft-anticipated firework displays, put together at public expense to sanctify the collective gathering of the public—of the people who make up the very nations that are being celebrated.

I must confess that it took me some time to get used to these “fire works”. In fact, for a good while in my childhood, I was dreadfully afraid of fireworks, and I wouldn’t go anywhere near them or the people who claimed to enjoy them… folks that I regarded as very highly suspect.
As I’ve grown up and gotten used to the sound of bursts in the air, I have come to appreciate the beauty—the ephemeral splendour—of those large fire flowers blooming in the sky, giving brief witness to precious moments that remind me of the magnificence of the universe, and that even seem to offer a glimpse of that first day of creation.

Sitting at a fireworks display—that fleeting time of ooh-ing and aah-ing—can give me a brief sense of timelessness; of a fragile, eternal bond with our origins and with our shared existence.

As the loud pops and bangs of each light-burst chase the other, a murmur starts to form, with an emerging rhythm that echoes in the air like one universal heartbeat.

And as this heartfelt display beats in the sky, an odd smoke, like that of a gigantic stick of incense, begins to waft down on the crowd. One with a very peculiar scent:

Gunpowder.

That is when one spell is broken and another one appears. The rocket’s red glare gives proof through the night that a story is still there. That our flags wave with a heavy heritage, often too complicated to give in detail, and can sometimes only be told in discrete doses of national mythology and odd rituals of celebration and commemoration, where the sacramental altar is the sky above.

In Quebec, the saint day of John the Baptist is also known as *la fête nationale*. It is a time to display the fleur-de-lys, the blue and white, and speak the tongue of a rich francophone heritage. Amid the June picnics in the park, the parades, and the poetry readings, John is rarely mentioned, but it strikes me as a neat connection that a feast of identity still holds a namesake with the Baptist, a prophet that, by some accounts rebelled against the imposition of an empire over a nation, and who proclaimed a path that was different from the established one.

The Fourth of July is an opportunity for an entire nation to gather for barbecues and beerfests, flags and fireworks. The words *freedom*, or sometimes, *liberty*, get thrown around very often. They sound like things worth celebrating, and moreover, *enjoying* directly over a lawn, with people who are special.

The date it commemorates is a little odd, historians can’t agree on a specific day when the document it celebrates was actually signed, as the Declaration of Independence took some time to get to all its signholders and be properly published. The war that came with it is also a complicated matter. It is a story of heroes and villains, the identity of whom can depend on who is telling the story, and to what end. This morning, it is not for me to say who was right in this story, but perhaps it is for me bring up, that when I cross the Rainbow Bridge, onto the ground of Niagara Falls, New York, I tread that ground with a knowledge that those of us who roam on it step on more earth and bedrock.
Canada Day is a slightly different animal, as an anniversary of Queen Victoria’s proclamation for a new capital, and the joining of several provinces into Confederation, which achieved a very similar result as the American War of Independence, but without the war… not quite the same independence, and just under a hundred years later.

And then, there’s May Two-Four, Victoria Day: a birthday! a day to commemorate that same queen that gave Canada a measure of independence like the American type, but without the same kind of conflict. And still this is the same queen that was crowned empress of India, a colony that felt its oppression to such an extent that it too had its fight for independence. Only it took that fight largely in the nonviolent way for which its national hero Mahatma Gandhi is remembered.

There are people who fought for their right, not to fight… at least not in the seemingly conventional way.

My friends, today I wish to share with you a song, and a bit of its history. In a few minutes, our quartet will sing for you the Battle Hymn of the Republic. The lyrics of the Battle Hymn which we’ll hear today were written during a war, which is called the American Civil War; it was indeed a battle hymn. It is a complicated song, with a complicated history, for a people who were living through a complicated and indescribable war.

The song goes to a popular abolitionist tune, sometimes called John Brown’s Hymn—many of you might know the tune better as Solidarity Forever—and this is a story which I will expand in more detail next week, as we celebrate and commemorate the Pride festival in Toronto. But I am bringing up the song today because it highlights some of the complexities of our denominational history. The author of the Battle Hymn was Julia Ward Howe, a Unitarian woman sympathetic to the abolitionist cause. Yes, my friends, that old iconic hymn is part of our Unitarian heritage. The lyrics will probably sound somewhat odd to many Unitarians today: it borrows heavily on the apocalyptic imagery of the book of Revelation, with a good measure of fire and brimstone, for good manners, and a dash of martial mission:

He hath sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat.

It is language that Julia Ward Howe knew best and is the way that she found to tell the story and inspire courage in a fight that she felt needed fighting, recognizing that it was an ongoing struggle that would carry on ages after the war she witnessed and beyond her life. Yet she was also confident that her eyes had seen that glory, even if at an incomplete level of fulfillment.

And so, my friends, in these days, these holy days, we hold each others hands and celebrate, to witness a partial glory, commemorating incomplete levels of fulfillment, in gratitude to complex stories and lives that have made today a holy day.

Glory, glory,
Hallelujah!
Amen.