



# Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

MARCH 16, 2014  
THE SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT  
FAITH SONGS FOR LIFE RHYTHMS

## When Our Confidence Is Shaken: Singing Our Way to Belief Genesis 12:1-4a; John 3:1-17

Perhaps you have had this happen to you: you are working on a project—cleaning the house or working in the yard or otherwise concentrating on accomplishing something—when suddenly you realize that a hymn is playing in your head. Over and over the tune repeats itself—“Amazing Grace” or “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” or “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee”—and you can’t get it out of your mind, nor do you want to. Numerous people over the years have told me that they remember their mother singing hymns as she cleaned house or cooked and their father whistling a favorite hymn as he worked in his shop. When I am out in the yard, especially cutting grass or working in my garden, hymns play in my head like best friends on a summer day.

Hymns say what we think. They speak what we feel. They teach us and help us along life’s way. Because hymns are based on scripture and life experiences, they guide us through the seasons of faith. They tell God’s story—and our own.

This morning’s Old Testament and Gospel lessons are two of my favorites. I love the story of Abram responding to God’s call to leave home and venture into an unknown land. He is eager, adventurous, and trusting. God says, “Go!” and Abram asks, “How far?” When he and Sarai and all their entourage pack up and leave Haran, they must be singing, as we did earlier:

He leadeth me, he leadeth me, by his own hand he leadeth me;  
his faithful follower I would be, for by his hand he leadeth me.<sup>1</sup>

Abram and Sarai’s story is a story of faith—not of blind obedience, mind you, for they were not always obedient or wise or even honest. But they were faithful to the extent that they always trusted God even when they did not make the best choices in the circumstances in which they found themselves. From their start in Haran until they finished their lives in Canaan, they trusted God’s hand to lead and provide for them.

<sup>1</sup>Joseph Henry Gilmore, “He Leadeth Me: O Blessed Thought,” 1862.

Nicodemus, on the other hand, sought out Jesus carrying an armload of doubt. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a well-educated religious man. He was a legalist, at least as far as it suited him, and like most Pharisees, he had life—and God—all figured out. Jesus, however, put a chink in his religious armor. Nicodemus was faithfully following what he had been taught about God and Jesus raised some doubts in his mind. Unlike Abram who embarked on his journey in the light of day, Nicodemus sought Jesus out at night, darting through the back-alleys of Jerusalem lest any of his fellow Pharisees catch him talking with the Teacher they considered to be a heretic and threat to the faith.

Nicodemus had questions about who Jesus was and what he was about. Jesus knocked him off balance and Nicodemus' Pharisical faith began to teeter. He could not understand Jesus when he talked about being born from above or born of the Spirit. Jesus quoted familiar scriptures and cited biblical references, but Nicodemus could not fit Jesus into the tiny boxes of his narrow understanding of God. Nicodemus struggled to make sense of what he already believed. If they had been available, Nicodemus might have sung these words:

When our confidence is shaken in beliefs we thought secure,  
when the spirit in its sickness seeks but cannot find a cure,  
God is active in the tensions of a faith not yet mature.<sup>2</sup>

This hymn text, written by Fred Pratt Green in 1971, sums up what I think is an experience many of us share at some point in life. Like Nicodemus, as our faith is being stretched and experiencing growing pains, we realize we are not finished with our faith. It is not fully mature. While a familiar and beloved hymn like "Blessed Assurance" speaks to a faith that has worked through many of its questions, "When Our Confidence Is Shaken" voices the struggles that confront faith in a complex world. When wars stretch on for dozens of years, floods and famines increase in intensity, unstable men with guns assault our children, and enormous airplanes disappear without a trace, our confidence in a God who "has the whole world in his hands" may be tested. We can sing, "His eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me," on those days when all is right with the world. But what do we sing when our lives are thrown off-balance? What do we sing when we are more like the father who cried to Jesus, "I believe. Help my unbelief!"? (Mark 9:24b) Like a modern day Nicodemus, we might find ourselves singing:

---

<sup>2</sup>Fred Pratt Green, "When Our Confidence Is Shaken," 1971.

Solar systems, void of meaning, freeze the spirit into stone;  
always our researches lead us to the ultimate unknown.  
Faith must die, or come full circle to its source in God alone.

In the discipline of praying, when it's hardest to believe;  
in the drudgery of caring, when it's not enough to grieve;  
faith, maturing, learns acceptance of the insights we receive.<sup>3</sup>

The true gift of hymns to the faithful is that they speak to the full range of our spiritual experiences. God speaks not only in scripture, but through our hymnals as well. During this season of Lent and throughout the year, I suggest that when you come into the sanctuary on Sunday mornings you get out the hymnal and thumb through it. You will notice that it is divided into sections, the first being "Praise to God," our primary role in life. The entire first section of our hymnal is devoted to celebrating the character and goodness of God.

You will discover that the second portion of the hymnal focuses upon Jesus. Following hymns of praise, we delve into his life which we celebrate from Advent through Easter. These hymns tell the story of Jesus birth, walk us through his years of ministry, and guide us from the wilderness to the cross and into the garden where we share his resurrection. The hymns which follow honor the Spirit of God at work in our lives and lead us to the section on the Church and its worship, ministry, and mission. Finally, the hymnal takes us beyond our fellowship to the world where we live out our faith.

Our hymnal is not exhaustive. There are thousands and thousands of hymns available to people of faith. Our hymnal does not have all of the old favorites that we love so well nor does it include some newer hymns that we need to learn. It is, however, a good collection of the best of the Church's hymns of faith.

Our hymns make the connection between the scripture which tells God's story and our own experiences of faith. Horatio G. Spafford wrote the words to "It Is Well with My Soul" following the death of his four daughters in a shipwreck. Frank Mason North wrote the hymn "Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life" in 1903 when he was a minister in New York City (imagine what he might write now!). The elegant prayer for our nation, "O Beautiful for Spacious Skies," was written by Katherine Lee Bates following a visit to the summit of Pike's Peak in 1893. "The Church's One Foundation" was penned

---

<sup>3</sup>Green.

by Samuel J. Stone, an Anglican minister, to help explain the phrase in The Apostles' Creed, "I believe in the holy catholic church." And the stirring hymn we sing on Palm Sunday, "All Glory, Laud, and Honor," was composed by Theodulph of Orleans while he was in prison on suspicion of treachery against King Louis the Pious of France in the year 821. The story is told that as the king was leading a Palm Sunday procession through the city streets, the crowd came by the prison tower and heard Theodulph singing this beautiful hymn. The king was so moved that he pardoned the minister and restored him to his church.<sup>4</sup>

Every hymn has a story behind it. All of them are not as dramatic as some I have sighted. Many hymns are written in order to express an understanding of faith that has evolved over many years. What is important is that we sing our faith on Sunday mornings every bit as much as we read about it, pray about it, and preach it. Our hymns not only bear witness to the poet's faith journey; they reflect our experiences as well.

Week by week, our ministerial staff takes time to carefully plan our worship and a good bit of that time is given to choosing the music that will carry the theme of worship for that service. Our goal is always to choose hymns that will speak to whatever theme is being addressed in the sermon. So for today we chose hymns that tell of the experience of faith. Most of us felt that confidence Abram had, and so we sang with full voice:

All my hope on God is founded;  
he doth still my trust renew,  
me through change and chance he guideth,  
only good and only true.  
God unknown, he alone  
calls my heart to be his own.<sup>5</sup>

The second hymn, as noted earlier, sings of the underlying trust we have in God to lead us through whatever comes our way in life:

He leadeth me, O blessed thought!  
O words with heav'nly comfort fraught!  
Whate'er I do, where'er I be  
Still 'tis God's hand that leadeth me.

---

<sup>4</sup>Cliff Barrows and Donald Hustad, eds.. *Crusader Hymns and Hymn Stories*, (Chicago: The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, 1967), 282, 288, 284, 286, 43.

<sup>5</sup>Joachim Neander, "All My Hope on God Is Founded," 1680.

By the way, Joseph H. Gilmore wrote this hymn in 1862 during the darkest days of the Civil War. He wrote that he was in the pulpit of the First Baptist Church of Philadelphia intending to offer an exposition of the Twenty-third Psalm. When he reached the line which said, "He leadeth me . . . , " he could go no further with his prepared remarks. He spent the rest of his time talking about the importance of God leading us in whatever we do in life, including those tragic days of war. Following worship, Gilmore and others gathered in a parlor and continued to discuss God's leadership in life. As he talked, he wrote down the poem which became the hymn we all love.<sup>6</sup> Faith must sometimes be expressed in song.

Our recessional hymn was chosen because it speaks to the experience we all have at times when our faith is not as confident as we would like. The Christian faith is not only about unwavering allegiance to God in Christ. It is also about finding our way to that place of faithfulness when circumstances in life have caused us to doubt. Our hymns sing not only about the serenity of faith, but about the struggle as well:

God is love, and thus redeems us in the Christ we crucify;  
this is God's eternal answer to the world's eternal why.  
May we in this faith maturing be content to live and die!<sup>7</sup>

This evocative hymn, relatively new compared to most of our songs, speaks to faith in our current world. It reminds us that as much as we love the old hymns that have long nurtured us in faith, we also need new hymns to express evolving challenges of faith.

We would all like to have the faith Abraham had—at least at the beginning and ending of his journey. The middle part is probably more similar to what most of us experience. If truth be told, however, I am happy that I share faith with Nicodemus. At some point in life, we are all Nicodemus, questioning if Jesus is who he says he is, wondering if he is the Son of God, hoping that his offer of salvation is true. As with Nicodemus, Jesus offers us all a very simple answer: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life."

---

<sup>6</sup>Joseph H. Gilmore, "He Leadeth Me," 1862, as quoted on *The Cyber Hymnal*™; available online at: <http://www.hymntime.com/tch/htm/h/l/e/hleademe.htm>.

<sup>7</sup>Green.

While the Pharisee struggled with understanding Jesus and accepting his new interpretation of God's involvement with the world, Nicodemus did come to believe in Jesus. He defended Jesus when the Pharisees and scribes challenged Jesus in the temple (John 7:51) and he helped place Jesus' body in the tomb after the crucifixion (John 19:39-40). Tradition holds that he became a stalwart among the faithful in Jerusalem. In the end, Nicodemus did sing his way to faith. He learned a new song, one that we all know by heart:

Jesus loves me—this I know,  
for the Bible tells me so;  
Little ones to Him belong—  
they are weak, but He is strong.  
Yes, Jesus loves me!  
Yes, Jesus loves me!  
Yes, Jesus loves me!  
The Bible tells me so.<sup>8</sup>

And so do the hymns we sing. Thanks be to God. Amen.

---

<sup>8</sup>Anna B. Warner, "Jesus Loves Me," 1860; refrain by William Bradbury.

March 16, 2014

## Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

God of healing and mercy, we bring our prayers to you today and every day, knowing that you will be faithful to the promises you have made to be present with us and to sustain us through all of the circumstances of our lives. Some of us come today feeling strong and confident, and some more fragile, but we have the assurance that in our strength and our weakness, your Spirit heals us in ways we do not understand and cannot imagine. We rely on your power in our times of need. We depend on you for comfort and hope. We may find ourselves hindered by pride, paralyzed by fear, crippled by addiction, suffering from self-inflicted wounds or hurt by the choices of others. Whatever our need, we are grateful that you offer the grace of your Spirit, of loving family and friends who will stand with us, of faithful companions whose example and love provide support, of trusted mentors who will lead us to you. For these and all of your good gifts, we offer our prayers of thanksgiving and praise.

And we also come now, O God, to pray for others throughout our community and beyond who are in need of restoration and hope. May we be present with those who are sad or lonely, reminding them that you do not despise a broken heart but welcome its tears. May we offer consolation to those who live in fear, giving witness to the good news of your grace for the most vulnerable among us. May we attend generously and compassionately to the needs of those whose bodies and minds ache for healing and peace, sharing your powerful word of redemption and wholeness. May we profess to all who long to hear it our trust in your touch of mercy that will ease our pain, in your Spirit that will inspire us to care for one another, in your power that supports us in our crushing sorrows and dances with us in our joyful triumphs. In the name of the One on whose steady love we depend and whose mercies never fail, even Jesus the Christ, we pray. Amen.

Elizabeth J. Edwards  
Associate Minister