

October 9, 2016  
Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

**"THOSE GOOD OLD HYMNS"**  
by Mary Anne Biggs

2 Timothy 2:8-15 ~ Luke 17:11-19

I've always thought that the soundtrack of life should have an appropriate score. Mine does. Even though, outside of church, I seldom sing in public ... I do sing in the shower and in the car and often anytime when I'm alone. I usually have some tune rolling softly in my head: "Black Magic Woman," "George of the Jungle" or "Achy-Breaky Heart" ... something appropriate to the moment. You can tell that my life is more of a musical comedy than a melodrama!

I didn't grow up in a church that sang hymns. But I did, upon occasion visit the Baptist church and they sang anytime the preacher wasn't talking. Sometimes I even find myself remembering some of those "good old hymns." In times of elation ... and moments of distress ... they bubble to the surface of my consciousness. Music has a power beyond simple thought. It connects with the heart and integrates mind, body, and soul ... as well as joining a community of voices. The early church leader Ambrose noted in the fourth century that *"Psalmody unites those who disagree, makes friends of those at odds, brings together those who are out of charity with one another."* No matter what our differences ... when we join our voices in song we are ... for those precious moments ... united in something ... and connected to someone greater than ourselves.

There are problems with the "good old hymns," of course. The language is archaic ... "thee's," and "thys," and "thou's." Nobody talks that way anymore ... dost thou? They contain references unfamiliar to most people ... like "Here I raise mine Ebenezer, hither by thy help I'm come." Well, come hither and tell me what in the Sam Hill an Ebenezer is! Do you know? I had to look it up. It's Hebrew for a "rock of testimony" ... a stone monument raised in celebration of a significant event, but how many people know that these days? And the language of many "good old hymns" is also archaic in its exclusiveness ... speaking only of man and men ... of sons and soldiers. We sing "God of Our Fathers" and leave our mothers out. In the "good old hymns," black is bad and white is good ... and at least one hymn speaks of "savage tribes" ... as if ours weren't. God is always addressed as male ... and the old hymnals lack the rich and diverse poetic imagery of God that we celebrate today.

Worst of all, the good old hymnals contain some hymns whose theology is just plain awful, to be quite honest. *"There is a fountain filled with blood ... drawn from Immanuel's veins, and sinners plung'd beneath that flood ... lose all their guilty stains."* That's a rather gross misapplication of the sacrifice of Christ. I can't imagine that a child who took it literally wouldn't be scared half to death. And how about, *"Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war, with the cross of Jesus going on before...."* That's a hymn right out of the medieval crusades when "Christian" armies slaughtered Muslim families ... and plundered their homes in the name of Christ.

Some people would say that poetic license ... and exaggeration for the sake of expressing emotion ... must allow a certain freedom for theological looseness. After all, they're just hymns. It's not as if it were the Bible. And how much attention do people really pay to the words they sing, anyway? But I don't agree. The church ... based on the living Word of God ... has never been nonchalant about language. The theology and language of the hymns is all the more important precisely because of the power they have over our hearts and minds ... and the deep imprint they make on our souls. As James Cone said, "*It is possible to 'have church,' as the people would say, without outstanding preaching, but not without good singing.*" And we remember the songs long after the sermon is silent.

From the earliest days, God's people have been a singing people. When the people went into exile in Babylon, they were so filled with grief they could hardly sing their hymns any more, but what do they do? They expressed their grief with a song! *By the rivers of Babylon-- there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?* (Psalm 137:1-4).

But sing they did ... and their psalms helped them follow Jeremiah's advice to the exiles that they should bloom where they were planted. In fact, the testimony of Israel ... the good times and the bad times ... their victories and their defeats ... their successes and their failures ... their faith and their history ... are all expressed in the form of liturgy and litany ... as hymns used in worship collected in our book of Psalms.

The Christian church followed this lyrical and liturgical tradition of the Hebrews. After Jesus shared his last supper with the disciples, what did they do? They sang a hymn and then went to the garden to pray. Modern music rose from the praises of the church ... full circle from ancient chants to modern rap. During the Reformation, Martin Luther wrote Christian lyrics in the vernacular German to go with familiar beer drinking tunes so the people could sing God's praise with gusto. Praise was wrested from the elite musicians of the Roman Church and given back to the people. The American Civil Rights Movement in the sixties relied on the Christian spirituals ... and freedom songs of a people long oppressed ... who had sung together for centuries ... when songs were the only form of resistance and release they could find ... and who sang together again as they were marched off to jail. According to David Halberstam, singing and praying and sharing songs like "We Shall Overcome" gave them unity and strength to overcome isolation and fear as they went to jail or marched into danger. In the 1970's the people of the Central American village of El Mozote in El Salvador sang hymns to invoke God's presence as a witness and strength while the government's troops gathered them for massacre. "*The body they may kill, God's truth abideth still....*" In all times and places ... in celebration and distress ... in victory and persecution ... advancing justice or holding on for dear life ... God's church has been a singing church. We cannot help but praise ... for as our gospel reading suggests today ... our healing is incomplete until our heart is filled with gratitude.

Even in the earliest days the church had its hymns ... we heard one in our scripture today, quoted in 2 Timothy . "The saying is sure" intones the author, and then he quotes this hymn from the church. And he quotes it because they all know it. They have been singing it in worship for a

good generation now. I imagine the author writing this letter ... sitting in the house where the people worship each week. He remembers Paul and Timothy ... he writes in the name of the first as if to the second ... what the church of his own day needs to hear. The people are gathering as they get off from their hard day's work. They will worship the Lord and share communion ... then eat dinner together. As he writes, the choir is rehearsing in the other room. "That's right," he thinks. "These words we've been singing are true: " *If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he will also deny us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful-- for he cannot deny himself* (2 Tim. 2:11-13).

This is a hymn of courage ... arising from a people facing persecution for their faith. The early Christians were hated for being nonconformists. They would not serve in the army because they would not kill in the name of the Roman state. They would not worship the local deities who protected the city ... or the emperor who ruled over Rome, so they were considered unpatriotic and rebellious. They would not respond to violence with violence. They carried their faith to ... and made close relationships across ... the walls society defined ... including the poor and outcast ... indigents and slaves ... so they were considered dangerous. And, singing hymns like this ... they refused to recant their faith in the face of great pressure, trial, even execution. Their faith in the risen Christ held a power greater than their fear of the executioners of Rome: "*If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; ...*"

On the other hand, they did not let themselves off the hook. The faith they sang was a demanding and dangerous faith ... "*If we deny him, he will also deny us.*" How did that get in there? Why introduce this negative note ... this minor key ... the possibility of failure ... and the harsh judgment of Christ? Is this sound theology? Yes! The Bible says that God gives us the freedom to reject Christ ... with disastrous results. The call of Christ is no easy path, and the wages of sin is death. While Christ invites everyone to follow, we can exclude ourselves. Jesus never said, "Hey, do whatever you want ... everything's cool with God!" No, in the gospels Jesus makes what William Law described as "a serious call to a devout and holy life." Our conduct, our relationships, our attitudes, and our words matter to God ... and grace is not just *carte blanche* permission to do whatever in the world pleases us because God will overlook it. The Christian faith is an ethical and moral character-building life relationship to God and humankind ... or it isn't worth bothering with at all.

But the hymn goes on: *If we are faithless, he remains faithful - for he cannot deny himself.* Doesn't that seem contradictory with the preceding line? If we deny him, he will deny us? If we are faithless, he remains faithful? Which is it? Both, of course. We experience demand and consolation in our relationship with Christ. We experience God's call, but also, a recognition of human weakness and finitude. Even on our best days, we are incapable of perfection ... we are prone to sin. God understands that, and stays with us anyway. Our hope is not in our unassailable strength to withstand temptation and persecution. We are not saved by our good character ... but by the character of God who is always faithful to us. This is the paradox of our faith ... God's judgment and mercy are mixed together ... and bound in his steadfast love. Indeed, we can sing out "Great is thy faithfulness."

That hymn is a reminder that we should mean the words we sing and live by them. And that makes those "good old hymns" a little scarier, doesn't it? I mean, what if God holds us

accountable to the words we sing on Sundays? What if God takes seriously the promises we make ... and the words we say ... and the professions of faith we share at our baptism? Does that make you want to sing with more gusto or be silent altogether? You might want to watch what you say... and pay attention to what you sing ... because indeed, God is listening.

It's a beautiful hymn we hear in 2 Timothy, and an indication of the power of music to instruct us about God ...to lead us to God ... to express our prayers to God ... and to encourage and unify us as we struggle to live for Christ in an unchristian world. I thank God for Lori, Gary, Norma, Linda and the choir and the

Quintet and the Praise Team and all the soloists and musicians ... who with exceptional talent and commitment to excellence ... lead us to heaven week after week in worship. They work hard and prepare well and make our worship rich indeed. And the hymns! Some of us may sing like a bird ... and some of us may sing like a wounded moose ... but we bellow it out the best we can and God hears our joyful noise. We unite our voices and hearts and God listens ... and God hears the voices of the angels joining us in praise. And God smiles, because of course, God is the source and inspiration of our song.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us sing on. And as God gives the song, let us live out the words together.

May we pray?

Gracious God,

Thank you for the music of our lives which lifts and inspires and instructs and encourages and unites us in you. Hear our songs as you hear our prayers. May the melodies of our hearts and the joy of our praise be acceptable and pleasing to you. And let our lives attain to the words of love and commitment we sing in the name of Jesus. Amen.