

Sabbath in Hymns
Colossians 3:12-17
July 15, 2007

The Rev. Christine Chakoian
First Presbyterian Church Lake Forest

“With gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God,” the Scripture says. From time immemorial, people have reached beyond words alone to the depths of their heart to express their faith in God; a depth that only can be touched by the higher arts. Now don’t get me wrong, I love words. I blame some of it on my father who used to drop impossible words at the dinner table every night and then made us look them up in the dictionary. I blame some of it on my mother, who did crossword puzzles incessantly; I still love to do them, though, snob that I am, I only do the New York Times Sunday puzzle now. I grew to love words through teachers and Sunday School teachers and my brothers and sister and friends who loved to read, and I love to read still. The week that I was away I consumed four novels. It was delicious.

I love words, but words can’t convey everything, and so people of faith have turned to music to attach themselves to words in a deeper place. I shared with you a few weeks ago that a new study has shown Alzheimer’s patients come alive again when they sing the old, old hymns. At Presbyterian Homes in Evanston the Chaplain talked about how her patients on that floor wouldn’t be able to remember anything. But when it came to hymns at worship, they sat up again and they remembered everything, every single word. They sang literally and spiritually “by heart.” That’s why we’re singing today; to remember what it means that words alone cannot carry us and to encourage us all to share that joy which I know the choir had . . . of lifting praise to God.

Let me give the briefest introduction to the hymns that we will be singing as our sermon today. Much of the information about these hymns was taken from Robert J. Morgan’s book, Then Sings My Soul. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003.

“Be Thou My Vision” is one of the oldest hymns in Christendom. Its roots can be traced to St. Patrick, who was born in 373 in Scotland. He was 16 years old when pirates raided his town and torched his family’s house. Taken to Ireland as a slave, it was there he found his true freedom in Jesus Christ. He said, “The Lord opened my mind to an awareness of my unbelief, in order that I might remember my sins and turn with all my heart to the Lord my God.” Eventually, Patrick escaped and returned home. But in a dream he had a vision: an Irish man was pleading for him to come and bring the gospel to Ireland. At 30 years old he returned to his former captors with the Bible in his hand. Before he died he had baptized over 100,000 people. The fruit of his work endures; the hymn we are about to sing, written in the eighth century, is a testimony to the faith he inspired.

*Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;
Nought be all else to me, save that Thou art—
Thou my best thought, by day or by night,
Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light.*

*Riches I heed not, nor vain, empty praise,
Thou mine inheritance, now and always:*

*Thou and Thou only, first in my heart,
Great God of heaven, my treasure Thou art.*

*Be Thou my wisdom, and Thou my true word;
I ever with Thee and Thou with me, Lord;
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
Still be my vision, O Ruler of all.*

Until the Reformation, church music in the West was restricted to the Latin mass. One of the radical ideas of the 16th century reformers included the conviction that worship should be conducted in the vernacular ... in the native tongue of the people who gathered. Thus a new hymnody emerged: translations and interpretations of the ancient psalms for the people themselves to sing. John Calvin, the father of Presbyterianism, took it a step further, using the newest technology of his day: moveable type. For the first time anywhere, every worshiper had a *hymnal* in their hand, so that they could follow along and sing the hymns together. Not only the priest and the choir but the *congregation* could sing praises to God ... another sign of the core Reformation conviction of “the priesthood of *all* believers.” The hymn we are about to sing was penned by Calvin’s own hand, and is taken from the Psalter in Geneva, Switzerland, where he presided.

*I greet Thee, who my sure Redeemer art,
My only trust and Savior of my heart,
Who pain didst undergo for my poor sake;
I pray Thee from our hearts all cares to take.*

*Thou art the King of mercy and of grace,
Reigning omnipotent in every place:
So come, O King, and our whole being sway;
Shine on us with the light of Thy pure day.*

Within the Catholic Church there were elements of renewal as well. By the late 17th century, the Jesuits in Germany had created a hymnbook for themselves. Many of us know our next hymn, “Fairest Lord Jesus,” by its earlier title, “Beautiful Savior.” Not based on psalms, which ascribe glory to God, this is a hymn to Jesus himself.

*Fairest Lord Jesus, Ruler of all nature,
O Thou of God to earth come down, Thee will I cherish,
Thee will I honor, Thou, my soul’s glory, joy and crown.*

*Fair are the meadows, Fairer still the woodlands,
Robed in the blooming garb of spring: Jesus is fairer,
Jesus is purer, Who makes the woeful heart to sing.*

*Fair is the sunshine, Fairer still the moonlight,
And all the twinkling, starry host: Jesus shines brighter,
Jesus shines purer, Than all the angels heaven can boast.*

Our next hymn, “Amazing Grace,” is moving in its own right, but is all the more poignant for the story behind it. John Newton had been pressed into service with the British Navy, but deserted, was captured, and flogged. At his request he was exchanged into service on a slave ship; he himself was abused at the hands of the slave trader whom he served. At last, in 1748, he was rescued by a sea captain who had known his father. Ultimately, John Newton became captain of his own slave-trading ship. And then, one stormy trip at sea, he found himself praying mightily for deliverance. His transformation began to happen, with the humility of one who knew that he could not rely on his own strength alone.

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found, Was blind, but now I see.*

*‘Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear The hour I first believed!*

*Through many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come;
‘Tis grace has brought me safe thus far, And grace will lead me home.*

Our final hymn, “Joyful, Joyful,” is known best perhaps by its tune, Beethoven’s Ode to Joy. But the text is equally moving. Henry Jackson van Dyke was the pastor of Brick Presbyterian Church in New York. (Many of you know Brick Church as the one that stole Rev. Anderson from us some years ago.) A true Renaissance man, he left Brick Church to become a professor of English literature at Princeton, and served as well as Ambassador to the Netherlands, Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, and President of the National Institute of Arts and Letters. This hymn was written in 1907 in the midst of the tumultuous debates between fundamentalism and modernism, a debate that nearly split the church. He later wrote, “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. ... This is a hymn of trust and joy and hope.”

*Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee, God of glory, Lord of love;
Hearts unfold like flowers before Thee, Opening to the sun above.
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness; Drive the gloom of doubt away;
Giver of immortal gladness, Fill us with the light of day.*

*All Thy works with joy surround Thee, Earth and heaven reflect Thy rays,
Stars and angels sing around Thee, Center of unbroken praise.
Field and forest, vale and mountain, Flowery meadow, flashing sea,
Chanting bird and flowing fountain, Call us to rejoice in Thee.*

*Mortals, join the happy chorus Which the morning stars began;
Love divine is reigning o’er us, Joining all in heaven’s plan.
Ever singing, march we onward, Victors in the midst of strife,
Joyful music leads us sunward In the triumph song of life.*