

Psalm 149: 1-6a

“Singing our Faith”

Sunday, April 26, 2015

©Rev. Heike Werder

The Congregational Church of Needham

Today we are going to sing our faith, and contemplate together the surprising effects music has on our lives. Let me share one of my most powerful encounters with music. When my Aunt Ilse died in 2004, my mom was willing to delay the funeral services so I could get there to attend. My aunt was the one who got me into this “ministry” business, and it seemed important to everyone that I would be able to not just attend the funeral but also participate.

The service was held on October 31, 2004, on Reformation Day, a major holiday in Germany. I did my parts in the worship service, and in the middle of it we sang my aunt’s favorite hymn “Von Guten Maechten”, in English “By gracious Power”, a hymn that is in our black hymnal. I was supposed to sing a few verses of this hymn solo, but that never happened because I had lost it. I was a puddle of tears. The Germans use a different melody for the song but both versions are equally moving.

This particular hymn has great meaning for our family. The first verse of this hymn was our morning prayer. We all would say it together at breakfast. The lyrics were written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer while imprisoned by the Nazis. It was written as a love poem to his fiancée and as a New Year’s greeting/prayer for his family as they anticipated the new year of 1945. Four month later, Bonhoeffer was executed. The lyrics speak of hope in the midst of grave danger, and knowing that we are not alone but surrounded by gracious powers – by God, and family, and friends. For us as a family living in Communist East Germany, Bonhoeffer’s were words of defiance, hope, and courage.

I think that we all have hymns or pieces of music that stir great emotions in us. Music has this canny ability to engage a part of us that is not simply cerebral and expresses thoughts and feelings in a way that words alone cannot. Music can be a vehicle to express an intuition or a feeling that stirs in our souls but is beyond language. Gustav Mahler said, “If a composer could say what he had to say in words he would not bother trying to say it in music.” And in a related vein, Victor Hugo said, “Music expresses that which cannot be said but on which it is impossible to remain silent.”

Most of the music we listen to is directed toward an audience. When we attend a concert, the music is intended for those of us who have shown up to listen. But music for worship has a different audience. The hymns and sacred pieces

played during our worship time, are directed toward God. In worship, music is played and sung, for an audience of one – the Creator of heaven and earth.

That is not to say that we do not benefit from hearing sacred music or singing a hymn or spiritual song. We can be moved to tears or injected with courage; we can be drawn closer to God or inspired to action. Sacred music can give voice to deep longings or help us gain a new perspective; it can calm our soul and create internal peace or revive our hope in a new day.

Often hymns, anthems and musical pieces undergird, reinforce and expand the message of Scripture and sermon. Music can take words that have been embraced by our minds and imbed them in our bones. Music can touch deep places within us and transport us to different times. That's why some people will love a particular hymn even though they may not agree with the theology it expresses. The music resonates with them despite the words, because it carries them back to a childhood memory or a special occasion.

With those thoughts in mind, we are going to sing a number of hymns in our hymnal. These are hymns that come from different periods of history, hymns that express different emotions and hymns that affirm different expressions of faith.

Do not hold back because you cannot sing on key. Hitting the right notes is nice, but not obligatory. God does not care if you can sing on key or not. All I asked you is that you sing joyfully!

Singing our Faith: the hymns

38 (R) Morning has Broken

Morning has broken was not written by Cat Stevens! It is the best known work of Eleanor Farjeon, children's author and poet. Cat Stevens just made it popular.

Eleanor was born in London on 13th February 1881, the daughter of a popular novelist at the time, Benjamin Farjeon. In 1931, she was asked by Percy Dearmer, who was the editor of Songs of Praise, to "make a poem to fit the lovely Scottish tune," called Bunesan. It originally was considered a children's song.

456 (R) All Beautiful the March of Days

This hymn is set to an old English hymn tune - **Forest Green**. The words came from Frances W. Wile at the request of her friend William Channing Gannet. Ms. Wile was a native of Bristol, NY and Gannet was a Unitarian minister who had been educated at Harvard after the American Civil War. They met in Rochester, NY where both were active in the women's suffrage movement. Gannet was collecting hymns and was interested in those that evoked the beauty of winter.

209 (R) Abide With Me

Words by Henry Francis Lyte (1793-1847) and put to music by William H. Monk (1823-1889).

And sadly, the hymn made its debut at Henry's memorial service. Henry and his wife Anne were faithful pastors of a little fishing town in Devonshire England, for 23 years. Although Henry's health was compromised, he worked tirelessly ministering to his parish, taking care of his family, and writing poems and hymns. In 1844, Henry was diagnosed with Tuberculosis. Before embarking on a trip to Italy, he wrote the words to the song. Henry died in France

The hymn has since been popular within many Christian denominations. It was reported to have been a favorite of King George V, and of Mahatma Gandhi. It was sung at the weddings of King George VI and of Queen Elizabeth II. It is sung before kick-off at every FA Cup Final and Rugby League, and at various annual celebrations in Austria, New Zealand, Canada and the United Kingdom.

473 (B) Blessed Assurance, Jesus Is Mine

Words by Fanny Crosby, who wrote more than 8,500 gospel song texts during her lifetime.

Crosby was visiting her friend Phoebe Knapp as the Knapp home was having a large pipe organ installed. The organ was incomplete, so Mrs. Knapp, using the piano, played a new melody she had just composed. When Knapp asked Crosby, "What do you think the tune says?", Crosby replied, "Blessed assurance; Jesus is mine." [1]

195 (B) On a Hill Far Away

Even as a youngster George Bennard had aspirations as an evangelist to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Soon after his wedding, he and his new wife joined the Salvation Army and his dream began to become a reality. They worked together telling people of Jesus in word, deed and in song. In 1913, Reverend Bennard wrote a hymn that would become one of the most beloved of all Christendom: The Old Rugged Cross.

Upon Bennard's death in 1953, the local chamber of commerce of Reed City, Michigan, erected a large memorial cross near the Bennard home as a tribute the evangelistic life of Reverend and Mrs. George Bennard, and to his most famous beloved song. A year later, The Old Rugged Cross Historical Museum was dedicated near the same site. The cross and the museum still stand today.

475 (B) God's Eye Is on the Sparrow

The theme of the song is inspired by the words of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew in the Bible: "Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" (Matthew 6:26) and "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? And one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows" (Matthew 10:29–31).

Civilla Martin, who wrote the lyrics, said this about her inspiration to write the song based in the scriptures outlined above:

"Early in the spring of 1905, my husband and I were sojourning in Elmira, New York. We contracted a deep friendship for a couple by the name of Mr. and Mrs. Doolittle—true saints of God. Mrs. Doolittle had been bedridden for nigh twenty years. Her husband was an incurable cripple who had to propel himself to and from his business in a wheel chair. Despite their afflictions, they lived happy Christian lives, bringing inspiration and comfort to all who knew them. One day while we were visiting with the Doolittles, my husband commented on their bright hopefulness and asked them for the secret of it. Mrs. Doolittle's reply was simple: "His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me." The beauty of this simple expression of boundless faith gripped the hearts and fired the imagination of Dr. Martin and me. The hymn "His Eye Is on the Sparrow" was the outcome of that experience." — Civilla Martin