

# Three Hymnal Themes

05 June 2005, 10:45 a.m.

Good Morning.

This sermon begins in Portland, Oregon three months ago at the District Ministers' Winter Retreat. Our workshop was with the Nashville, Tennessee Minister of Music Jason Shelton.

Jason challenged us, at least one a year, to preach to a hymn. All year he said, you choose the topic, and your long suffering musicians or service leaders struggle to choose music to fit the topic. Just for once, let them pick the music and you preach about that!

Accordingly, today I take as my text Hymn #107.

Marilyn, as we begin the sermon now, would you please play once through #107, "Now Sing We of the Brave of Old", and then I'll share some reflections on that. And then we'll complete the sermon by singing the hymn, #107.

[Marilyn plays #107 once – no singing] Thank you Marilyn. And thank you, all of you who share your music with us.

- I. What comes to mind, prompted by Hymn #107? What reflection does Hymn #107 suggest to me? First, some thoughts on music in general.

According to the June issue of Scientific American, we humans have been walking the earth for approximately one hundred thousand years. And, approximately half that time, fifty thousand years, we have been capable of symbolic thinking.

Fifty thousand years. That's at least two thousand generations. If we lined our ancestors up, one per generation, about a meter apart, they would line the path for about two kilometers, around a mile and a quarter. If my calculations are correct, it would take about half an hour to stroll past them, even if you didn't stop to chat.

Scientific American tells us that this line of ancestors capable of symbolic thought may go back even further, perhaps as far as 70,000 years, roughly another half a mile of ancestors capable of stringing shell beads and other sorts of "external storage of information" – jewelry, art, tools, language, and music.

My point here is that music and singing are complexly and deeply embedded in the functioning and patterns of the human brain. Which is why I can willingly sing words that I might have difficulty saying. Which is why music can speak for us and to us when words fail [e.g. Handel's Messiah].

II. Second, some thoughts on hymns in general.

Perhaps in the music, in word and melody, we can begin to come close to some sense of those humans who are our spiritual ancestors, and how they felt.

Our current hymnal, assembled some twelve years ago, is freighted with jewels of musical religious history and a rich diversity – four hundred years and beyond. Southern harmony and the Geneva Psalter run shoulder to shoulder with Buddhist words set to Gregorian chant, along with Asian and African words and melodies and modern compositions. Something old, something new, something borrowed ....

This separate book, “Between the Lines”, includes notes on the authors and composers. It’s quite a fellowship – rich, diverse, broad and deep.

In general, when I look for music for a service, I am looking for three elements: a hymn of celebration or praise, to open the service. I grew up in the ‘50s with our old friend #21 “For the Beauty of the Earth”. Something like that. We also used to sing a doxology, literally, the Greek means “words of glory”. Every week we sang,

From all that dwell below the skies  
Let songs of hope and faith arise  
Let peace, good will on earth be sung  
Through every land, by every tongue. [#381]

The words we sang emerged from Psalm 100, “Make a joyous noise unto the Lord, all ye lands.” [3000 years ago] Our words were a composite drawn from Isaac Watts’ Psalmody of 300 years ago. We sang it to the tune [#371] known as Old Hundredth, which comes from the Geneva Psalter in 1551, 454 years ago. Our praise music has deep roots.

Next, from praise to prayer – meditation – reflection – some moment of inner searching.

Music for reflection.

Music to quiet us as we listen for the small still voice within.

Finally, a closing hymn, a hymn of commission, a song of purpose and commitment and meaning and future and hope, a song for returning to the world prepared to shape our lives into harmony with the truth, beauty, and vision of justice and hope to which we sang our hymn of praise and celebration.

III. So, third, some thoughts on our text, Hymn #107, “Now Sing We of the Brave of Old”.

What can we say about this hymn? What do we know about it? How does it feel?

[Marilyn would you play it again please?]

What does the page tell me about this hymn?

Bottom left: “Words by Albert M.P. Dawson, 1880-1963.”

“Between the Lines” does not elaborate on this. Some 20th Century wordsmith. Not known to be a UU or there would be a chalice symbol beside his name. I know nothing further about this writer than what his words tell me: [read them aloud] Four stanzas, separated by the refrain Alleluia, each stanza with three rhyming lines,

old-gold-manifold  
fight-right-might  
way-day-say  
bore-sore-evermore

(I’ve never really trusted poets entirely – I always suspect they’d say almost anything, to get a good rhyme!) Each line has eight syllables, plus the Alleluia.

The tune is “Victory”; If I liked the tune, I could write any new words for it, as long as each line was eight syllables long. And if I look in the indices at the back, I can find three other tunes to fit these eight syllable lines. I could sing Dawson’s words to these other hymn tunes.

But the editors chose this fit; they chose to set Dawson’s words to this tune VICTORY. Somehow the music supports the sense of praise and celebration that is in the words.

It was William Henry Monk who adapted the tune. Monk was a well known English organist and music professor. The music he took the tune from was written, as we see, lower left on the page, by Palestrina about 400 years ago. This is the music of the Renaissance, from 400 years ago.

What else? Two sharps. A bight, cheerful key. But note the time. Three quarters time! This is no grim left-right-left-right processional. This is music to waltz down the aisle.

What else – well it’s in good company. #106, the page before, “Who Would True Valor See” – one of my favorites. From John Bunyon’s Pilgrim’s Progress. He wrote that allegory in prison.

Overleaf, #108 “My Life Flows On in Endless Song,” another favorite. An early Quaker song.

And back to #107, “Now Sing We of the Brave of Old”. I’ve never paid it much mind before. But it grows on me. Especially in this year of Jubilee, the 50<sup>th</sup> year of this Anchorage fellowship. Let us indeed Sing of the Brave of Old.

Next week we’ll be honoring those who have been with the Fellowship half that time or more – over 25 years. Do you know who you are? [Read list]

The brave of old indeed. And not so old. We live so much longer now than most did in Palestrina’s day, or Bunyan’s, or even Dawson’s. I wonder if Dawson wrote them for a Jubilee?

Mind you, Palestrina made 69, and Bunyan made 60, not bad for those days. And Dawson made 83! Well done! I wonder who he was thinking of, when he thought of the brave of old?

I wonder who you think of, when you sing for the brave of old.

We live our whole lives, scattered, spread thin, our time consumed with daily routine. What are the “riches manifold” we might be leaving? Are we even aware of what will truly be remembered with praise and thanks and celebration 50 years from now?

Will it be something we said, some intentional act? Or will it be offhand, a routine moment, a simple domestic choice, a second’s pause on a busy day. Our legacy is as much what we do, and how we do it, not just our noble thoughts and high resolve.

That whisper of a butterfly’s wing by which we each change the world, one trembling flutter at a time – what will it be, known or anonymous, that will give our successors cause to name us among the brave of old in our turn? We may never know.

Great deeds? Or great love in simple deeds? A fireside chat, perhaps? An evening stroll. An elegance of manner. An excursion to a green house on a cold, rainy day?

Another thing. The brave of old had their own perspective, and their own issues. What we praise them for, might seem less important to them.

For example, Joseph Priestly is first remembered now as the discoverer of oxygen. To him, that might have seemed a mere hobby, and less important than his work as a social reformer and his chosen career as a Unitarian minister.

For example, Olympia Brown, the first female ordained Universalist is an icon and inspiration for female seminarians. Her marriage to her Henry is a beacon of hope and a model of trust and mutuality for any woman professional. Olympia, I believe, might have quickly returned our focus to her work, her true work, for women’s suffrage and world peace.

When we praise the brave of old, I believe, it is important to let them be themselves, with their own realities and all that goes with living in time and place and history. And thus we find our heroes with feet of clay – such as Jefferson, the slave owner. Such as – Mr. Felt [identified recently as the legendary Whitehouse informant “Deep Throat”] who blew a whistle only after he was denied the appointment he felt he deserved.

We all have our feet of clay When subsequent generations consider the state of the environment, the lost species, the pillaged resources, the needless dead and maimed and desolate, will we still make the cut as the brave of old?

Youth succeeds age, and is succeeded in its turn, and goes to stand one meter further along that chain of ancestors reaching back one hundred thousand years. The brave of old. Power changes hands. Protection waxes and wanes.

This Fellowship has lost four of the brave of old in the last few months: Harriet Hall, Martha Thompson, Ms. Laré, and Jean Brown.

I always feel a draft on my shoulders when we lose an elder, as if a tile had been blown off the roof. The brave of old.

What else can be read in Hymn #107?

Paradox! Albert Dawson's lines are shaped around Paradox! Teachings that appear mutually inconsistent, self-contradictory, seemingly absurd. And yet somehow make sense.

No gold- but riches manifold.  
Fighting the good fight BUT "their patient love their chiefest might.  
A struggle won through steadfastness and endurance.  
In the dark, pressing on, by night, by day.  
In being dead, but living evermore.  
In sorrow, toil, and suffering BUT Alleluia

Paradox.

Today, for me, that is at the heart of what I read in Albert Dawson's words, and what I hear in Palestrina's uplifting music: Celebration and Praise!

Dawson sings me courage of the brave, in spite of all, in hopeful paradox the courage of "their patient love, their chiefest might".

Steadfastness. Patient love.

That would be a legacy worth passing on. That would be a fine thing to hear sung, fifty years from now.

Al le luia!

Let's Sing!

Hymn #107, "Now Sing We of the Brave of Old"

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