

**Devotions – January 22-29, 2017**  
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**Sunday, January 22, 2017**

Bible Verse: Psalm 95:1

***“O come let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation.”***

When last I offered daily devotions I referenced a number of hymns and sacred music. I thought I would continue in that vein. There is a wealth of interesting information behind many of the songs that we sing. When examined, their stories add to our depth of understanding and appreciation for the music that is so familiar. Many of these stories reflect great evidence of faith and none more than our first example.

*What a Friend We Have in Jesus* is one of the most familiar and loved hymns of all time. Its history is a compelling story of tragedy and faith. In Ireland in the spring of 1844, Joseph Scriven was about to get married. On the day before his wedding his bride-to-be was out riding and her horse shied and threw the young woman into a stream where she drowned. Scriven turned to God for guidance. He moved to Canada and settled on the shores of Lake Ontario and dedicated himself to Christ’s message of the Sermon on the Mount. He became known as the Good Samaritan of Port Hope. Following Jesus’ entreaties to provide for the poor and needy he helped those who could not pay.

Scriven fell in love again but a few weeks before the marriage his fiancée died of pneumonia. He turned to God again and in that time wrote a poem to his Mother in Ireland which ultimately, set to music, became *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*. His love of God was that which allowed his burdens to be assumed by the Lord. He lived out his life in Port Hope, Ontario and in its cemetery on his monument are etched the words of his hymn.

Prayer: *Lord, allow me only a portion of the faith of Joseph Scriven and my life will be that much more dedicated to following Christ. Amen.*



**Monday January 23, 2017**

Bible Verse: Psalm 98:9

***“Sing a new song to the Lord, who has done marvelous things, whose right hand and holy arm have won the victory.”***

Quite a few years ago I had an opportunity to attend an Easter sunrise service at the Hollywood Bowl. It was quite a production with celebrities, huge mixed choirs, a Salvation Army brass band from England and the releasing of hundreds of white doves. It was choreographed so that as the first rays of the sun peeked over the Hollywood Hills behind the Bowl the choir somehow exchanged their black robes for white and burst into the first strains of *Christ the Lord is Risen Today*. It was truly a memorable morning.

In the midst of it all, however, the most powerful element for me was the singing of *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* with the audience joining in with the choirs and orchestra. Thousands of voices filled the air and the effect was amazing. It was strong evidence of the power of music to move the soul. It is, however, somewhat ironic that the origins of the song are as far removed from the Hollywood production of that morning as possible.

Julia Ward Howe, the composer, was a social activist during the Civil War. She was part of a commission that was visiting the battlefield camps of the Union army trying to determine how well the troops were being treated. She came face to face with the realities and the horror of war. The sights, sounds and images of the day troubled her sleep and though she slept unsoundly during the night the lyrics of the song came to her. She committed them to paper when she awoke. It is doubtful that she had any inkling of what her poem would become.

It is said that Lincoln wept when he first heard the song. The last words in Martin Luther King Jr.'s last speech were from the song, "mine eyes have seen the glory of the Lord." As Bobby Kennedy's funeral train wound through Baltimore in June, 1968 mourners beside the tracks sang the hymn. After the September 2001 terrorist attacks it was sung at the National Cathedral. It was also part of the funeral service for Winston Churchill.

*The Battle Hymn of the Republic* is not a gentle song; rather it is a song about God's vengeance. It was written reflecting the realities of war and suffering. Howe's words leave an impression of a powerful and righteous God that will protect his people with his "terrible swift sword" and that Christ died to make us holy and so should we die to keep us free. Strong words written by a strong woman.

Prayer: *Lord, give us the ability to recognize that in the midst of turmoil, troubles and terror there is God's presence. Often from the worst of what life has to offer evidence of His love will emerge. Amen.*



**Tuesday January 24, 2017**

Bible Verse: Colossians 3:16

***“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.”***

The hymn *The Old Rugged Cross* has for over a century been one of the best loved songs in the hymnals of most all denominations. The Cross of Jesus is the most recognizable symbol of the Christian faith wherever you might be in the world. This hymn elicits the Cross and all that it represents and that powerful imagery had a profound effect on George Bernard, the author of the hymn.

Bernard was a rather well regarded preacher on the Methodist evangelistic circuit in mid-America during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. He would respond to invitations from various churches and groups to help spread the Word of God. His favorite passage was John 3:16 and he framed many of his messages around those words. The concept of God sacrificing his only Son for the sake of the world seemed to Bernard to be the essence of the faith. Further he was fixated on the cruel vision of Calvary and the suffering of Jesus on a crude wooden cross. He struggled to get the image of that sacrificial scene into a song that he had been trying to write for a number of years.

One night, at the kitchen table of the parsonage of a church he was preaching at in Albion, Michigan the obstacles fell away and he wrote the lyrics without hesitating over one word. He immediately called his wife, played his guitar and sang the song to her. He sent the song to a publisher in Chicago who wrote him and said that Bernard would be hearing from the song for a long time for he had written what was sure to be a classic.

George Bernard said that he really hadn't written *The Old Rugged Cross* but that God had written it and he was only the instrument chosen to put in on paper. He was a man of talent and humility who proved the publisher's prophecy to be spot on.

Prayer: *We pray that the symbol of the Cross remains an ever present image for us to hold in our hearts as evidence of God's love for his people. Amen.*



**Wednesday January 25, 2107**

Bible Verse: Psalm 98:8

***“Let the rivers clap their hands; let the hills ring out with joy before the Lord, who comes to judge the earth.”***

A hymn creation story that many people are aware of is that of *Silent Night* but it bears repeating and, perhaps, introducing to some folks.

On Christmas Eve in 1818 at St. Nicholas Church in Oberndorf, Austria, Father Joseph Mohr learned that the organ was broken. Realizing that there would be no music for the service he went to his office and retrieved a poem he had written two years before. He gave it to Franz Gruber, the church organist, and asked him to compose a melody and guitar accompaniment for

it and thus *Silent Night (Stille Nacht)* was sung for the first time at the midnight Christmas Eve Mass.

How often have we heard that the Lord works in mysterious ways? Two hundred years ago a musical crisis in a small Austrian church generated one of the most loved hymns of all times. The simple tune was a product of the limited time Gruber had to produce. Combined with Mohr's words the song tells the story of Christ's birth in a wonderfully simple and clear manner. It has become one of the most beloved and symbolic hymns of our Faith.

Prayer: *Lord, the story of that Christmas Eve will ever be dear to our hearts and this wonderful hymn will help it always be so. Amen*



**Thursday January 26, 2017**

Bible Verse: Psalm 105:2

***“Sing to him, sing praises to him; tell all of his wondrous works!”***

Some 30 years ago I was attending church in Wausau, WI at Immanuel Lutheran, an ELCA congregation. It was a special day since we had a guest musician participating. It was John Ylvisaker and we were honored to have him there. He spoke and played his electric piano around the theme of the role of music in worship. I enjoyed his presence and contributions but the most lasting memory of that day was that it was the first time I heard the song *Borning Cry*. The tune impressed me but the story line of the lyrics was what really caught my attention.

John Ylvisaker has written hundreds of songs and religious works but, by far, his best known is *Borning Cry*. That day we bought a cassette tape of his music and over the years I have listened to it numerous times. Perhaps the other song you might recognize from it would be *Drawn to the Light* which is also in the ELW. He has strong ties to the ELCA and has written much of his music to include in ELCA videos and other media. He comes from a strong family tradition of Lutheranism that has a particularly strong tie to Lutheran education. He has been involved with music all of his life and with the Lutheran church as well. All of that may explain why the hymn *Borning Cry* seems like such a comfortable fit.

As you listen to the words of *Borning Cry* you can't help but recognize how seemingly easily he wraps the life of a child of God up in those four verses. The ability of those images to affect people the way they do is the genius of the song. It is little wonder that it has become attached to the meaningful times of our religious lives; baptisms, confirmation and funerals. Little did I realize that as I sat and listened to John Ylvisaker's presentation that I was listening to what would become one of our most beloved hymns.

Prayer: *Lord, thank you for the talent and dedication of composers like John Ylvisaker. His communication of your message manifested through his efforts has given us greater insight and understanding of the Good News. Amen.*



**Friday January 27, 2017**

Bible Verse: Psalm 71:23

***“My lips will shout for joy, when I sing praises to you; my soul also, which you have redeemed.”***

One of the common threads I’ve noticed in the writing of many hymns and religious songs is that there was usually some seminal event that caused the song to be written; a vision, a life changing crisis, a coming to Christ or a strong sense of need to tell the world about God through song. One such hymn that comes to mind is *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing*.

Written in 1758 by an Englishman named Robert Robinson, it has been a standard in many of the denominations tied to the Protestant experience in England. As a young man Robinson was a critic of religious things and on one occasion was in attendance at an evangelical meeting with the intent to heckle and disrupt the proceedings. However he was intrigued by the message being given by a great preacher named George Whitefield and the belligerent young man became a believer. He formally became churching and eventually became a pastor of a church in Norfolk, England. There in 1758 while preparing a sermon he penned the words to his hymn. The story line of the hymn speaks of how Robinson was changed for the better in his life by God’s grace. The lyrics of this beloved song speak of the bountiful grace of God and how it binds us all, as it did Robinson, to the Lord. We like sheep are prone to wander but God continues to bring us back into the fold.

One of the most talented musicians I have come across is a man by the name of Buddy Greene. I guess you would consider him a bit “gospelly” as he accompanies himself on guitar. However, he is also a virtuoso on the harmonica and has played Carnegie Hall where he did a superb rendition of *Jesu Joy of Man’s Desiring*. He is simply an overall talented man. If you find him on You Tube and reference his rendition of *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing* you will have a memorably enjoyable experience. He makes this hymn resonate with the intent of Robert Robinson to tell us of the grace of God.

Prayer: *Praise to the guiding hand of God who has blessed the world with the good works of people like Robert Robinson. He had once thought God to be a target of derision yet like Saul of Tarsus he came to praise Him. Amen.*



**Saturday January 28, 2017**

Bible Verse: Psalm 46:1, 11

***“God is our refuge and strength; an ever-present help in trouble. The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.”***

As we celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> year of the Reformation it seems only right to consider the story of *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*. It is not only Martin Luther’s most well known musical composition but it is also the hymn most symbolic of the Reformation and the rise of Protestantism.

Martin Luther was a prolific producer of hymns. He believed strongly that through singing, congregants would come to better understand their faith. He translated the Bible into the vernacular from Latin, thus allowing the common German to read and understand it rather than having to depend on priests to interpret it for them. This effort on Luther’s part went a long way in standardizing the German language which had a huge cultural impact. His hymns fostered the practice of singing in the Protestant churches. Much of the musical prominence in our services can be laid directly at the feet of Luther.

The life story of Martin Luther is a fascinating one but we want to focus on only one, but hugely important aspect of his history.

Luther wrote 36 hymns but of all of them the best known is *A Mighty Fortress is our God*. It was written in 1527 as the plague was approaching Europe. There seems to be little question that Luther wrote both the words and the melody for this famous hymn. It is based on Psalm 46 and is a celebration of the power of God to protect the world against all threats because he is the Lord Almighty. The hymn had a huge impact not only on the world of religion but on the political arena as well. Until the Reformation the linkage between government and Rome was very strong. Actions diminishing the Catholic Church’s influence on the people ultimately developed into a populist movement that eventually eliminated the Pope’s control. It was almost as if there were theological or philosophical war declared and the hymn was the *Battle Hymn of the Reformation*. The Reformation did not simply happen on October 31, 1517 when Luther posted his 95 Theses on the door of All Saints Church at Wittenberg. We use that date as the birthdate of the movement but, in truth, that was only the beginning of what developed over many years into the Protestant movement in Germany and, eventually, worldwide.

Throughout all of these 500 years one song can be heard above all others symbolizing everything that has transpired. The hymn became closely associated with Luther and some might say that is only right since the words seem to embody the character of the man himself; bold, defiant and confident. This association is memorialized by the first line of his lyrics being engraved on the base of the Luther Monument at Wittenberg.

Though many denominations revere and use the hymn these days, including the Catholic Church, we Lutherans are the ones that have shaped our worship and beliefs most closely to the ideas of Martin Luther. His approach to things seem rather simple but profound at the same time. His conviction is that we are all sinners but if we have faith, God’s grace will provide our salvation.

