

November 9, 2008
Scripture Reading

Nehemiah 12:46

For in the days of David and Asaph long ago there was a leader of the singers, and there were songs of praise and thanksgiving to God.

1 Chronicles 31

These are the men whom David put in charge of the service of song in the house of the Lord, after the ark came to rest there. They ministered with song before the tabernacle of the tent of meeting, until Solomon had built the house of the Lord in Jerusalem; and they performed their service in due order.

Isaiah 42:10-11

10 Sing to the Lord a new song,
his praise from the end of the earth!
Let the sea roar and all that fills it,
the coastlands and their inhabitants.
11 Let the desert and its towns lift up their voice,
the villages that Kedar inhabits;
let the inhabitants of Sela sing for joy,
let them shout from the tops of the mountains.

Nehemiah 12: 27

Now at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought out the Levites in all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem to celebrate the dedication with rejoicing, with thanksgivings and with singing, with cymbals, harps, and lyres.

Acts 16:25

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.

Matthew 26:30

When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

1 Corinthians 14:15

What should I do then? I will pray with the spirit, but I will pray with the mind also; I will sing praise with the spirit, but I will sing praise with the mind also.

Colossians 3:16

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.

Ephesians 5:19

... Be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ

Sermon
November 9, 2008
Rev. Corey F. O'Brien

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts always be acceptable in thy sight, oh God, my strength and my Redeemer

Hear My Voice, O God

A few weeks ago during one of our supervisory sessions, our seminarian Tom Hathaway and I were having a discussion about the various things that come up when we reflect upon the art of ministry. It had been a long day for me and we were very near the end of our time. Although I am not sure what time that is since Tom and I seem to have a lot to talk about. But it was getting late and just before we were ready to tie up our session Tom asked me, why do we sing hymns? The first thought that came into my mind was, because we do, that's why. But before I could formulate a real answer to his question Tom said, I mean what is the theology behind why we sing hymns? Well, I muddled around a bit and managed to give him a watered-down, lukewarm version of the theology of singing hymns during worship. His question pointed out to me that this required further reflection upon my part. Tom deserved a more informed answer to this very important and significant question. So today, I would like to ask you to help me in answering this question. During the sermon today, I will ask you to join me in singing some of our most beloved hymns. Between the words that I will preach and the hymns that we sing together, it is my hope that we will all come to a deeper understanding of this very important part of our worship service.

Hymnody has been with us throughout our Judeo-Christian heritage as illuminated by our Scripture readings today. Hymns have been traditionally used in

worship, and in celebrations and dedications. They have been sung to praise and give thanksgiving to God. They are used in times of mourning, as well as in times of joy. Hymns sung together bring us together as a community. The art of singing releases us from our inhibitions. The emotional power of music reaches deep into our souls and gives these hymns meaning beyond words alone. It is as if God is singing through us.

Ours is a rich musical heritage. Our doxology, which we sing each Sunday to praise God, finds its roots in the synagogue during Christ's lifetime. We have canticles and ancient songs and beautiful anthems to punctuate our worship, such as the one you just heard. And just as our motto for the United Church of Christ states, "God is still speaking," I will say to you God is still singing. We need look no further than our gathering hymn whose words have been changed by us to state that all are welcome here today.

The hymns that we will be singing along with the sermon today will carry the stories of those who have experienced God and wanted to share their joy through the timelessness of Hymns.

Our opening hymn, "Every Time I Feel the Spirit," was written by a slave poet, who is unknown to us today. The first verse of this hymn recounts Moses' experience on the mountain top, when he received the 10 Commandments. The second verse is an allusion to baptism in the Jordan River and to the 'heavenly train.'¹ We can't help but be moved by the refrain of this exuberant hymn. "Every time I feel the spirit moving in my heart I will pray." As we are all aware those who were held in slavery were not permitted to learn to read. But they were allowed Christian worship, and from the Bible verses that

¹ Robert L. Anderson, "Hymn Profiles," in *The New Century Hymnal Companion*, ed. Kristen L. Forman (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1998), 352.

they heard they transformed them into song and these songs embodied their hope and expressed their faith in God. Humanity could enslave their bodies, but it could not enslave their spirit or the presence of God in their lives. And so it is still true for us today. Our bodies can be held captive by illness or addiction, but the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, cannot be held captive. It is only up to us to open our hearts and minds and feel the presence of God moving within us and among us, filling us with hope.

The first hymn that I would like us to sing, "When Peace Like a River," brings to mind Psalm 34 verse 19, "Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord rescues them from them all." Bad things happen to good people, and we all may wonder why this happens. The beauty of this hymn is that it takes into account that bad things do happen and they are not caused by God, but even in our darkest despair it is always to God whom we may turn to for solace.

Horatio G. Spafford wrote the words to this beautiful hymn as a source of comfort in his time of need. Horatio was an attorney in Chicago, who lost his fortune in 1871 during the Great Chicago fire. At that time, his only son who was four years of age died of scarlet fever. Perhaps to sooth his family's grief he decided to take his wife and daughters to Europe for a vacation. They were all due to set out on the luxurious French liner Ville du Havre but at the last minute Horatio was detained in New York, on an urgent business matter, and he decided to send his wife Anna and their four daughters, Maggie, Tanetta, Annie and Bessie on ahead, promising them that he would join them soon. During the night of November 22, 1873, the ship collided with an iron sailing vessel and within two hours the ship vanished into the sea. There were 226 fatalities, which included Horatio's four daughters. His wife was found nearly unconscious

clinging to the wreckage. And when the survivors landed in Wales she sent a cable to her husband, saying, "Saved alone." Horatio immediately took a ship to join his wife. And while they were en route the captain called him and said, "I believe we are now passing over the place where the Villa du Havre went down." Horatio returned to his cabin and unable to sleep he said to himself, "It is well; the will of God be done," and later he wrote the words to this beautiful hymn based on these words which were uttered in his grief.² Horatio asked his neighbor, Philip Bliss, a prolific songwriter of his generation, to provide a melody.³ Horatio clearly understood the soothing power of song and that through the darkest times in our lives we may call upon God. Please join me in singing, "When Peace, like a River."

"For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope." Jeremiah 20: 9-11. It is no wonder that someone decided to turn this beautiful music written by Beethoven into a hymn for worship. The music for Joyful, Joyful, We adore Thee, is the final chorus of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, and is entitled, "Hymn to Joy." It is truly remarkable that this very inspiring music was written when Beethoven was toward the end of his life and had completely lost his hearing.

The words to this Beethoven's "Hymn to Joy" were written by Henry Van Dyke who was a famous preacher and intellectual of his time. It was during a visit to Williams College in Massachusetts in 1907, when Van Dyke was so inspired by the beauty of the Berkshire Mountains that he wrote the words to this hymn with the intention that they be sung to Beethoven's "Hymn to Joy." Henry Van Dyke was an American ambassador to

² Robert J. Morgan, *Then Sings My Soul* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2003), 185.

³ Anderson, 438.

the Netherlands and Luxembourg, a Lieutenant Commander in the United States Navy Chaplain's Core during World War I, the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church and the president of the National Institute of Arts and Letters. It is no wonder that when later in his life he was asked about this hymn, he said, "These verses are simple expressions of common Christian feelings and desires in this present time-- hymns of today that may be sung together by people who know the thought of the age, and are not afraid that any truth of science will destroy religion, or any revolution on earth overthrow the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, this is a hymn of trust and joy and hope"⁴ Please join me in singing the first and fourth verses of, "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee," a hymn for all the ages.

Although we will not be singing the hymn, "God Be With You," until the end of our service, I would like to tell you a story about this hymn that illustrates the power of words when they are attached to the beauty of a simple song. "Grace, mercy, and peace will be with you from God the father and from the Lord Jesus Christ, the son of the father, in truth and love." 2 John 3.

It was on September 19, 1945 that missionary Darlene Deibler was liberated from a Japanese prison camp in Indonesia, 17 days after Japan had signed instrument of surrender ending World War II. Darlene was in very bad shape, for she had suffered many years of physical suffering and mental torture. She had come to New Guinea with her husband Russell to help build a church and was aided by a dear friend and mentor, Dr. Robert Jaffray. Now, both Russell and Dr. Jaffray were dead. She was a 28-year-old widow returning home without a single possession.⁵ "All her mementos and private

⁴ Ibid., 265.

⁵ Ibid, Morgan, 205.

keepsakes were gone, her loved ones were dead, and her body was debilitated by exhaustion, starvation, malaria, beriberi, and dysentery.... as the boat carried her from her island prison, she prayed a bitter prayer: 'Lord, I'll never come to these islands again they've robbed me of everything that was most dear to me.'" ⁶ Later Darlene wrote in her biography entitled, *Evidence Not Seen*, that after she had recited this bitter prayer she heard voices from the distance. These were the Indonesian voices of her people coming from the shoreline as her boat passed by; these were the voices of those who had come to know God through her mission. They were singing, "God be with you to we meet again. /by his counsels guide, uphold you, /with sheep securely fold you; /God be with you to we meet again."⁷ Darlene wrote, "This song released the waters of bitterness that had flooded my soul, and the hurt began to drain away from me as my tears flowed in a steady stream. The healing had begun. I knew then that some day, God only knew when, I would come back to these my people and my island home."⁸ As we sing this at the end of our service today, let us remember that we are singing to each other and sending blessings among us.

"In Him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace." Ephesians 1:7

Amazing Grace, a hymn about sin, repentance, grace and salvation. John Newton, the author of this hymn, was a captain aboard a slave ship in the 18th century involved in the heinous sin of slavery. On the night of March 9, 1748, John was jolted awake by a brutal storm at sea. Apparently the storm went on into the next day, and John Newton later wrote, "That 10th of March is a day much remembered by me: and I have

⁶ Morgan.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

never suffered it to pass unnoticed since the year 1748 -- the Lord came from on high and delivered me out of deep waters." ⁹ You probably are familiar with the rest of the story. John Newton went on to be a powerful foe against slavery and to become one of the most powerful evangelical preachers in British history. ¹⁰

In our world today we don't use the words sin, repentance and salvation very much anymore. We tend to use words like spirituality, empowerment, stress reduction and harmony. ¹¹ "The threat of sin, the need for repentance, and the promise of salvation sound too much like part of the old control mechanism for keeping people in line, which has failed even at the highest echelons of church leadership." ¹² Yet I believe that these words still have great meaning for us. Sin means to miss the mark, or, to put it in more of a theological context, to not fully live in into the light of God. We sin when our actions hurt others and when we hurt ourselves and do not live our lives fully. If you can relate to this definition of sin, it makes it difficult to understand people who seem to willingly harm themselves through addictions and by out-of-control behavior brought on by mental illness. Yes, there is sin in this, but it is not the sin of the people who suffer these debilitating conditions. Perhaps this is the corporate sin of a society that turns its back on these people.

The other day I had a very interesting conversation with a friend of mine who claims to not be religious. I was telling my friend that I would be giving a sermon today about what it means to sing hymns during our worship service. My friend responded

⁹ Ibid., 79.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Speaking of Sin* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2000), 20.

¹² Ibid.

very excitedly by telling me that when she feels sad or can't rest at night, she finds herself singing Amazing Grace, a hymn she remembers from her childhood.

She tells me she is not religious, and yet she picks a hymn that draws us into the very center of our Christian beliefs. Now I ask you, why do you think this hymn has been so popular? The tune is pleasant enough and easy to sing, but I say the real power of this hymn lies in its words. Amazing Grace calls us to recognize and confess our sins, "I once was lost but now I'm found, was blind but now I see." There is an old saying, "confession is good for the soul," and maybe that is why this hymn has come to mean so much to so many people. For we all sin and whether we want to or not there comes a time when we at least have to admit it to ourselves if not to God. I believe that this hymn, whether sung in private or in a communal setting allows us to openly confess our sins to God. But it also calls us to repentance, and by repentance, I mean changing our lives in a way that allows God's presence and life-giving grace to enter into us. Like all hymns, this is a hymn that is to be prayed. This is a Hymn that calls us to worship with intention, it calls us to transform ourselves and it comforts us with the knowledge that God's grace sings out to us.

We sing Hymns because they are grounded in our scripture and we are called forth by God to sing. We sing hymns because they tell the stories of inspired people who have felt the presence of God in their lives and we share their sentiments and feelings. We sing because singing is the exuberant and soulful expression of our deepest feelings. We write and sing hymns because God continually speaks to us and through us. So let us pray our hymns and worship intentionally. Let us raise our voices filled with prayer as we sing "Amazing Grace." Amen

Bibliography

Anderson, Robert L. "Hymn Profiles." In *The New Century Hymnal Companion*, ed. Kristen L. Forman. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1998.

Morgan, Robert J. *Then Sings My Soul*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2003.

Taylor, Barbara Brown. *Speaking of Sin*. Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2000.