

**October 21-27, 2018**

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**Sunday, October 21, 2018**

Bible Verse: Psalm 147:1

***“Praise the Lord! For it is good to sing praises to our God; for he is gracious, and a song of praise is seemly.”***

Frequent readers of the Prayfaithfully\_devotions will know that my devotions focus on musical matters; typically on stories of the hymns. I have enjoyed the research and understanding that these efforts have generated.

Often hymns take on a certain attachment to events within church life that may have never been the intent of the composer. Such may be the case with “funeral” hymns. *Abide with Me* falls into that category in a lot of churches. As I listen to the hymn and read the lyrics I have come to realize that it is ill served if about the only time it is sung is at a funeral. I have come to think of it as a wonderful song regarding the latter days of the aging process.

The author of the poem that became the hymn, Henry Francis Lyte, was a Scottish pastor who suffered from ill health most of his life. He fought his body’s frailty by working as best he could. When cautioned about overworking he said, “it is better to wear out than rust out.” Typically he would travel to warmer climes when cold weather arrived. He was in the south of France on September 4, 1847 when he wrote the poem that became *Abide with Me*. Several weeks later his body surrendered and he died. The song was sung at his funeral but not to the tune we now recognize. That tune, *Eventide*, was penned in 1861 by a well- known composer, William Henry Monk. It is said that he wrote both the melody and harmony in a half hour.

The next time you sing this classic hymn view it from the perspective of an aging person with a long life behind them but some years still before them. The comfort of knowing that their God is with them and waiting is what makes this hymn so special.

Prayer: *Truly the Lord is gracious in His willingness to abide with us throughout our lives. The comfort that comes with this knowledge gives us the strength to meet life’s challenges until life’s end. Amen*



**Monday, October 22, 2018**

When I was thinking about writing this series of devotions I asked a friend what hymn she would like me to include. She surprised me a little bit with *My Life Goes on in Endless Song*. My

surprise most likely had to do with my thinking she would have a more traditional Lutheran hymn in mind. My familiarity with her choice is rather recent. In fact, I thought the hymn was rather recently written and was one of the “new” hymns.

Imagine my chagrin when I learned that this hymn was written in the mid-1800s by the venerable Baptist hymnist Robert Lowry. It has a long and distinguished history and has been adopted almost as an anthem by the Quakers. A number of contemporary artists, including Enya, have included this song in their recordings, albeit somewhat modified to de-emphasize its obvious Christian nature.

Though this particular hymn might not be overly familiar to a number of us, Robert Lowry should be. He has written any number of other hymns with *Shall We Gather at the River* as perhaps his best known.

Little did I know when years ago I was singing the Finnish song *Haudasaan Lepasi* alongside my father in the St. Paul choir that we were actually singing a Finnish language version of the Robert Lowry hymn *Lo in the Grave He Lay*. I still remember most of the words we sang. We would sing a verse or two in Finnish and then switch to English to finish things off.

Until now I was unaware of how much richer Robert Lowry had made my life as well as my friend's.

*Prayer: Lord, how much more rich all of our lives are because of the great music that your story has inspired. Bless all of those who have given us such joy. Amen.*



## **Tuesday, October 23, 2018**

Bible Verse: Psalm 138:1

***“I give thee thanks, O Lord with my whole heart; before the gods I sing thy praise;”***

The evolution of the musical life of the ELCA is reflected in each of the hymnals used since the merger and in the hymnals of its predecessor churches. No more classic example of this can be found than the fact that Marty Haugen has more hymns attributed to him than Martin Luther in the *ELW (Evangelical Lutheran Worship)*, generally referred to as the cranberry hymnal, and in *With One Voice*.

Admittedly Haugen is a truly prolific producer of liturgical music. Raised in an ALC church he is now a member of a United Church of Christ congregation. A graduate of Luther College in Decorah, Iowa with a degree in psychology he soon turned to music as a career. His initial work was with the Catholic Church and his “Mass of Creation” remains a well-loved part of Catholic liturgy. A good share of his later work has been focused on ELCA related efforts. However, he is ecumenical in his presence in the music of any number of denominations.

Most ELCA Lutherans are familiar with his hymns included in the ELW: *Gather Us In, All are Welcome*, etc. What they might not realize is that he also composed the second communion setting in the ELW. As well, the *Holden Evening Prayer* is Haugen's.

As mentioned, Haugen has surpassed Luther as a contributor to our current hymnals and that tells us something about the evolution of Christian imagery. There was an aggressive almost militant quality to the image of the Faith not so many years ago. *Onward Christian Soldiers* and *God of Our Fathers* typify the hymns supporting that view of things. You'll note that neither of them are in our current hymnals, even though the latter is identified as our national hymn.

The hymns of today are far gentler, loving and welcoming in their message. Marty Haugen music is highly reflective of this change and so it has ascended in acceptance.

Prayer: *Lord, help us to adapt to the changing needs of an evolving Church. Bless those who assist in our ability to accept change even in the music we participate in. Amen*



### **Wednesday October 24, 2018**

Bible Verse: Mark 10:14-15

***“Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belong the Kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.”***

This past Sunday an interesting circumstance happened as part of our worship service. The choir anthem was one of my favorite hymns, *Children of the Heavenly Father*, and during communion we sang *Day by Day*. Our choir director had chosen both songs and was unaware that those two hymns are the most famous of the 650 hymns written by Karolina Wilhemina Sandell-Berg.

It is often written that *Children of the Heavenly Father* resulted from a tragic accident when Sandell-Berg's father, the Lutheran minister Jonas Sandell, drowned while traveling with her. However, that happened when she was 26 and she had penned the hymn when she was 18. This hymn is always a part of baptisms in Sweden as it is commonly done here. The reference to children seems to make that logical but in analyzing the words of the song you realize that just as easily the children are a metaphor for the people of God. As the gospel verse from Mark says unless we are as innocent and trusting as children we shall not enter the kingdom of God. The words of Sandell-Berg expand on this gospel theme. The portrait of our relationship with God is painted by the lines of her poem.

Carolina V. Sandell-Berg, as she is credited in the English translations of her hymns, was probably the best known of the Swedish hymnists. She wrote the poems or hymns and many of them were set to music by the well-known Swedish composer, Oscar Ahnfelt. He traveled throughout Sweden singing Sandell-Berg's hymns while playing his 10-string guitar. She said that he had “played her songs into the hearts of the people.” He was a pietist and was disliked by the state church but when he sang and played before the king as commanded he was told by

Karl XV that he could play in both his kingdoms. Jenny Lind, the famed “Swedish Nightingale” brought their music to America by singing her hymns as she traveled throughout the nation.

The beautiful imagery created in the words of Sandell-Berg and the melodious memorable music of Ahnfelt have given us a hymn to treasure.

Prayer: “*Let us appreciate the genius and dedication of those people who make it their life’s purpose to glorify God musically. The gifts they give to us all create an opportunity for Christian community through singing. Thanks be to God. Amen.*”



### **Thursday, October 25, 2018**

Bible Verse: Luke 10:30

***“A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho when he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead.”***

When last I did devotions for Prayfaithfully I mentioned how in accepting new hymns we could change for the better. Without change there can be no progress. I do believe that, but I also espouse being careful about the change we accept and hopefully it is not at the expense of the valued old things.

One of the valued old things discarded with the publication of the ELW was the great old hymn *Lord as a Pilgrim*, or as it is known by its Finnish title, *Oi Herra jos ma matkamies maan*. This was a standard in the Finnish language services at St. Paul Lutheran in Ironwood. I am not certain as to how familiar a hymn it is or was outside the Finnish related churches, but for me it is a classic.

The story line of the hymn, while reassuring of God’s love, is not particularly uplifting. It has almost a dirge like quality. This type of hymn with its gravitas is in stark contrast to the almost pop music nature of many of our newer hymns. So in a sense I may be holding on to old baggage that is no longer in fashion.

History was always one of my favorite subjects and maybe you can tell it still is. Earlier I had written about the story of Horatio Spafford and the tragedy that led him to write *It is Well with My Soul*. Many other hymns have been prompted by like events and so was *Lord as a Pilgrim*. This poignant hymn was published in 1903. Written by Wilhemi Malmivaara after he had lost two children and his wife within the space of a few weeks. The story of his struggles and his Christian hope inspired the troops during the Russo-Finnish conflicts during the WWII era, when this hymn could be heard throughout all of Finland.

The ability to inspire an entire nation in time of distress speaks volumes to the power of music and of God’s presence.

Prayer: “*Lord as a pilgrim on earth I roam, by foes surrounded far from my home, what ere’ betide me thou art beside me Savior Divine. Though the words seem old the thought is ever new. Amen*”



### **Friday October 26, 2018**

Bible Verse: John 8:12

***“I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life.”***

Adversity as a source of inspiration is a very frequent element in the stories of great hymn writing. In yesterday’s devotion the depiction of Wilhelmi Malmivaara’s grief leading to his writing of *Lord as a Pilgrim* is quite typical. In earlier devotions we’ve read of numerous other cases with similar elements: *Amazing Grace*, *What a Friend We have in Jesus*, *It is Well With My Soul*, and many others are great hymns that like the Phoenix rose from the ashes of distressed lives.

Consider the life of Fanny Crosby, the most prolific hymn writer of them all. She penned over 8000 hymns during a life that spanned 94 years. A highly accomplished person overall, she wrote not only hymns but secular, political, patriotic music and cantatas as well as poetry. A confidant and friend of Presidents and, perhaps, one of the most famous women of her time. It’s not our purpose here to list all of her achievements; suffice to say that she was a highly accomplished woman.

Fanny Crosby was blinded soon after birth.

When Crosby was eight years old she wrote her first poem which described her condition. Later in life she said, “It seemed intended by the blessed providence of God that I should be blind all my life. And I thank him for the dispensation. If perfect earthly sight were offered me tomorrow I would not accept it. I might not have sung hymns to the praise of God if I had been distracted by the interesting and beautiful things about me.” Rather than live a life of regret and bitterness she chose to consider her plight a strength. Her attitude led her to write *Blessed Assurance*, *Pass Me Not Oh Gentle Savior*, *Near the Cross*, *To God be the Glory* and 8000 more.

Even though adversity inspired her and numerous other hymn writers they shared yet another quality of even greater significance: the love of Christ as the focus of their work. Fanny Crosby said when she finally got to heaven the first thing she would do is to see the face of Christ. Now that is faith.

Prayer: “*Lord when life seems troubled and our challenges more than we can bear let us remember the lives of people such as Fanny Crosby. In a life of constant challenge, she rose above her disability and turned it into an inspiration to praise her God. We pray that we may find hope and inspiration in the midst of our troubles. Amen*



**Saturday October 27, 2018**

Bible Verse: Psalm 138:13

***“Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven.”***

As I have researched and studied the creation of hymns I’ve come to realize that the great share of them are collaborative efforts. Relatively seldom are both the lyrics and music written by the same person. A great number of people that we consider hymn writers might more properly be considered poets but then again many of their poems were written with the intention of marrying their words to music. Additionally, some hymns were written with the music being added afterwards, in some cases many years later. Then there is music that someone pens a hymn to fit years after the music was composed.

The latter is the case of the hymn version of Jean Sibelius’ *Finlandia*. Originally composed in 1899 it was music for a pageant that was in support of the Finnish press that was being oppressed by the Russian government. It quickly became a favorite of the Finnish population that was hungering for freedom from Russian rule. The strident patriotism of the music reflected the national mood.

*Finlandia* became the most recognized of all of Sibelius’ compositions and gained popularity worldwide. An early hymn version was included in a Scottish hymnal in 1924 using the text of a German poet under the title *Be Still My Soul*. Some of our readers may recognize that title but #887 in the ELW carries the initial line *This is My Song O God of All the Nations*. Stanzas 1 & 2 were written in 1934 by Lloyd Stone and stanza 3 was written by Georgia Elma Harkness in 1939.

Though the ELW is clearly not political in its included hymns this hymn does speak to political issues, in a sense. The song prays for peace, unity and mutual appreciation for all nations. It really invokes the same message as the popular song *From a Distance* by Judy Collins. The basic idea is that we all share the same sky, air, earth and God’s love. This is a song of hope that expresses love of nation and a desire to end whatever divides all nations.

The beautiful music of Sibelius is wonderfully matched by the lyrics of this hymn. He was fascinated by nature and the beauty of this earth is extolled in this song. The earth is a God given legacy and we should strive to honor it in our relations with humanity.

Prayer: “Lord provide each of us the wisdom to realize how best to relate to others whether they be family, neighbors, community or countrymen. As well help us to accept and honor those who live in other lands and guide us in our relationships with all. Amen.”

