

## Sing Your Faith!

Psalm 100, Colossians 3:15-17

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When I heard Thom's plans for this morning's hymn-sing service, I was excited, because music is such an important part of worship. I was a little disappointed, though, when Thom decided to ignore some of my suggestions. I mean, who wouldn't want to sing "Amazing Grace" to the tune of Gilligan's Island? Or how about the reggae version of "Jesus Loves Me, This I Know." I even offered to provide a rap hip-hop rendition of "Just As I Am," but for some reason Thom forgot to include those suggestions in today's service...

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"...with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God."<sup>1</sup> Truly, faith without music is like a Bible without the gospels. If music is not part of your faith, then your faith is sorely lacking. The blending of poetry, rhythm and music move the heart and mind in ways that words alone are unable to achieve.

In the Bible the most obvious example of the way that music informs faith is found in the book of the Psalms. In the Psalms you will find songs that were sung during worship in the Temple, songs sung as people journeyed to Jerusalem for the annual festivals, songs sung as individual or corporate prayers lifted up to God in praise or in lament. The Psalms convey hope in the midst of despair, trust in God in the face of opposition from enemies, contrition for sins committed, affirmations of God's faithfulness through the ages... In a culture that was primarily illiterate, it is through the telling of stories and the singing of songs that the faith was transmitted from one generation to another.

It is not hard to imagine a young David tending his sheep, reflecting at the end of the day that the Lord is his shepherd. It is not hard to imagine David years later, consumed by guilt at being confronted with his sin against Bathsheba and Uriah the Hittite, cry out the words of the 51<sup>st</sup> Psalm: "Have mercy on me, O God... Create in me a clean heart... Cast me not away from your presence, nor take your Holy Spirit from me..." And so it is that the faith of a man like David has been passed on to us, through centuries of song and meditation.

Music has always played a vital role in the transmission and interpretation of our faith. Sometimes the hymns and spiritual songs of our faith are occasioned by personal circumstances. Sometimes the songs are inspired by socio-political situations. Certainly that is the case with many of the old Negro spirituals that have found their way into the library of Christian music. The slaves were allowed to meet for Christian services; often they would stay after the regular worship services for singing and dancing. Through these meetings they were able to share their joys and their pains and their hopes. Some of the spirituals simply reflected hope in a God who cared about them and who promised eternal life to them.

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<sup>1</sup> Colossians 3:16b

Some of the spirituals took on subversive references to the Underground Railroad and to literal freedom from the chains that held them captive. There is a rich heritage of faith in the old Negro spirituals.<sup>2</sup>

Sometimes hymns were written to address heated issues in the life of the Church. There was a time when there was great debate over the appropriateness of singing anything other than psalms in worship services. As a form of compromise, some churches would sing the Psalms at the beginning of the service, but after the preaching they would sing hymns. People who still objected to the singing of hymns would get up and walk out of the worship service at this time. Isaac Watts took offense to people who would walk out during the singing of hymns, and so he wrote "Marching to Zion," which we sang earlier in the service, in order to refute them:

Come, we that love the Lord, and let our joys be known,  
Join in a song with sweet accord, join in a song with sweet accord,  
And thus surround the throne, and thus surround the throne.

Let those refuse to sing who never knew our God,  
But children of the heavenly King, but children of the heavenly King,  
May speak their joys abroad, may speak their joys abroad.

Indeed, it is not hard to see a finger pointed to all those who were critics of the singing of hymns in worship.

Some hymns have become so well known that they can speak universally. The beautiful children's song, "Jesus Loves Me, This I Know," was quoted by renowned theologian Karl Barth when asked if it was possible to condense the many volumes of his works with just one sentence that summarizes the essence of the Christian faith. His reply: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." Another interesting instance of how this song was used was to communicate a message about Christians being persecuted in Communist China. A letter was written from a Christian in China to someone on the outside. The censors did not catch the secret message, because it simply said, "The *this I know* people are well," a clear reference to the Christian community in China. The message provided assurance to the outside world that the church in China was alive and well.<sup>3</sup>

Many of the hymns arise out of personal circumstances, experiences, or encounters in the hymn writers' lives. Something happened in the life of the hymn writer that opened a window of faith for them. Or they witnessed something inspiring in others that compelled them to put to words and music what they had just seen. Civilla Martin and her husband were spending some time in Elmira, New York early in the spring of 1905. There they became friends with a couple, Mr. and Mrs. Doolittle. Mrs. Doolittle had been bedridden for nearly 20 years. Mr. Doolittle was also crippled, only able to move about by pushing himself in a wheelchair. Civilla Martin noted how, despite the Doolittles' afflictions, they lived happy Christian lives, bringing inspiration and comfort to everyone they knew. One day the Martins were visiting with the Doolittles, and Mr. Martin commented on the bright hopefulness of the Doolittles, and he asked their secret. Mrs. Doolittle's reply was simple: "Why should we be discouraged? His eye is on the sparrow, and I know

<sup>2</sup> For more information on Negro Spirituals, please refer to [www.negrospirituals.com](http://www.negrospirituals.com)

<sup>3</sup> Richard Niell Donovan, [www.lectionary.org/hymnstories](http://www.lectionary.org/hymnstories)

He watches me.” It was Mrs. Doolittle’s reply that provided the inspiration for that hymn that has become so beloved in American Christianity.<sup>4</sup>

Most of you are familiar with the story of Job in the Bible. Job was a righteous man with everything going his way. But very suddenly Job lost his children and his livelihood and his home. He was desolate, ruined. Yet despite the urging of his wife and friends, Job refused to curse God for his misfortunes. He remained steadfast, saying, “But [God] knows the way I take, and when he has tried me, I shall come forth as gold.”<sup>5</sup> In the end, Job’s faith is affirmed, and he finds in God new hope for living.

A man whose life mirrored the life of Job is responsible for one of the more moving and poignant hymns in today’s service. Horatio Spafford was a businessman in Chicago in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He and his family were members of the Fullerton Avenue Presbyterian Church. In a very short period of time he was beset by three tragedies which stripped him of livelihood and his children. In 1871 Spafford’s only son died. Shortly after that, the Chicago Fire ruined him financially.

Then in 1873, Spafford had planned to travel to Europe with his wife and four daughters; Spafford was delayed because of a business matter, but he sent his wife and daughters ahead to set sail for Europe on the S.S. Villa du Havre. While crossing the Atlantic, the ship collided with an Irish sailing vessel, and quickly sank in the frigid waters. 226 people aboard the Villa du Havre died at sea, including Spafford’s four daughters. Spafford’s wife Anna was rescued; when she reached land, she sent a telegram to her husband with just two words: “Saved, alone.”

Spafford boarded another ship and set sail to reunite with his wife. As they neared the coast of Ireland, the captain of the ship came to Spafford and said, “I believe that right now we are sailing over the wreckage of the Villa du Havre. Consumed with grief, Spafford threw himself on his bed and cried out to God.

Later that night, a peace came over Spafford, and he uttered two simple sentences: “It is well. The will of God be done.” From that moment of surrender came the inspiration that now comes to us in the words, “When peace like a river, attendeth my way; when sorrows like sea billows roll. Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say, it is well, it is well, with my soul.”<sup>6</sup>

“But [God] knows the way I take, and when he has tried me, I shall come forth as gold.” It is well with my soul.

“We know that in all things God works for the good for those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”<sup>7</sup> It is well with my soul.

Friends in Christ, there are few ways to express our faith more movingly or more beautifully, than through the gift of music. Saint Augustine once said, “Whoever sings once, prays twice.” And it is indeed true, for the hymns of faith not only communicate with words, but they also engage the heart.

And so make a joyful noise, or as Wesley put it, “sing lustily!”

With thanksgiving in your heart, sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God.

Amen.

<sup>4</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/His\\_Eye\\_Is\\_on\\_the\\_Sparrow](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/His_Eye_Is_on_the_Sparrow)

<sup>5</sup> Job 23:10

<sup>6</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/it\\_is\\_well\\_with\\_my\\_soul](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/it_is_well_with_my_soul), and [http://www.dailyencouragement.net/hymnstory/audio/it\\_is\\_well.mp3](http://www.dailyencouragement.net/hymnstory/audio/it_is_well.mp3)

<sup>7</sup> Romans 8:28