



October 17, 2021
Festival of Hymnody
Reflections



Hymn 210 (Our God, Our Help in Ages Past)

The theme of today's Hymn Festival is the Psalms. There are one hundred and fifty Psalms in the Bible, and they span the full range of human emotion, from bleak depression to ecstatic joy. Whether they are used in public worship or for private devotion, the Psalms have the immediacy of the very best poetry - that quality of articulating the most deeply personal of experiences, of making you say, "yes, that's just how it is, only I didn't know it."

The Psalms do not flinch from addressing the dark places of human experience. We began today's service with J. S. Bach's setting for organ of Psalm 130, which starts in the darkest despair of the whole Psalter: "Out of the depths have I cried to you, O Lord," and moves cautiously towards hope: "O Israel, wait for the Lord, for with the Lord there is mercy." Our choral introit, by Beethoven, sets the lyrical words of Psalm 108: "O God, thy love is infinite," and our opening hymn gives us the powerful affirmation of Psalm 90, "Our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home."

Now we will sing a hymn which is not in our blue hymnal. You can find it printed on page 5 of your bulletin. It is an adaptation of Psalm 137, "By the waters of Babylon," which expresses the longing of the Jewish community in exile after the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem about 587 BCE. Over the two thousand, six hundred years since it was written, this psalm has been a touchstone for those in all types of exile - physical, emotional, and spiritual. As we sing it, I invite you to think of your own experiences of longing and displacement, and to remember that God is always with us, no matter how far we may be from home.

Hymn 234 (I to the Hills Will Lift My Eyes)

The words of Psalm 23 are some of the best-known and best-beloved in the whole Bible. The metaphor of God as a shepherd was quoted by Jesus during his ministry on earth, and is one of the most familiar images in Christianity.

The music of Hymn 170, as well as Hymn 234 which we just sang, comes from the Scottish tradition of metrical psalm singing. Before the Reformation, it was not common at all for the congregation to sing during worship; the official music of the Catholic church was Gregorian chant, which was mostly sung by the clergy and choir. The reformers, including Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Knox, found what was practically a ready-made hymnal in the Book of Psalms.

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And that was no coincidence, because the Psalms likely reflect what was sung in worship at the Temple of Jerusalem.

The problem was that since most people in Europe knew neither Hebrew nor Latin, the psalms had to be translated into the language of the people. And then a melody had to be found, since the original cantillation patterns of the Jewish Temple were lost. In a great outpouring of poetry, new translations of the Psalms were made from the original Hebrew, in German, French, English, and other languages, fitting them into contemporary patterns of line length and rhyme so that they could be sung by all.

The Scottish Psalter published in 1650 has been dear to the hearts of Presbyterians for centuries, and in singing the words of Psalm 23, we join with all those who have gone before us, lifting our voice as one.

Reading of Psalm 150

Today's Festival of Hymnody is the root of all of worship in its rawest, most unrefined form. In fact, according to the Westminster Catechism, our purpose in life is to glorify God and enjoy God forever! Today we do so not with our words, but with the words the Lord Himself gave us to offer our praise – the Psalms.

During the Reformation, John Calvin declared:

There is no other book in which there is to be found more express and magnificent commendations, both of the unparalleled liberality of God towards his Church, and of all his works ... in short, there is no other book in which we are more perfectly taught the right manner of praising God, or in which we are more powerfully stirred up to the performance of this religious exercise (pp. xxxviii-xxxix).

He insists that praying and singing the Psalms teach us how to worship; therefore shaping us into more godly people.

Now what Saint Augustine says is true, that no one is able to sing things worthy of God unless he has received them from him. Wherefore, when we have looked thoroughly everywhere and searched high and low, we shall find no better songs nor more appropriate for the purpose than the Psalms of David.

Today there are still churches that only sing the Psalms, and without harmony or accompaniment at that. The purpose of these practices lead us to focus on the beauty of the text given from God rather than the beauty of the voices or organ. Today we believe both can add to the praise of our creator as we use the extent of our human gifts to offer God even more.

At times the singing of the Psalms has been reserved and contemplative. And indeed this reflects the tenor of many of the Psalms, but if God's Word gives us the mood and emotions of worship, then Psalm 150 offers something almost entirely un-Presbyterian!

It calls for loud praise! Exultant, overflowing with joy. Like King David, who's unseemly dance before the Ark of the Lord caused a scandal, let us be prepared to sing with Psalm 150-like zeal!

Though much of worship should be reflective and peaceful, we note that the Bible's hymnbook ends not in a quiet simplicity, but a rousing call for loud, clashing cymbals, trumpets, and more!

Let everything that lives and breathes... praise the Lord!!

In a moment, the choir will sing an anthem by Henry Purcell. The words, taken from Psalm 116, encapsulate the emotional trajectory of the whole book of psalms: the speaker calls on God in the midst of trouble, receives God's deliverance with gratitude, and then sings a song of praise and renewed devotion.

Throughout the whole anthem, the bass line - the most fundamental part, played on the organ - never changes. Purcell uses this steady, repeating bass line as a symbol of God's constant presence. Through changes of key from major to minor, changes of rhythm and time signature, musical dissonance and consonance, surprise and fulfillment - that bass line is always there, supporting the singers and binding everything together. God's eternal love never fails, no matter what joys and sorrows our lives may bring.

Hymn 253 (I'll Praise My Maker)

Our response to God's goodness and mercy is one of praise, and all the rest of the music in the service takes up this theme. Psalm 146, "I'll Praise My Maker While I've Breath," was adapted in its present form by John Wesley, one of the founders of the Methodist movement, and he is said to have died with these words on his lips.

The melody of Hymn 253 was included by John Calvin in his Genevan Psalter, and since then it has been adapted far and wide. J. S. Bach knew it as a Lutheran chorale and used it in his St. Matthew Passion; and Roman Catholics in Germany made their own version of it, which then came back into the Presbyterian tradition as our Hymn 455, All Creatures of our God and King. The history of this melody, which is known and loved all over the world, shows that there is far more to unite us as Christians of different denominations than there is to divide us.

At the offertory, you are all invited to sing verses 1 and 5 of our anthem, The Old Hundredth Psalm Tune by Ralph [NOTE: pronounced "Rafe"] Vaughan Williams. We will all join with our

Chancel Choir, our Youth Choir, and our brass ensemble, making music together to the glory of God.

Hymn 257 (Give Praise to the Lord)

The book of Psalms ends with a series of cosmic hymns of praise to God the Creator. We have already heard the last of these, Psalm 150, read as our Scripture for the day. Now, as we go forth into the world, we will sing Psalm 149, which tells us of our duty to praise God at all times and in all places - with voices, with instruments, by day, by night, and in all places we go.

The music to this hymn was written by the English composer Charles Hubert Hastings Parry in 1893 for a festival not unlike this one. Originally, it was the closing section of a long and spectacular choral anthem called "Hear my words, ye people," in which the Psalmist's words summed up a number of previous movements focusing on the different attributes of God.

As we leave Brick Church today, let us carry a song in our heart. May God grant that what we sing with our lips, we may believe in our hearts, and what we believe in our hearts, we may show forth in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.