



FESTIVAL OF HYMNODY REFLECTIONS

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1. This is our third – I guess I can now say, “annual” – Festival of Hymnody. Singing has been central to Christian worship for 2,000 years, but for many folks today singing has become a “spectator sport,” something you listen to someone else do. In fact, just about the only places people sing today is at birthday parties (and there briefly and badly) or in church.

In this, Brick’s 250th Anniversary year, the focus will be on our own congregation’s history of singing and sacred music. I hope we’ll learn a bit more about Brick’s musical heritage, but more importantly, I hope *everyone* will actually sing. So sing! Sing even if you don’t fancy yourself much of a singer. Fear not, you’ll not be singing solo – hundreds of voices around you will bear you up!

The processional hymn we just sang, and the two we’ll next sing, are translations or paraphrases of one of the 150 Psalms in the Old Testament of the Bible. For a long time, Presbyterians sang *only* Biblical Psalms. In Brick’s early years, the congregation would have sung nothing but metrical versions of Old Testament Psalms. In the decades before Brick was founded in 1767, a controversy had arisen among Presbyterians and others as to whether to also sing what were called “hymns of human composition” (that is to say, *not* Biblical Psalms). No one was more influential in this movement to expand singing than the London scholar and hymn writer, Isaac Watts. Watts wrote two types of hymns – loose, often *very* loose, paraphrases of Psalms, and hundreds of immensely popular “hymns of human composition.” Watt’s most famous such original is surely the Christmas



carol, *Joy to the World*. We just sang another Watts hymn, *From All that Dwell Below the Skies*, which is very vaguely based on Psalm 117.

The popularity of Watt's original hymns helped encouraged Presbyterians to welcome what was once a scandalous worship innovation – those “hymns of human composition.” But some congregations – Brick included – held to Psalm-only singing well into the 19th century. And still today, there are more than 100 Psalms in that modern *Presbyterian Hymnal* in your hands.

Not only did Brick sing only Psalms in those early days, but we did so *a cappella* – without organ or musical accompaniment. Though records are sketchy, when you went to Brick Church in the decades after the Revolutionary War, you probably would have sung Psalms responsively with a song leader called a precentor. He would sing a line, and the congregation (there was no choir at first) sang the same line back. We're going to dare to do that just now. Our Precentor, Dan Collins, will sing a line, then the congregation and choir will repeat it – just like 200 years ago. It's a Psalm we will sing of course, an almost 500-year-old paraphrase of Psalm 100 by a Scottish Presbyterian named William Kethe. The familiar melody, just as old, was composed by Louis Bourgeois, a musician who worked with John Calvin in Geneva. The melody is familiar because it's the tune to the Doxology, that sung response which we – like most Presbyterians – sing nearly every week in worship.

2. The words to the anthem our Youth Choir is about to sing, *Let All Things Now Living*, are only a century old, written by choral composer Katherine Davis, a 1914 graduate of Wellesley College. (By the way, Davis' most famous composition is the Bolero-like Christmas classic, *The Little Drummer Boy*.) A hymn version of the delightful anthem we're about to hear is in our *Presbyterian Hymnal*. The melody, *Ash Grove*, is an old Welsh tune named after its original secular words, a melancholy folk song about love lost.



The hymn we'll sing after the Children's Message is yet another sung Psalm, this one a lovely paraphrase of the beloved 23rd Psalm, the famous Psalm that begins "*The Lord is my Shepherd.*" It's one of no fewer than six settings of the 23rd Psalm in our *Presbyterian Hymnal*. This version is yet another by Isaac Watts, who was something of a hymn-writing rock star in his day. The first American edition of Watts' hymns was published in 1729 by none other than Benjamin Franklin. The melody we sing today is a lovely American folk tune published about a century later.

Brick Church got its first organ in 1858, some 90 years into our history. But we did not go straight from *a cappella* singing to singing with an organ. In between, singing was often accompanied by a single cellist and a quartet of professional singers who would set meter and pitch for the congregation. So this morning as we sing *My Shepherd Will Supply My Need* in the manner that it would have been sung at Brick in the mid-19th Century. The cellist and quartet will sing the first verse alone to introduce the hymn; then the congregation and choir will stand to join in singing the remaining verses.

3. Those verses Deborah just read describe the opening service of worship in the first Temple in Jerusalem, some 3,000 years ago. Solomon was King of Israel and had at last built the great place of worship that his father David had not. As a part of worship that day, the Ark of the Covenant containing the Ten Commandments was processed into the new edifice, accompanied by a huge choir, as well as trumpets, cymbals and other unnamed musical instruments. Singing in worship goes back a long, *long* time.

This Is My Father's World, a sweet little hymn we'll sing next, is part of a much longer poem written by Maltbie Babcock when he was pastor of the Brick Presbyterian Church at the beginning of the 20th Century. Though Babcock only served Brick for 18 months, he made a lasting impact on both the church and community. In February of 1901, Babcock traveled to Egypt and the Holy Land and died suddenly in Naples en route home. A plaque erected in his memory is



now mounted at the north end of our breezeway. The tune, *Terra Beata*, is adapted from an English folk song by Franklin Sheppard, who learned it from his mother.

4. That last hymn, *This Is My Father's World*, the anthem the Chancel Choir just sang, and the hymn we'll sing next were all written or composed by ministers or musicians of the Brick Church. The choir's anthem was composed by Clarence Dickinson, who served as organist and choirmaster of the Brick Church for 51 years, from 1909 until his retirement in 1960. He began his work in the Brick Church located on 5th Avenue and 37th Street and completed his tenure here in this – our third – building. During his long years at Brick, Dickinson became a towering figure in the world of sacred music. He composed hundreds of anthems, wrote countless essays on church music, and was the founder of the School of Sacred Music, first located here in New York and now moved to Yale University. Our current Sacred Music Intern, Christopher Keady, is a Master's student at the very school Dickinson founded.

During Dickinson's first year or so at Brick, the Rev. Henry Van Dyke had briefly returned to serve as interim minister while the congregation searched for a permanent pastor. Dickinson remembered that after the service one Sunday, Van Dyke said to him, "*It hardly seems necessary to preach; the music says it all.*"

This Henry Van Dyke, who had been Brick's installed minister from 1873 to 1900, wrote prolifically: poetry, theology, literary criticism and hymns. His most famous hymn is the one we're about to sing. Van Dyke wrote the words to *Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee* in 1907 while a guest preacher at Williams College. His son wrote that his father, an enthusiastic outdoorsman, had come down to breakfast while at Williams and set the poem before the president of the college, the son of U. S. President James Garfield, and said, "Here is a hymn for you. Your mountains were my inspiration. It must be sung to the music of Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*." Van Dyke's portrait hangs on the north wall of the Living Room of our Old Parish House.



5. Hymnody is anything but a lost art. New hymns are being written today at a dizzying pace. So the last hymn we'll sing is relatively recent and more contemporary in style. The words to *When in Our Music God is Glorified*, were written in the early 1970s by Fred Pratt Green, an English Methodist pastor and hymn writer. More than anyone else, Green is credited with the 20th Century explosion of hymn writing. His hymn about the importance of music in worship is a perfect way to end a Festival of Hymnody.