

SUNDAY, August 11, 2024 “Old Gospel Hymns”

Psalms 96:1-9 Romans 1:16-17 and Mark 16:14-18

We continue in our summer sermon series “At your Request” with this week’s focus on Old Gospel Hymns. When first asked about this topic, I asked what do you mean by this phrase? Old Gospel Hymns and what particular hymns/ songs of praise are you referring to? Those who were in this conversation stated the names of the hymns/songs which we are singing today—including the one which will soon follow. The phrase Old gospel hymns has different meanings for people depending upon their church background, cultural experience, or even who influenced their theology, hymnody and what was taught when they were younger or what was shared by them as adults to teach their children or the next generation. For example, I was raised in the United Church, my first piano teacher was Baptist, my main piano teacher later on was Anglican. So for practise pieces not only did I learn what was in the books, but hymns, choruses, chorales, and what was popular at the time in church music. This also meant that my experience with church music was across denominations and also included several from the Roman Catholic tradition. So when asked to talk about old Gospel hymns, some clarification is needed!

Hymns as we know are types of songs written for the purpose of adoration or prayer and typically addressed to God. *Hymnos*- a Greek word means ‘song of praise’. But we go back in history to realize that there were many kinds of hymns shared years ago through Ancient Eastern countries- from Egypt, India and China. But for us the basis of hymns has been the Book of Psalms directed to God and as Christians, primarily focused on Jesus Christ. When Paul established churches in Ephesus and Colossae he expected the people to sing psalms and hymns praising God not only to lift up God, but so that all would be encouraged to live following the teachings of Jesus.

Hymns are lyric poems which were and continue to be reverently and devotionally conceived and to be sung by the gathered community in faith. Each musical choice reflects the worshipper’s attitude toward God or God’s purposes in human life. We realize that today many hymns/ songs of praise come in many different varieties based upon simple melodies, metrical construct due to the words, some hymns evoke emotion, some are poetic and literal interpretations of the Biblical passages and many open the hearts of people as they invoke the presence of the Spirit. The whole idea of singing hymns or songs of praise is to unify the congregation.

But what if we like different kinds of hymns? The answer is simply called blended worship. Many people and not age dependent are renewed in faith by singing traditional hymns but like to hear contemporary worship songs as a means of enhancing one's choice in music. As Protestants, the music we hold onto was influenced by the reformation of the Christian church. England was the home of many changes and challenges to the established Church of England. As an English Congregational minister, Isaac Watts influenced the music of his time and what we sing in praising God today. He is deemed the Father of English hymnody for he moved worshippers beyond singing only Old Testament Psalms. Through his hymns worship became inspirational and revitalized. Isaac Watts (1674-1748) wrote many hymns still sung today based on Psalms, but often with a personal twist putting the worshipper into the lyrics. "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross", "O God our Help in Ages Past" (Psalm 90), "Jesus Shall Reign" and "Joy to the World"(Psalm 98).

Somewhat contemporary to Watts were brothers, John and Charles Wesley who started the Methodist movement within the Church of England. Charles Wesley underwent a spiritual awakening and initiated, the Holy Club who were dedicated to frequent attendance at Holy Communion, serious study of the Bible, and regular visitations to Oxford prisons. John came to lead the group, and its members were derisively known as Methodists because of their "methodical" devotion and study. John moved to the US state of Georgia and welcomed Charles in service to the church which was being established. However Charles returned to England and wrote prolifically hymns about the good news in Jesus Christ. His most well-known hymns are: "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing," "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today," and "Rejoice, the Lord Is King,"

Yet what are "Gospel hymns" and what makes them old and good! Gospel means good news of Jesus Christ and often described because of their composition. Gospel hymns usually have a refrain, and faster tempo than hymns and often express one's personal experience of God. For example: "Amazing Grace" may be called a hymn; and "How Great Thou Art" is a gospel song. But no matter how we label the music of the church, it is important to note that one of the reasons we gather to worship God is to experience the Spirit's movement. When one can put "I" in the hymn there is something may be transformative from within. Not always is this so—but when praising God from within one's heart there is a method of experiencing the spirit anew and this is what we ought to be striving for—taking on the good news for ourselves as we may each tell others what Jesus' life, death and resurrection means to us.

Paul stated in Romans 1: "I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith- Jew, Greek and those for whom God's righteousness is revealed." The power of Gospel transcends all matters. But the important reason for sharing the Good News of Jesus is so that individuals will come to Christ and be changed. When one experiences the gospel message- whether in hearing words or through music of the heart, there is change, transformation occurs and this is what we strive to do as we worship with each other our amazing God!

In the last 70 years or so there has also been a change in hymnody in the church—the 1960s-1970's—when the big boom of church was occurring—was when the young people of the time brought popular music into the church and we called it contemporary. But depending upon where you worship and what was once popular, blended worship of all kinds of music occurs in most churches today.

Traditional Hymns describing God like "Come let us sing of a wonderful Love" describe the nature of God's love for all people. "in the Garden" is gospel because "I come to the garden" and we meet Jesus after his resurrection and know that He is with us always. But what about cultural and heritage hymns? Depending upon where you were raised may influence the kind of church music you listened to and sung? "The Church in the Wildwood" is a song that was written by Dr. William S. Pitts in 1857 following a coach ride that stopped in Bradford, Iowa. It is a song about a vision for a church in a valley near the town even though the church was not actually built until several years later. Why is this part of our experience of church? Because it is memorable, tells us about one's transformation in Christ and has an ideal vision attached to it as a place where lives are changed.

According to Mark 16, Jesus commissions the disciples by saying, "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news/ gospel to the whole creation." The one who believes and is baptized will be saved. They will be able to cast out demons, speak in different languages, heal the sick, and no harm will come to them."

But there is also a purpose of why we gather to worship God—to know that one day God will call us home. Different traditions of Christian hymnody reflect the words of the Bible and what they mean for those who are growing in faith. We might wonder about what is to come to us after our time on earth is ended. The hymn we will sing in a few moments is a hymn of faith from the Christian Reformed tradition, based upon Revelation 4-5 which teaches us of when all

will come together in God's eternity. Is it is an old gospel hymn? Yes—based upon its scriptural references, and the good news story of being in God's presence for all eternity.

When preparing for a worship celebration such as this experience we share right now, specific thoughts of what to sing together makes a difference in our collective worship of God. Whether the music is traditional hymns, contemporary choruses, gospel or even some children's songs with Bible stories, the purpose of singing is to experience God as the body of Christ in this place, to praise God for He is worthy and to honour and thank and glorify Christ as the Spirit moves us. Old Gospel Hymns will always be a part of our church experience as long as people who are searching for God open their hearts to receive the Good News of God's grace given through Jesus Christ. This is why we worship and gather together now for we know that one day we will be praising God in glory! This is the good news of the Gospel! Thanks be to God.

PRAYER

Holy God we praise you with word and song and prayer Hear us O God for you are worthy. Enable us to sing and shout your gift of love and grace to others. We ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.