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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: Psalm 59: 16-17; Acts 16: 19-30; Colossians 3: 16-17
April 14, 2024

This Is My Story, This is My Song: Why Hymns Matter

“This is my story, this is my song.” That’s the refrain of a famous hymn, “Blessed Assurance,” written by Fanny Crosby in the 19th century. Crosby wrote literally hundreds of popular hymns during her lifetime, and she’s buried here in Connecticut, down in Bridgeport. Like a good many blues musicians, she was blind, and so she understood a little about what it is to be a person of faith - to have to grope about in the dark in order to get one’s bearings. She depended upon sound, and specifically music, in order to help find her way. More than that, she used hymns to access the depth dimension of the human spirit, what we call soul. For those with ears to hear - and I hope there are many of us with such ears this morning - it’s still possible to access those depth dimensions when this art form, the singing of hymns, is practiced.

Today I wish to celebrate that art form for a couple of reasons. First, because things have felt a little heavy around here since David Good’s death, and I thought perhaps we could use a kind of diversion. But also because little by little, the singing of hymns seems to be disappearing from public practice. We still sing hymns around here, of course, but the number of churches that do so is decreasing. Even in mainline churches such as our own, many have traded the hymnal for songs that are sometimes called “contemporary,” or at other times are called “praise and worship music.” That, combined with a decline in religious engagement in the United States, means that fewer and fewer people are familiar with hymns. At funerals, for example, many seem baffled and unsure when it comes time to sing. Some families recently have even suggested not singing hymns at all, for fear that no one will know them. I’m not faulting anyone for that. Times change. Tastes change. Beliefs change. Even so, it’s a practice, and a form of music, that I wish to preserve, and encourage. Even if you don’t agree with, or don’t resonate with the theology of certain hymns (and there are many that I wish to argue with), there is a power to this form of music making that we do well to celebrate.

Throughout the next several minutes, I’ll offer a few reasons, together with some stories, about why hymns matter. But interspersed with that, I want us to actually sing a few hymns. I’ll invite you to call out a hymn title, and number, and we’ll sing one verse of the hymn together. We’ll alternate back and forth like that for a while, with a little talk and a little singing. So, be thinking of a hymn you’d like to sing. The only stipulation is that it’s got to be in our hymnbook. You can find a list of titles and first lines in the back of the hymnal.

While you think of a hymn, let me offer the first reason that hymns matter. It’s this: these are songs that are, often anyway, hundreds of years old, and sometimes thousands. People have been singing these songs for that long! For a song to stay in circulation for a hundred years, for five hundred years, or for a thousand, means that there’s something going on in that song that transcends changing fashions and taste. By contrast, most of the music we consume now is ephemeral, meant to be quickly replaced by something newer. Not hymns. Not always, and not everywhere, but hymns have had a staying power because they narrate perennial human experiences that we somehow confront over and over again in our search for meaning, in our search for God.

Think of “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” written by Martin Luther in 1536. It was likely inspired by his own forced seclusion within a fortress, to avoid assassination by enemies of the Protestant Reformation. For 500 years, communities have found strength in the sounds and images of

Luther's hymn whenever they have sensed their own instability. Or a little closer in time to our own, think of "Amazing Grace," reportedly a melody overheard on a slaving voyage among captive Africans in the 18th century, and then fashioned into the form of a hymn by a repentant slaver, John Newton. There's "It Is Well With My Soul," written by Horatio Spafford in 1871 after his wife and children died in a shipwreck. Or think of "Be Thou My Vision," a song that originated in the 700's, in Ireland. For 1300 years, people have been singing that song together. These are durable and lasting songs that have stood the test of time, and regardless of whether one subscribes to their theology, they now exist as one of the great deposits of world culture. It's also why they serve as the bedrock for much of our popular music - Paul Simon, Van Morrison, Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, Mavis Staples, and on and on, all were shaped by the power of hymns, sources they have returned to frequently over the years.

Three Hymn Requests

Here is another reason why hymns and communal singing matter: it has given people the strength to withstand enormous pressure. It has helped people walk through fire without getting burned, and to go through deep waters without drowning. The singing of hymns, in other words, has consequences pertaining to social struggle. That was true in the anti-apartheid campaigns of South Africa. Those resisting apartheid sang through the dangers, a practice that many had first learned in church.

Many of our own young people, and a good many adults as well, just returned from a journey where they learned about the civil rights era. I don't know if it was mentioned, but one of the key weapons in that non-violent struggle was singing. In Montgomery during the bus boycott, night after night people would gather in the churches, and they would sing together. They would sing some of the old standard hymns that circulated throughout the United States at camp meetings in the 19th century, and they would sing hymns fashioned from old spirituals. Those who traveled from the North as allies in the Movement frequently spoke of how, when hearing that kind of singing for the first time, the hair on the back of their necks would stand up, and they would get goosebumps on their arms. The singing of hymns and spirituals fortified people, so that they could face beatings, arrests, jail time, and sometimes worse. In Parchman Farm, one of the most notorious prisons in the South, there are reports that jailed civil rights workers drove the guards crazy by singing spirituals and hymns all day. In that, they were just like Paul and Silas, in the story we heard from Acts. After being beaten, the two kept up their spirits by singing together.

Few of us, I think, are fighting battles quite that extreme. But I know that we each carry burdens of one sort or another. Singing together is one of the ways that we too can fortify our spirits for the struggles we face.

Three Hymn Requests

Another reason to celebrate hymns is this: they're one of the last forms of communal music making that most of us experience in our lives. Save for the national anthem at sports events, where and when do we join our voices to make music with strangers, or with friends? It still happens here and there, but in the age of recorded music, it's rare. But I also want you to hear that it can be fun.

When I was working as a minister at a Presbyterian church in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, Rachael and I became a part of an informal group that gathered once a month to sing hymns together. At first, it sounded antiquated, like a group of lost 19th century fundamentalists trying to steel

themselves against the modern world. But then I saw who was a part of those hymn sings - they were professors at places like Penn and Villanova. One man had been a famous liberation theologian in Brazil. Another was the most socially progressive member of the congregation, a committed leftist, who had started a food program for AIDS victims living in downtown Philadelphia during the early 90's. And then there were Jack and Helen. Jack was a retired executive at a chocolate company, and he was the single funniest person I have ever had the pleasure of knowing. He loved hymns. When young people were confirmed at the Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church, they got Bibles, but Jack ensured that each of them received a hymnal as well, because he thought these songs were invaluable for the life of faith. It's something we might even consider doing around here.

On those Friday hymn sings, Jack and Helen would pour themselves glasses of bourbon, and they would sing from what they called "the real hymnal," from early in the 20th century. When words had been changed, they would sing the old words loudly and joyfully.

These were anything but fundamentalists, in other words. They were smart, literate, socially engaged, and thoughtful people. The singing of hymns was a way of building community, and strengthening bonds of friendship among us all. Somehow, these old songs held us together in a bond of celebration and joy. That too is something that we might consider doing around here at some point.

Three Hymn Requests

There's more to say about hymns of course. But the final image I'd like to leave with you comes from an episode of *The Crown*. In it, a Welsh mining village called Aberfan is destroyed when a local coal mine destabilizes a mountain, creating an avalanche. Some 140 people, many of them children, died in the accident. It was the result of loose regulations and miscalculations on the part of the managers. The Queen is detached from the event, and she struggles to connect with the people emotionally. Prince Philip, on the other hand, is dispatched to the funeral for the children who died, and he is visibly moved. When he returns to Buckingham Palace that evening, the Queen asks him what had happened. He says, "The grief, the anger, at the government, at God too - 81 children were buried today. The rage on their faces...they didn't smash things up, or fight in the streets." "What did they do?" the Queen asks. Philip responds, "They sang. The whole community. It was the most astonishing thing I ever heard."

In a time of great need, that mining village knew what to do. They sang. *That's* how they survived their terrible grief. So it has been for centuries among faithful people. So has it been for millenia. And so has it been for us. In our times of sorrow, we sing. In our times of gladness, we sing. When we are afraid, we sing. When we need to gather strength, or courage, we sing. Especially now, when many among us are weighed down by losses - and there have been so many - we need to sing.

I hope our community continues to uphold this treasury of music together. I hope we share these songs with our children. I hope we learn them ourselves. They're songs that we continue to need. They form a part of our story, and they are our songs.

Final Hymn Request