

WGUMC August 4, 2013 Hymn Stories
Psalm 42 "God's song is With Me"

Through the angst of adolescence and into young adulthood, through the trauma of being diagnosed with epilepsy and all the pharmaceutical failures, Psalm 42 was a favorite of mine. I guess there was a lot of disquiet in my downcast soul. O, how my soul longed for God in those years.

On the one hand, I was depressed, and that's not a good thing. On the other hand, my situation drove me to seek out a deeper relationship with God, and that's not a bad thing. It seems that sometimes we have to be down before we ever think to look up. We have to be in the depths before "deep calls to deep" and the reality of God washes over us like a wave. But it is in the darkest, stillest night that we can sometimes hear heaven singing. "At night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life." It is in those situations of extreme adversity that we occasionally find inspiration for great works of creativity.

The Holy Spirit works in mysterious ways, as they say. Many of the hymns in our hymnal were written when the authors themselves were lost in a dark night, so they wrote the song they needed to hear God singing. Take "Just As I Am." I always supposed that to be a song about poor miserable sinners coming to Jesus. True enough, but the woman who wrote it, Charlotte Elliott, had other intentions for her song. Charlotte had been an invalid all her life, disabled by an early illness, and confined to her home. One day, this very pious woman began to dwell on her uselessness as a Christian and even to question her own salvation. To counter those thoughts, she wrote this hymn. Not only did she convince herself but countless others that no matter what you can't do and where you can't go, you can always, in every circumstance, come to Christ. They may call you disabled and may have no use for you, but Christ has set a place for you. Let's sing...

Little was well with his world when Horatio Spafford wrote "It Is Well with My Soul." A successful lawyer and real estate developer, he lost a fortune in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. When recession hit a few years later, he put his wife and children on a steamship to Europe, intending to join them later after he finished up some business. In the middle of the Atlantic, the steamer collided with another ship and sank. His wife, Anna, survived. All four of his daughters drowned. The front of the bulletin this morning shows the shipwreck and the telegram that Anna sent to her husband. On his way to meet up with his wife, as the boat passed over his daughters' watery grave, Spafford wrote this hymn. It is a masterpiece of self-talk, don't you think? We call that "fake it 'til you make it." Wesley preached it until he believed it. Spafford had to write it so he could fight it. Let's sound it until we've found it...

"O Love that Wilt Not Let Me Go." Now here's a hymn that will always bring a tear to the eye. I figured this song was

written when someone had died. I often use it for funerals.

Then I read how George Matheson came to write it. He records in his journal, "It was the day of my sister's marriage...Something happened to me which was known only to myself, and which caused me the most severe mental suffering. The hymn was the fruit of that suffering." Now George doesn't tell us what had happened to him, but we know from others that there were two terrible things that happened to him in his life. He began to lose his eyesight when he was 15 and in his early twenties he lost his fiancé. She just couldn't bear the thought of being married to a blind man. George Matheson finished seminary and never married, but he wrote this hymn when his sister did, reminding himself that the love that will never ever let us go doesn't come from any human being, but from God, the Ground of All Being. Let's sing...

Thought we should end on an up note. So we have a hymn by Brian Wren, one of the most prolific and successful

hymn writers of the 20th century. He wrote "Christ Is Alive" as an Easter hymn, but he wrote it in 1968. Do you remember what happened 10 days before Easter in 1968? Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. Like a lot of young pastors, Wren was inspired by the Civil Rights movement in this country, even though he was a pastor in England at the time. That Easter, he wondered how he was going to preach the Good News on the heels of such bad news. And so he wrote this hymn as a reminder that Easter isn't something that happened a few thousand years ago. Easter happens in the here and now. As Charles Wesley put it: "Christ the Lord is risen today!" So what the Spirit keeps inspiring these hymn writers to write, what we keep coming here to sing is that no matter how much death or despair gathers around us, Christ is Alive in every one of us. And we're going to sing it as if we believe it!

Three additional hymn stories shared during the service:

Gathering Song: O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing

We have to begin a hymn sing with this one. Peter Böhler, the Moravian friend of the Wesley brothers, told Charles, "Had I a thousand tongues, I would praise [God] with them all." Charles wrote this hymn on the anniversary of his conversion, May 21, 1738, three days before John's heart was strangely warmed. The hymn has 18 verses. Our first verse is the seventh verse in the original.

Opening Hymn: O God, Our Help in Ages Past

Our opening hymn is by the other great English hymn writer, Isaac Watts. Raised a dissenter from the Church of England, his father beat him because he couldn't stop rhyming. In 1719, he wrote this hymn as a thanksgiving for the death of Queen Anne. Well, not quite. You see, dissenters from the Church of England were very much oppressed in England at the time. Queen Anne forced through Parliament the Schism Act, which severely limited religious freedom. It stipulated that anyone wanting to run a school had to get permission from the Anglican bishop and conform to the liturgy of the Church of England. The day the act was supposed to take effect, Queen Anne died and it was never enforced. Watts was so grateful to God, he wrote this hymn. If you're grateful for your religious freedom, sing!

Closing Hymn: The Battle Hymn of the Republic.

We don't sing it often maybe because we are just a little uncomfortable with putting a terrible swift sword into the hands of Jesus. Or because we don't want to say that God is on just one side in any war. This song was written during the Civil War, and even President Lincoln cautioned that we shouldn't say that God is on our side. We'd better worry about whether we are on God's side!

Julia Ward Howe, who was the author of this hymn, wasn't too worried. She was an ardent abolitionist and supporter of the Union cause. She went to visit Lincoln in Washington, D.C. in 1861, at the start of the war, and went with him to review the troops. Then she wrote this hymn.

But I want to tell you the rest of the story. After the Civil War was ended, after more than 600,000 people had died, Julia Ward Howe became a pacifist. In 1870, as war broke out again in Europe (the Franco-Prussian War), she made an impassioned but unsuccessful call for a Mother's Day for Peace and wrote a proclamation calling all women the world over to refuse to send their sons to war. So we conclude our service with this song and a prayer that one day all wars will end and the Prince of Peace will come again. Amen.