

## Morning Meditation

*Sing Lustily – and with good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half-dead or half-asleep; but lift up your voice with strength. [And] Sing spiritually – have an eye to God in every word you sing.* Two of the seven directions for singing from John Wesley.

Music is one of the most powerful and profound ways to communicate. Music has a way of evoking emotions and invoking the holy in ways that spoken words cannot. Music is woven into our memories and helps us make meaning of life. Music lingers and leaves an impression upon us. I may not remember much about my ordination day 19 years ago, but I do recall we sang one of my favorite hymns, “Won’t you let me be your servant?” Or I have a vivid memory of planning my mom’s memorial service and talking about how we had to sing a Christmas Carol because that was my mother’s favorite holiday.

We know that one of the harshest and hardest realities of the pandemic is that we are not able to sing together. I do believe, deep in my heart – to quote the spiritual “We Shall Overcome” – that if we could sing together right now, it would be like a balm in Gilead to heal our sin-sick souls. I do believe, deep in my heart, that our lives flow on in endless song; sometimes the song is in a major key; other times a minor key; still other times just feel like banging on the piano keys! God is both the composer and conductor of the symphony of creation. I believe, deep in my heart, that to sing is to pray twice.

This week, I want us to hold our hymnals close to our hearts. I acknowledge and affirm this is difficult. I grieve that our sanctuary walls are not being soaked each Sunday with the sound of your voice. I grieve and miss the communal first breath of the opening hymn that tells us we are conspiring (which means to ‘breathe together’) to glorify God. I grieve the holy hymns that bring us a sense of unity in midst of diversity.

Yet, I don’t want our hymnals to sit on the shelf collecting dust. I do believe, deep in my heart, that we have an opportunity unlike anytime before to see our hymnal as a prayer book. To read the words of the hymns. To pick up the hymnal every day as a way to God is still singing and ministering to us in such a time as this. I invite you to focus not only on beloved hymns that make you want to sing out with gusto...or sing lustily as Wesley advises and admonishes us to do. But to dig deeper and dwell in the second, third and fourth verses of hymns.

In fact, there is a hymn, “In Solitude” (#521 in the New Century Hymnal), that if you read the words, they are so profound and powerful. The author, Ruth Duck, says that this hymn was, “An expression of her ‘deep-rooted southern spirituality.’” In the second verse of this hymn she writes, “Whe-e’er the world is troubling me, and stress is all around, I seek the presence of my God, and healing light is found.”

Hold those words. Breathe them in. They are so beautiful.

In the third verse, Duck writes, “In seasons of perplexity, in times of deep despair, I light a candle in the night and turn to God in prayer.”

Go get a candle, light it, say these words again for they are a prayer.

If you happen to have a hymnal handy at home, I encourage you to get it down. I invite you in the coming weeks to read through hymns. Slowly. Savor each word, letting it sink deep into your soul.

Imagine when we come back to worship and can sing, how much more we might be able to proclaim God's presence because the words we sing will be written upon our hearts. That to me sounds like a holy way to start each day.

**Prayer: God who inspires and conspires with hymn-writers over the centuries, open our ears, hearts and whole lives to You as we pray our hymnals in these days. Amen.**

## **Morning Meditation**

*Great, living God, never fully known, joyful darkness far beyond our seeing, closer yet than breathing, everlasting home; Hail and Hosanna, great living God!* Brian Wren, "Bring Many Names," (#11 New Century Hymnal)

Our hymnals are not only prayer books, they are theological textbooks. Make a list of the hymns you love.

Go ahead. I'll wait!

Now, try to make a list of sermons you remember and love.

My hunch is one list is a lot longer than the other! My grandmother didn't quote sermons when she was baking bread, she hummed hymns. And given this reality, we take the next logical, linear step which is to say that when we are singing, we are learning about who God is, why Jesus came, and the calling of the church. Hymns teach and tell us a lot about faith and prayer and life.

Every hymnal I have ever held in my hands has organizing structure. Maybe it is the liturgical year, where the hymnal starts with Advent to Christmas to Epiphany to Lent to Easter. Or maybe the hymnal starts off by trying to help us define and describe musically our faith. Our New Century hymnal starts with section on God (39 hymns); and then moves on to Jesus (15 hymns); and next to the Holy Spirit (9 hymns). Two conclusions from just this quick glance: one, the Holy Spirit really needs a few more hymns; second, that is sixty-four hymns about how we as humans encounter and experience the holy hovering/hanging around our lives.

Look back at your list of favorite hymns. How many are about God? Jesus? The Holy Spirit? What if we spent time studying and discussing about the images, the words of these hymns? What might we uncover and discover in such a dialogue? So often, our discussion of hymns starts and stops with our favorites. That's often it. But we can do more. Consider this, if every Sunday we sing three hymns that means over the course of a year you are singing over a thousand hymns. Plus, you hear anthems. And we haven't even talked about what you are playing on your headphones when you go out for a bicycle ride in the morning!

This is why I am trying to encourage and invite you to pay attention to the music and the meaning it is inviting. I love that Brian Wren, in the hymn quoted above, invites us to “Bring Many Names” for the holy in our lives. I love that Wren uses male/female and the whole age spectrum to describe who God is. I love that Wren’s theology (talk about God) is expansive and evolving. You get done reading this hymn and there is the unsung/unwritten eighth verse where you offer the name for God you bring. This is the power of hymns to teach and tells us about the holy.

I pray today you might randomly open your hymn to a page, slowly read the words, and pay attention to response/reaction what you encounter, what the words do to your soul.

**Prayer: God of melody that bring forth meaning, open our hearts, imaginations, and whole lives to the ways hymn-writes have shaped our faith. Amen.**

### **Morning Meditation**

*Praise to the living God, around, within, above, Beyond the grasp of human mind, but whom we know as love. In these tumultuous days, so full of hope and strife, May we bear witness to the Way, O source and Goal of life.*  
"Praise to the Living God" by Curtis Beach, (#8 New Century Hymnal).

If, our hymnals are both prayer books that provoke and invoke the spirit; if our hymnals are theological textbooks that engage our minds/hearts/souls, the words of hymns can cause questions to stir within us. Who is God in this verse above? Where is God? What imagines and ideas of the holy are awoken in reading these words?

Go back. Read them again. Slowly this time.

What does a word like, “Praise” awaken within you?

How can God be around and within and above? It doesn’t make rational or reasonable sense, does it? Yet, somehow, I know those words to be true and trustworthy.

How does that tension of naming that ‘these [are] tumultuous days, so full of hope and strife,’ challenge me? Am I only seeing the strife and not the hope?

I hope you are starting to sense the profound power our hymnal as both a prayer book and theological textbook brings forth.

And if that verse didn’t stir your soul, read with me the third verse of the same hymn,

Praise to the living God, who knows our joy and pain, Who shares with us our common life, the sacred and profane. God toils wher-e’vr we toil, in home and mart and mill; And deep within the human heart God leads us forward still.

I think any hymn worth its salt needs to use the word, ‘Wher-e’vr’. Secondly, how did hearing the verses out of order do for you? We get so accustomed to hymns one way, but the beauty of a hymn is that sometimes reversing the order of the verse can provoke and invoke something new, different.

Whatever hymnal you have handy open to the section on God and read the hymn. Or Google, “Hymns about God,” and read the words of a hymn online. Does the hymn offer an understanding of God that you agree with or that causes you to shift uncomfortably in your chair? Not every hymn needs to be beloved! Sometimes hymns we don’t like can teach and tell us much too!

Please keep reading, praying, and opening your hymnal in these days.

**Prayer: Singing, stirring, swirling Spirit, speak through the hymns we read we pray this day. Amen.**

## Morning Meditation

*O praise inclusive love, encircling every race, Oblivious to gender, wealth, to social rank or place: We praise you, Christ! Your cross has made us one! O Praise the Gracious Power by Thomas Troeger (#54 in the New Century Hymnal)*

As a child, I learned in the Cherub Children’s Choir, “Jesus loves Me.” Then, just to make sure our faith evolved and expanded a bit, we also learned, “Jesus loves the Little Children...all the children of the world.” The fact that I remember those songs, as well as the Hawaiian punch and animal crackers from Sunday School, is more evidence of how much music sticks and stays with us over our lives.

Often, when we read a hymn, we automatically read it as if we are singing it. We read the words in rhythm with the notes and meter that has been assigned. But part of the power of opening the hymnal as a prayer book and theological textbook is that we can engage the words differently.

Below is a link to this hymn so that you can engage in a prayer practice for today. I have intentionally chosen a hymn that might be less familiar so that maybe the melody of the music doesn’t influence how you experience and encounter the words.

Read the first verse of the hymn, then pause. What word leapt off the screen and landed in your lap? What emotions do you have surging in your soul?

Read the second verse of the hymn, then pause. How did this verse build upon the first? Any contradictions you might sense in-between the words?

Keep going. Keep reading. Keep pausing.

I hope this exercise awakens your spirit, stirs your soul, and gives you strength of the living/facing of this day and hour.

**Prayer: God tumble down the walls of fear in my heart, gather us in our diversity, finding our unity in the ways You vulnerably embraced the cross to meet us in our struggles and suffering. Amen.**

## **Morning Meditation**

*Only the Spirit's power can fit us for this hour: come, Holy Spirit, come! Unite, instruct, inspire and fill us with your fire: come, Holy Spirit, come!* **Let Every Christian Pray** by Fred Pratt Green (#261 New Century Hymnal)

I pray this rhythm of leaning into and listening to hymns is meaningful and making a difference, especially because I am going to continue this series of Morning Meditations next week. I hope you just said, "Yay!!"

Two simple thoughts to wind down and wrap up this week. First, I love that the above hymn speaks of the Spirit as uniting, instructing, inspiring and filling. Notice that those are verbs. The Holy is not a noun, but an activity in our lives. The sacred is not something we can control, but seeks to conspire, collaborate in holy ways with us. When I say that hymns teach and tell us about God, it is verses like this that shine a light on this truth. If we ask, "What is God up to?" God is uniting, instructing, inspiring, and filling us in life-giving ways. Secondly, I wonder what would happen if over the next three days you prayed the above verse several times each day? How would these words work in your life to be in concert with the holy by returning to them prayerfully at regular intervals throughout the day?

What if we tried praying this verse three times today? Right now, at lunch, and in the evening. How do these words sound differently at 8 am when compared to 8 pm? Does the light of the day change how you experience the words? Do you find yourself hearing the words differently, especially when you return to them tomorrow...and the next day...and the day after that?

I invite us as a church to be open for the Spirit's power, fitting us – forming us – shaping us – filling us for this hour. Right now. Right here. Come, Holy Spirit to inform and influence how we live and what we say this day.

**Prayer: God, thank you for words this week from our prayer book/theological textbook/hymnal. Thank you for the authors whose words this week have caused our hearts to feel strangely warmed. Help us continue to sing, even to ourselves, with full voice and with open spirits. Amen.**