

Devotions – September 24-30, 2017

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Sunday September 24, 2017

Bible Verse: Psalm 138:1

I will give thanks to you, O Lord, with my whole heart; before the gods I will sing your praise.

Community is a word that can mean many things to people. Most often it refers to any group that shares an interest in something. I have come to the realization that I am within the community of devotional writers for Prayfaithfully. It is a nice community to attach to and I've learned much from and about the group. One thing I've noted is that many of the writers have some sort of theme or commonality in their devotions. We all come to Christ as our focus but how we get there is different for each.

My approach is to take a musical route and what was somewhat of an easy technique to frame my thoughts has become a great learning experience as well and a very interesting insight into the lives of a wide variety of people of faith.

Take, for instance, the story of John Greenleaf Whittier. As an American poet he is spoken of in the same breath as Longfellow, Emerson, Lowell and Holmes. Though he achieved much in his life, including serving in the Massachusetts legislature and being on the original staff of *The Atlantic Monthly*, he remained a Quaker throughout all his years. The Society of Friends or Quakers do not use music in their worship so Whittier had no real familiarity with the singing of hymns. Yet he is the author of one of our greatest hymns *Dear Lord and Father of Mankind*.

As with so many other hymns the words are taken from a poem and set to music. During the time when he penned these words Whittier was disturbed by the actions involved in the many revivalist meeting taking place in the eastern U.S. In protest he wrote a 17 verse poem *The Brewing of Soma* which likened these

religious circuses to a Hindu sect which indulged in histrionics. Whittier was offended by both and his poem speaks of the preference for a quiet contemplative worship approach. You can sense his feelings as you sing the verses of his hymn.

An anonymous source said of him, "John Greenleaf Whittier has left upon our literature the stamp of genius and upon religion, the touch of sanity."

Let us pray: *Lord, please allow us the ability to turn off the noise of this world at times so that we too can contemplate the wonder of your presence in our lives. Amen*



Monday September 25. 2017

Bible Verse: Genesis 28:16

Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said "Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it!"

When I was young life seemed so much simpler than today, or at least less complicated and busy. People had less of everything to choose from and, therefore, choices seemed easier to make. There were only three makes of cars, few brands of cereal, milk only came with the cream floating on the top and there were two or three T.V. channels, once we got a set. On those channels you had little choice as well. One of the shows that we would watch was the *Mitch Miller Show* which was nothing more than his men's choir standing and singing for the duration of the program. It was a popular program then but by today's standards it would never get on the air. Another sure sign of how times have changed is that each show would include a hymn. In my mind I can still see and hear the choir singing *Nearer My God to Thee* and *Lead Kindly Light*.

his refuge and was something he was good at. Ultimately he rose to the top of the charts and became wealthy since he wrote a great share of the music he sang. During the early performing years he contracted tuberculosis and withdrew from performing for some time. In his convalescence he wrote many of the songs he would incorporate into his albums but he also began to question life and issues of spirituality. Over the next few years he sought answers in many places but in 1977 he converted to Islam and took the name Yusuf Islam. The move was sincere and he has been a devout Muslim since that time believing that Islam is a faith of peace and righteousness.

The actual composition of the hymn took place in 1931 when a Scottish poet named Eleanor Farjeon was asked to write a song regarding the need to give thanks for each day to include in a song collection labeled *Songs of Praise*. It was set to an old Gaelic tune called *Bunessan*. The result was the hymn which is now regarded as a soothing song of peace and promise. Those same qualities are what caused Cat Stevens to become Yusuf Islam. The idea of a Muslim ascetic bringing a great hymn to my ears has always seemed somewhat ironic to me.

Let us pray: Lord, as we all take our personal journeys through life, be there to help us make the right decisions. Help shape our lives as a reflection of your influence. Amen.



Wednesday September 27, 2017

Bible Verse: Galatians 6:14

“May I never boast except in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”

Often as we sing hymns we’ll note the composers of the words and tunes listed at the bottom of the page. Some seem much more familiar than others; a phenomenon that I attribute to repetition. Two names that you may easily

recognize are Isaac Watts and Lowell Mason. An ancient Gregorian chant was used by Mason, a highly regarded American musician to set Watt's verses to music. This combination of notes and words has given us the simple, haunting hymn *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*.

The Isaac Watts story is truly fascinating. A child prodigy, this eldest of nine children, had conquered Latin, Greek, French and Hebrew by age 14. He was poetic as soon as he could speak and drove his father to frustration by speaking only in rhyme. At one point he was threatened with a spanking if he continued the irritating habit. The boy rhymed his retort and was summarily spanked as promised. The tearful boy is said to have told his father afterwards, "O Father, do some pity take, and I will no more verses make."

Watts was fifteen when he wrote his first hymn in response to a challenge from his father after Isaac complained of the dull and dreary congregational singing. He wrote his first hymn and the congregation enthusiastically welcomed it. Many of his early hymns were derived by the words or thoughts in the Psalms. Two of them are still sung today, *Jesus Shall Reign* and *O God Our Help in Ages Past*.

As Watts matured his compositions began to reflect a closer more personal relationship with Christ. None was more representative of this approach than *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross* which seems to place Watts on the scene as a witness to the Crucifixion. Some considered him a radical of sorts but such criticism didn't deter him from his hymn writing. His life production totaled more than 600 hymns and earned him the title of "The Father of English Hymnody."

Let us pray: *Father in heaven thank you for faithful servants such as Isaac Watts. His intellect, talent and creativity have combined to give us the pleasures of singing and hearing his marvelous music glorifying your name. Amen.*



Thursday September 28, 2017

Bible Verse: Jeremiah6:22

“Is there no balm in Gilead; is there no physician there? Why then is not the health of the daughter of my people not recovered?”

Quite a few years ago I had the opportunity to set a meeting up for an industry group I chaired. We met in Charleston, South Carolina, one of America’s truly charming cities. Part of the lure of the area is the vision of the antebellum South as it appeared prior to the first shots fired at Fort Sumter from this very city. So one night we had our dinner at one of the plantation mansions that survived the Civil War. As you drove into a long tree-lined approach the huge house appeared just as promised, but off to one side there were a number of somewhat squalid little cabins; slave quarters.

After dinner entertainment was provided by the Washington’s, a husband and wife singing duo. Their repertoire primarily consisted of familiar spirituals from the period. They were enjoyable and beautifully done by these descendants of the slaves that worked on that very plantation. Yet the whole experience was a bit disturbing because of the knowledge that that entire world depended on the toil and sweat of people who were brutally treated at the whim of the owner or overseer.

The Washington’s gave a short history of each of the songs and then, dressed in the clothes of the house servant slaves, they sang *a cappella*. Each of the songs were similar in the sense that they were all about the slaves’ struggle and how someday they would reach the Promised Land and be free of their misery. Jesus would be their Great Redemer and they would one day cross the Jordan and enter Beulah Land. This was the promise that sustained them.

One of my favorite spirituals has always been *There is a Balm in Gilead* and the Washington’s were kind enough to sing it with me that evening. One can never tell where you’ll find Christ. The plantation represented everything evil and cruel about mankind yet in the midst of all that there was a legacy of Christian faith founded solidly on the rock of salvation.

Let us pray: Lord, whenever we struggle please remind us of those who have truly struggled. Give us the strength to meet each day with the conviction that we too will someday realize the promise of your sacrifice on the Cross. Amen.



Friday September 29, 2017

Bible Verse: Colossians 3:16

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

About 30 years ago an uncle of mine passed away. He had never been a churchgoer yet we wanted him to be given a good Christian burial. As is the custom the funeral was held at the funeral home and other than not being in a sanctuary things were pretty standard. As we sat and waited for the service to begin we listened to the preliminary incidental music an organist was playing behind a curtain. I was taken back in time to many years before when we would listen to or sing the same songs at the Finnish services at St. Paul Lutheran. As I sat and enjoyed the music I sort of realized that when my parent’s generation left us so would those songs. I decided I would try to do something about that.

My Mother was a choir member for 80 years and choir director for 40 years at our home church. The church was a Suomi Synod congregation and had regular Finnish services along with the English for a great share of its history. Those Finnish hymns which we grew to love were a big part of that experience. Martha Patterson was the church organist for many years and she would play those hymns with the special touch of someone who loved the music. She happened to be the person playing behind the curtain mentioned above.

Sometime after my uncle's passing I gathered my Mother and Martha and we spent an evening singing and listening while Martha played all of our favorites. I recorded everything on cassette. Since then I burned that onto a CD and eventually transferred it to my iPod and iTouch. Now I can indulge myself with not only the music but my Mother's voice and Martha's talent. I furnished copies to my sister, brothers, other family members and Martha's son as well.

I suppose you might think this is a vain hope to keep a hold onto the past. Perhaps it is but often I think in a world where change is so rapid that many things of value can be lost. The Finnish hymns of my youth are still with me and they always conjure up an image of the good days spent with the family in the comfort of my church and my faith.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, guide us as we make our way through this world of change and challenge. Give us the wisdom to recognize the good in the new and the value in the old. We trust that you will give us the ability to make the right choices. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.



Saturday September 30, 2017

Bible Verse: Psalm 77:6

"I will remember my song in the night, I will meditate in my heart, And my spirit ponders."

One of the challenges in many of our churches is to get the congregation to embrace new or, at least, different hymns. I expect this has always been the case and songs that we now consider old standards probably met resistance when they were introduced. I, like most people in the pews, am not a musician and I'll admit that there are quite a few hymns in the ELW that cause me to wonder how this

one ever got chosen. I'll not sing when one of those hymns is chosen but simply listen rather than stumble through a song badly. I guess my expectation is that any hymn used in worship should be easy to sing. Now, I realize how that sounds and reading it you might think I resist new songs.

The truth is that I don't. I resist those songs that I struggle to sing and therefore can't appreciate. Conversely, I enjoy a good number of new hymns, new at least to us Lutherans, which are found in the ELW and *With One Voice*. *Here I Am Lord, Shine Jesus Shine, Borning Cry, Spirit of Gentleness, Oh, Sing to the Lord, Jesu, Jesu, Fill Us With Your Love, You Have Come Down to the Lakeshore* and many more are wonderful hymns. They all share the same quality – they are enjoyable to sing. Certainly there are other hymns that are just as good but I am ignorant of them since I've never had anyone play me the tunes of all the hymns. Most every church probably falls into a similar pattern and I suspect any one church uses somewhere between 10% and 25% of the songs in the hymnal.

Martin Luther believed that congregational singing was a powerful way to connect people with God. When you think about it, there is probably no opportunity for most people to join others in singing other than in church. Our Lutheran tradition places great value in expressing our community in Christ through singing. Bless those people who contribute new hymns to the old favorites that we probably will always sing.

Let us pray: *Lord, thank you for providing us the creative production these many years of the talented souls who have given us the hymns we sing to you. Our lives are richer for the opportunity to sing their songs. Bless all the musicians that serve to assist us in our effort to praise you through our singing. Amen*

