

Worship In Hymns
A Sermon by Stephen L. Allen
December 27, 2009

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: *Gracious God, as we come before you this day desiring to hear and understand your Word to us, we ask that you would open our ears and our hearts that we would hear what you would have us hear and then live as you would have us live. Amen.*

Good Morning – little did I realize that I would be back in front of this pulpit so soon! But, here I am, and trying to do my best to bring some words of inspiration and wisdom. My hope for the service this morning is to let us examine a little closer, what is possibly one of the best and most visible means of corporate worship – the hymn. How fitting that the Epistle reading today admonishes us to sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs – the very words used in the title to our Presbyterian Hymnal!

Today, we will take a close look at our hymnal to dissect and examine hymns and hopefully leave the sanctuary with a greater knowledge and appreciation for the hymns we sing each and every Sunday in worship. We will look at how and why some hymns were written; examine tunes and their effect on the text, so that each and every time we sing a hymn – old and new – the words will become fresh and taken to heart.

First, do we really know what a hymn is? According to Webster's dictionary, a hymn is "a metrical composition adapted for singing in a religious service". Therefore, a hymn is really the text – not the tune. The words are "adapted" for singing. The marriage of a text to a tune is a fine art. Tunes can drastically change the feel and mood of a text as we will observe a little later.

Have you ever really looked at a hymn in the hymnal? Have you ever noticed all the information provided? Please take a hymnal now and turn to hymn number 138, "Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!" Let's examine this page and see just what we can find out about this hymn. Look at the top left of the page – do you see "Trinity Sunday"? That lets us know that this hymn is appropriate for the Sunday after Pentecost – which is Trinity Sunday – where the emphasis is on – you guessed it – the Trinity! It is taken from Revelation 4:8-11 as shown at the top right hand of the page. Look under the name of the hymn – do you see Nicaea? That is the name of the tune to which this hymn is sung. Have you noticed in each Sunday's bulletin we indicate the name of each hymn tune to the right of the hymn?

Under the hymn tune on the left is the author of this hymn – Reginald Heber (1783-1826). Across from the author is the name of the hymn tune composer. – John Dykes. This tune was first published in 1861 in London in a publication entitled "Hymns Ancient and Modern". He named this tune in recognition of the Council of Nicaea, AD 325, whose summary of Christian doctrine contains an important affirmation of the Trinity.

Reginald Heber was born April 21, 1783 to a minister and his wife in a small English Village. He studied well in the village school and went to Oxford where he excelled in poetry. After he graduated from Oxford he succeeded his father as vicar in his family's parish where he served for 16 years. His passion for poetry gave him a keen interest in hymnody. He wanted to publish a book of hymns for use by liturgical churches but the Bishop of London would not agree to it. After Heber's death, his widow found 57 hymns in a trunk but, luckily for us, she succeeded in getting them published. Let's now sing verse

one of "Holy, Holy, Holy!" and reflect on its meaning and reference to the Trinity.

Meter plays a major part in any kind poetry. In hymns it can even allow us to sing the same text to different melodies. Please look at hymn numbers 24 and 25 – "Away in a Manger" Most of us remember from our childhoods the tune of hymn 25 – Mueller. But, do you see the meter marking of 11.11.11.11? That means that there are 11 syllables in each phrase. To sing this text to another tune all one needs to do is to go to the "Metrical Index of Tunes" in the back of our hymnal. Look with me now on page 705. Can you see that there are 5 tunes in this hymnal that will fit the hymn "Away in a Manger"? They just happen to print two of them side by side. Let's sing now verse 1 of hymn #25 followed by verse 2 of hymn 24. SING HYMN

Now, to kind of further illustrate the point, lets sing verse three to the tune FOUNDATION – hymn #361 – "How Firm a Foundation". SING VERSE THREE TO FOUNDATION

Doesn't give quite the same feeling does it?!?!?!?! The authorship of this hymn remains an unsolved mystery. It is first attributed to simply "K". Robert Keene was a friend of John Rippon who was a Baptist minister who published a book of hymns in 1787. In later editions the "K" became "Kn" and then later became "Keen". Until more conclusive proof can be found, most hymnals simply list the author as "K". The tune "Foundation" is an anonymous folk song.

The marriage between text and tune is a delicate one which we have just learned. Our brains associate many things together – word phrases – certain smells with certain memories (cookies baking and our mother's kitchens, etc.). Once in a while I would encourage you to truly look at

the text you sing. Hymns tell the journey of our faith and our doctrines in terms that we all can understand and take to heart. Even omitting a stanza can sometimes have a curious effect. I remember the minister at a church I once served called for the congregation to sing the first and last verse of Our God, Our Help in Ages Past – our hymn number 210. The first and last verses are identical. It is in the middle verses that the author talks about “before the hills in order stood or earth received its frame”, “a thousand ages in Thy sight are like an evening gone”, and “time like an everlasting stream soon bears us all away”. Singing only the first and last verses deprived the congregation of the true meaning of the hymn.

I would challenge each of you to do something when you enter the sanctuary for worship. Once seated, look at your bulletin and check out the hymns and responses to be sung. Quietly read through the hymn and take to heart the message there, so that when notes are added the full intent of the composer’s words are felt. No matter what the style – a message is there. Does your favorite hymn have a story behind it? The tune “Duke Street” was written on Duke Street – set to the hymn? – Jesus Shall Reign Where’er the Sun #423. “Amazing Grace” (hymn #280) is an early American melody of unknown origin. Hamburg (When I Survey the Wondrous Cross hymn # 101) was written by Lowell Mason in 1824 and first sung at the First Presbyterian Church in Savannah, Georgia and is said to be arranged from a Gregorian chant.

If you are interested in finding out more about your favorite hymns, I have several books that I would be willing to loan. Or, send me a request and I will do my best to get the information

printed in our newsletter so that all our congregation can be informed.

“Let the words of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.”
Amen.

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