

They're Playing Our Song

When I met Charlie, he was in his early eighties and on the far side of a debilitating stroke. I never actually heard him speak. But I did hear him sing. He had come to worship with his wife Daphne, in a wheelchair. And while she told me a story of faith and faithfulness, of them both, Charlie sat by and sang quietly to himself, quietly enough that it was humming, mostly. But you could make out the tune. If you listened closely enough, you might even make out the words. “Blessed assurance! Jesus is mine. Oh what a foretaste of glory divine!” And so on.

We believe, in our time and place, that traditional hymnody is dying out. We believe that the hymns that were sung throughout the last five hundred years of Protestant worship seem to be disappearing into obscurity. In some places they are being replaced by “Praise Songs,” which are a different kind of thing. In others they remain captive in books gathering dust on shelves, or lingering in the minds of aging saints.

We should not forget that hymnody, in its creation and growth, in its life over the years, held power. When the first Protestants began their fight to bring the teachings of the Bible into language that the common people, they needed tools. Everything the Church had done, for centuries, had been in Latin. They translated the Bible, of course, but needed teachings that would be easy to grasp, shorter, and memorable. They heard how popular songs, sung in taverns, inns, and workplaces held peoples’ attentions and stuck in their memories. They translated the ancient Latin hymns and set them to easier music. And they wrote their own.

Creating hymns worked. In many places, in many languages. The Moravian hymnal contains hymns written in the early 15th century (a hundred years before Luther) in Czech. Some of them would be dreadfully slow and dirge-like. Others of those 15th century hymns, however, were quick, bouncy and had an irregular rhythm that made them sound like something a minstrel might do. In the 16th century, Lutherans (and Calvinists and what have you) devised their own words and melodies – sung by many and, importantly, transmitting important teachings from and about God and Christ to the common people who sang them.

In the early 1700s (and this is not to brag, but simply an example I know well), the Moravians even “borrowed” tavern songs, wrote poetry about Biblical and theological and spiritual themes to fit them. They’d teach them to people of all ages, who would hear and love the tunes, but would

also learn and memorize the words the way we do with popular song “earworms.” (Who knows “Jenny, Jenny’s” telephone number?)

(And thanks, Pastor Andy, now THAT’s stuck in my head.)

Different styles of hymns were written over the years. The old polyrhythmic hymns of the 15th and 16th centuries gave way to more ploddingly standard 4/4 and 3/4 rhythms. (Look up the rhythm of “A Mighty Fortress is Our God” in the green “Lutheran Book of Worship” #228 – not 229. It is much harder for 21st century singers to handle.) These hymns gave way, in the American Revival period of the mid-1800s many with quicker paces and jaunty rhythms – think “Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory.” They also exchanged the “we/us” language, in many cases, for a more “I/me” language fitting American individualism.

These latter – the hymns written later in our five hundred year march of hymnody – the newer ones, became our “old favorites.” Those include Charlie’s “Blessed Assurance.” They include “I Know Whom I Believed,” “Just as I Am,” and “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” They include a hymn I sometimes hum quietly to myself: “My Savior’s Blood and Righteousness.” Like right now.

Edward Mote wrote the words in 1834, incorporating snippets of Biblical teachings throughout the hymn stanzas. He organized them to speak a message of hope in difficult times, and trust in Christ, to ultimately work out God’s purpose. Despite it all – whatever it is. Given the many forms of chaos that seem to be overtaking our world these days, I am reminded of our need for hope – and of MY need for hope. Mote’s chorus references Jesus’ teaching at the end of the sermon on the mount in Matthew 7 about a wise person building not on the sand of human structures, but on the Solid Rock of God’s love and Christ’s wisdom.

Perhaps we need hymns more than we think we do. For the comfort they bring. The hope they teach. The trust they call for. The reminder they give that we are God’s people now, as we have been through many generations. That the kinds of things we think we are uniquely troubled with now have been faced by people of faith before us, who lived to not only write about it, but set it to music.

-AWM

*“On Christ the solid, Rock, I stand;
All other ground is sinking sand,
All other ground is sinking sand.”*



