

Morning Meditation

Our hymnals are prayer books and theological textbooks. Our hymnals give us words to sing and teach/tell us truths that soak/saturate our soul every time we draw a breath to let the tune and text married together fall from our lips.

What is one hymn this week you could return to everyday as a prayer?

Maybe initially you think of the classics ~ *What a Friend We Have in Jesus* or *Sweet Hour of Prayer* or *I Need Thee Every Hour*. If you laid those three hymns side-by-side or sung them one-after-another, you would start to hear the theological threads that connect them. Prayer is a rhythm, routine, where we take our ‘trials, temptations, troubles, to God’. Where we do this every hour, especially now as the new cycle churns chaotically every time we turn on the television, radio, or refresh our newsfeed. As *Sweet Hour of Prayer* preaches, proclaims, “In seasons of distress and grief, (I am looking at you, Year of 2020!) my soul has often found relief and oft escaped the tempter’s snare by your return sweet hour of prayer.” Such a sentiment is echoed in *I Need You Every Hour*, the third verse, “I need You every hour, in joy or pain, come quickly and abide or life is vain.”

I pray you are starting to sense the power of hymns. They are not just interludes to break up the spoken words of worship. They are *more* than entertaining, hymns engage our mind, body, and soul. Hymns cause the synopsis of our minds to stir in ways that spoken words struggle to accomplish. When you sing, you engage your whole body. And our souls spark with feelings of being strangely warmed.

When we read hymns – slowly and prayerfully – some of the same effect can happen within us, especially if we read the hymns out loud.

What is one hymn this week you could return to everyday as a prayer?

Not just to read in your silently, but aloud. Perhaps you can read the hymn aloud inside, or go outside to tell the trees around your home. You may want to whisper like you are saying these words to the deepest part of your heart or shout time as if directing all the energy in your body toward making these words a reality.

The hymn I will return to this week as a prayer is *O Grant us, God, a Little Space* (#516 in the New Century Hymnal). I find especially verses two and three singing to my soul today:

“Around us rolls the ceaseless tide of business, toil, and care, And scarcely can we turn aside for one brief hour of prayer.”

“Yet this is not the only place your presence may be found, On daily work you shed your grace, and blessings all around.”

I commit, covenant to coming back to these words several times today and throughout the week. To let these words teach me; try to sing the melody; and sit with what stirs within me. I pray you will find a hymn that can ground and guide you this week prayerfully and faithfully.

Prayer: Conducting God, open my ears to hear and heart to be warmed by the marriage of tune and text as I pray the hymnal this week. Amen.

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A prayer book, theological textbook, and story to share as well. Hymnals tell stories. We don't realize this because rarely do we sit down and read a hymnal cover to cover. We jump from one page to another within a service.

When was the last time you thumbed through a hymnal? You can do this today, Tuesday, if you stop by the church this afternoon from 1 to 3 pm, sit in the pew, hold the prayer book/theological textbook/story of our hymnal, and begin to slowly turn the page reading the titles of hymns.

Or look at the "Contents" page of the hymnal. Our New Century Hymnal has five organizing sections. They are:

1. Hymns of Praise;
2. Hymns of the Christian Year;
3. Hymns of faith and the order of the church;
4. Hymns of Life and Work of the Church;
5. And finally, Hymns of Christian Hope.

Go back, look over those five sections, what does that narrative arch say to you? One suggestion I have is that we start with praise. Our life is orientated toward and by the One who is woven into every moment. What can you praise this morning? I think of the opening verse from Morning Has Broken, "Morning has broken like the first morning; Blackbird has spoken like the first bird; Praise for the singing; Praise for the morning; Praise for them springing fresh from the Word" This praise is part of our call regardless of the season, so that leads us to the second section, the Christian Year. I think about how we praise God in-the-flesh, born in a manger at Christmas. We praise God with the Wise Ones at Epiphany. We praise God who finds us in our brokenness, the ashes of life on Ash Wednesday. We praise God who is there when Jesus walked the lonesome valley and we find ourselves in the midnight of our souls during Lent. We praise God on Easter morning in the truth that brokenness is never the last word. We praise God as the Spirit stirred at Pentecost and then in the ordinary days of summer into autumn. Praise is the foundation regardless of the calendar. Throughout the year, we sing of our faith and connecting with others (section three on the list above). Throughout the year, we sing of God woven in our lives individually and collection (section four on the list above). Finally, we sing of God who is with us even when we breathe our last breath (fifth section).

That is only one amateur way to interpret the story. I would love to hear how you see threads connecting these sections. What do you hear? What hums in your heart? Post your comments here.

Remember, to keep praying, reading, engaging, and encountering our hymnal as a way to give voice to our soul in such a time as this.

Prayer: Story sharing and singing God, help open us to the narratives of hymns flowing from one to the next. Amen.

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This morning, I want us to slow down and savor one single verse of a hymn, “Be Still, My Soul”. The verse goes:

Be still, my soul: for God will undertake to guide in future days as in the past. Your hope, your confidence let nothing shake; all now mysterious shall be clear at last. Be still my soul: the waves and winds still know how Jesus' power rule them long ago.

Truth be told, this is not one of my favorite hymns. Some of the verses challenge me and certainly don't align with my theology/understanding of God. I don't always think I should 'bear patiently the cross of grief or pain,' as the first verse of this hymn says. Sometimes I need to be angry or cry or just grumble about how 2020 has left us all feeling exhausted. I need to get that out, because pain that isn't processed gets passed along. Yet, sometimes my grumbling, griping takes me down a negative cycle where nothing is right and everything is wrong. I see only the obstacles, not the opportunities. I hope you see that hymn lyrics can awaken so much to talk about.

But the second verse above reminds me that God guides (which is a verb I really find helpful in thinking/talking about God) the future as God has done in the past. You could lay the words above alongside the hymn, “O God our help in ages past” to see the way these two hymns sing to each other. The verse goes on to remind me that my hope is built on nothing less than God's love and all other ground is sinking sand. And to be still in these days is a wonderful invitation. It can be tempting to keep watching for the latest breaking news or constantly be in motion. To stop, to be still, is what my soul needs to hear today.

How does this hymn align with the hymn you are praying every day this week? Where is there harmony in your prayer hymn and the one above? Where is there dissonance? Take time to read the lyrics both to the hymn you are praying and “Be Still, My Soul,” then be still to listen and let God move in your midst.

Prayer: Be still my soul and sing to me, O God, I pray.

Morning Meditation

In a few weeks, we will begin the season of Advent. Now usually, we have conflated and collapsed the music of Advent with Christmas. But they are actually two different seasons with two different important messages. Advent is about waiting, watching, being open. Christmas is a celebration of God in-the-flesh. I come from a family that blared Christmas tunes from Thanksgiving Evening into the New Year. I come from a family that loved to let the melodies of Carols guide our hearts during the month of December. At the same time, I believe there is power in the dwindling days of every year, *especially* this year, to pray, “O come, o come Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel,” because my heart feels captive and the walls of my home can start to feel confining.

I want to share with you a newer Advent Hymn I love:

My soul cries out with a joyful shout that the
God of my heart is great, And my spirit sings of the
Wondrous things that you bring to the ones who wait. You
Fixed your sight on your servant's plight, and my
Weakness you did not spurn, So from east to west shall my
Name be blest. Could the world be about to turn?
My heart shall sing of the day you bring. Let the
Fires of your justice burn. Wipe away all tears, for the
Dawn draws near, and the world is about to turn! Canticle of the Turning by Rory Cooney

Read the words again, this time slower, savoring each one like a sweet Christmas sugar cookie on the tip of your tongue.

What do you hear in this hymn?

What do you hear in your own heart in response?

Who is God in this Carol?

What does this Carol say about the season of Advent, preparing us for Christmas?

One short, simple response to the last question: I prepare, wait, in Advent for the arrival of One who comes in weakness (born in a barn) who changes and turns my world. Such a sentence is music to my soul right now.

**Prayer: Sing out, O God, and let me life be caught up in Your melody/harmony today.
Amen.**

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We wrap up and wind down another week. There is much more we could continue to explore around our hymnal as a prayer book, theological textbook, and story it seeks to tell us. But it is good to take a breath and hold lightly where we have been this week.

Over the few posts, we built upon truths that we can pray our hymns. We have leaned in, listened to what hymns are telling us about God. And we begun to look at how our hymnal is telling a narrative.

What is one truth you learned this week? Something new or something that you knew but have reclaimed?

How was praying one hymn every day? What did that do? Did you find yourself saying the hymn when stopped at a red light? Or repeating it as a refrain to order your day? Do you want to keep praying that hymn or choose another? There are no “right” answers, just what your soul says, “Amen” to right now.

What other creative ways can you engage your hymnal?

You could randomly open the hymnal every day, read the hymn – slowly and prayerfully – or be brave/bold to sing it. Then, pause to ask yourself, how did that action make a difference?

You could start at the beginning of the hymnal, read one hymn each day.

You could make a prayer practice of calling someone to read hymns to each other.

You could sit with the same hymn for weeks on end, turning it slowly, slightly every day listening deeply to what the marriage of tune and text are saying.

You could go to YouTube and listen to as many different versions as you can find!

In the coming weeks, I will expand in new directions in these morning meditations, but I will always offer you one day when there is a “Hymn of the Week”. This hymn will shine and share a light on the reflections and keep grounding us in this prayer practice of holding our hymnals with open hearts.

I pray you continue to let the One who is still singing in our lives and causes our lives to flow on in endless song to accompany you in these days.

Prayer: Praise to the living God, the God of love and light, whose word brought forth the myriad suns and set the worlds in flight. Whose infinite design, which we but dimly see, pervades all nature, making all a cosmic unity. Amen.