



The Women's Choir, Mary Ogle

Don't Just Say It; Sing It!

Studying the Bible Through Hymns

BY MARY LOUISE BRINGLE

Our earliest Christian ancestors did not just read scripture; they sang it. When Jesus and his disciples finished their last Passover meal together, they “sang a hymn”—most likely, one of the traditional Hallel or “praise” psalms (*Ps. 113–118*)—before they went out into the night (*Mt. 26:30; Mk. 14:26*). When Christians gathered in their house churches, they addressed one another with “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (*Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16*). Modeling their worship on what they had experienced in the synagogues, they understood that reciting God’s word in a monotone was a form of disrespect. Holiness, the rabbis taught, was far too important for ordinary speech; it required the adornment of melody.¹

Unlike us today, early Christians lived in an oral rather than a print culture. Scripture came to them through the ear and tongue, the breath and the body. Even if they could not read, even if they did not possess scrolls or books, they still had deep access to the Word of God because they learned significant portions of it *by heart*. Surely the rhythmic melodies of chant assisted them in this memorization process.

While we may not chant our scripture readings any more (at least, not in most Presbyterian churches!), we still employ musical forms through which the word of God can “dwell in us richly” (*Col 3:16*): not just the biblical psalms, but also the hymns and spiritual songs created by fellow believers of the past and present. Hymns provide wonderful resources to enhance our study of the Bible, if we take the time to familiarize ourselves with the basic scriptural index in the back of the hymnal,

or with fuller indices available in other formats.² Using such resources, we can sing and study our way into an ever-deepening acquaintance with the stories and themes of God's word.

Hearing the Stories

Hymns are, indeed, an important tool for teaching Bible stories. The most obvious examples of this appear in Christmas carols, which unfold for us, act by act, the great drama of Jesus' birth. Stanza One of "Angels from the Realms of Glory," for example, begins with the host of heaven; stanza two moves to the "shepherds, in the fields abiding"; stanza three, to the "sages" (James Montgomery, 1816, 1825; *Presbyterian Hymnal* #22). We may overlook this narrative teaching function of hymns because, of all parts of the Bible, Jesus' birth is among the most familiar. But, suppose we had never heard of it before? How much would we learn through the words of hymns about its cast of characters, scenic backdrop and dramatic action? Indeed, how many "unchurched" people in our culture can still recount the birth story because of the carols they have heard as a constant backdrop to the Christmas season?

Other instances of the teaching function of hymns appear in stories that are less familiar. The transfiguration is a telling example. Look at hymns 73, 74 and 75 in *The Presbyterian Hymnal*: "Swiftly Pass the Clouds of Glory," "Jesus on the Mountain Peak," "O Wondrous Sight, O Vision Fair." How does each of these texts recast the mysterious episode, the transfiguration, from *Matthew 17* and *Luke 9*? Who are the principal characters? What is the setting? What happens?

"New Hymnal" Tidbit

The committee making song selections for the Presbyterian hymnal scheduled for publication in 2013 is proposing to include more hymns than in past hymnals that retell Bible stories in poetic form.

But a good hymnic account of a biblical story does more than simply replay the action. It also *interprets* the action, setting it into a broader context. So, just as we understand events of our own lives better by seeing how moments of the past have shaped us, we also grasp the biblical narrative better when we see the echoes and anticipations that run from story to story. Think, for example, of the great Easter hymn dating to John of Damascus in the eighth century: "Come, Ye Faithful, Raise the Strain" (114 and 115). What does this hymn teach us about the relationship between the exodus and the resurrection?

Finally, a good hymn not only contextualizes a biblical story, it also applies it, drawing out pastoral implications for our own journeys of faith. Often, this happens in the closing stanza, as events of the past are brought pointedly into the present. Look again, for example, at hymn 73, "Swiftly Pass the Clouds of Glory." According to poet Tom Troeger, what meaning should the transfiguration have for our lives today?

Recognizing Themes

Of course, not every hymn is narrative in style. Many are thematic instead. Rather than retell biblical stories, they compile biblical images and convey them in melodic and memorable form. For example, not many of us could quote by heart the short book of *Lamentations*, tucked as it is between the major prophets

Jeremiah and *Ezekiel* in the Hebrew scriptures. Yet, consider *Lamentations* 3:22–23:

The steadfast love of the LORD
never ceases,
his mercies never come to
an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.

Then flip to hymn 276 (that is, if you have not already found yourself making melody to God in your heart!) and look at the refrain:

Great is Thy faithfulness! Great
is Thy faithfulness!

Morning by morning, new
mercies I see . . .

(Thomas Obadiah Chisholm, 1923)

Hymn study provides countless further examples. After all, if a line of scripture delivers a meaningful promise or arresting image, chances are good it has inspired some writer not just to say it, but to *sing* it: to put it into the body of a hymn. Consider the following pairings:

- "Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning" (*Ps. 30:5*), and "O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go" (#384): "I trace the rainbow through the rain, / And feel the promise is not vain / That morn shall tearless be" (George Matheson, 1882).
- "Where I am, there will my servant be also" (*Jn. 12:26*), and "O Jesus, I Have Promised" (#389): "O Jesus, Thou hast promised / To all who follow Thee / That where Thou art in glory, / There shall Thy servant be" (John Ernest Bode, 1866).
- "Where, O death, is your sting?" (*1 Cor. 15:55*), and "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today!" (#113):

“Lives again our glorious King; / Alleluia! / Where, O death, is now your sting? / Alleluia!” (Charles Wesley, 1739).

At least one other hymn in the 1990 *Presbyterian Hymnal* makes use of the passage from *1 Corinthians 15* cited above. Can you find it? How many other such pairings can you identify by working your way through the hymnal’s scriptural

index, as part of a personal or group devotional practice? Not only are the relationships fun to unearth, they also are deeply enriching. After all, the most important lessons of our faith should never simply be spoken. They cry out to be sung! 🍷

Mary Louise Bringle is chair of the Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song.

Notes

1. Joshua Jacobsen, *Chanting the Hebrew Bible* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2005), 7.
2. See Judith Muck, *The Presbyterian Hymnal: Complete Concordance and Indexes* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997) or William Smith’s superlative index available at www.hymnary.org/files/hymnary/other/hs3.pdf.

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A New Presbyterian Hymnal

BY ADAM J. COPELAND

It’s about that time.

Since the 1870s, Presbyterians have published a denominational hymnal about once a generation, or roughly every 20 years. The last hymnal published (not including the 2003 supplement, *Sing the Faith*) was in 1990—The *Presbyterian Hymnal*, also known as “the blue hymnal.” Well, since 1990 thousands of new hymns have been written and raised to God’s glory. Additionally, the church has discovered many fantastic songs from beyond North America that have enriched our faith and worship. So, come 2013, it definitely will be time for a new hymnal.

With the authorization of the 217th General Assembly (2006), the Presbyterian Publishing Corporation brought together a 15-person Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song (PCOCS). Comprised of seven women and eight men, members of PCOCS are prayerfully working (and singing) through submissions for the new hymnal. It’s a diverse group—committee members include persons from various racial ethnic backgrounds, both pastors and musicians, and two persons under 25—and the PCOCS is working to make sure this hymnal represents the whole church.

Compiling a new congregational song resource for the church is a daunting task. Since the first meeting in September 2008, the committee has worked toward creating a hymnal that will serve in the varied contexts of Presbyterian congregations. After drafting a Theological Vision Statement and a Statement on Language, the committee consulted with experts in congregational song, and published requests for submissions. So far, the PCOCS has considered nearly 4,000 individually submitted hymns, gone through about 30 hymnals published since 1990, searched scores of collections of “contemporary praise music,” and read dozens of

collections written by individual text and tune writers.

With partnership from the Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, the Presbyterian Association of Musicians and the Office of Theology and Worship, the committee has explored not only song possibilities, but also liturgy and format possibilities. The PCOCS is committed to publishing an electronic version that will be available online, in addition to the traditional paperbound hymnal.

The committee still has tremendous work to accomplish before the 2013 publication of the new hymnal. In addition to the task of selecting content, the committee will choose a title for this new collection, and yes, even a new color. Around 200 congregations are supporting the work of the committee by serving as “test congregations” that sing new (or sometimes old) hymns the committee is considering for inclusion. The congregations give feedback as to how the piece worked in worship, on the text and tune, and even how the piece looked on the printed page. The PCOCS will present a list of hymns and songs to General Assembly in 2012 before the final product goes into the production process.

Visit the website for the hymnal project, <http://presbyterianhymnal.org>, to learn more about the process, the committee members, the theological and language statements guiding song selection, and the latest news from the committee. There you will find a survey about the new hymnal and you can add your name to the list of advocates for the project. As always, the committee asks for your prayers as members help discern how we might together “sing a new song to the Lord.”

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