

Service of Songs

July 14, 2019

Introduction: The Importance of Music in Christian Worship

From the earliest biblical times, music has played an important part in worship.

In the Old Testament, professional singers, accompanied by string, wind and percussion instruments, were a major part of services at the Temple in Jerusalem for centuries.

In the New Testament, the styles and traditions of music used in Judaism greatly influenced the early Christians who adapted many of them to their own worship.

For Protestant Reformers of the 16th and 17th centuries, music was best expressed by congregational singing. The pairing of easy-to-learn melodies with texts that taught Christian doctrine in settings of joyful praise allowed people of all ages to take part in worship.

Today, music in a wide variety of traditional and contemporary styles continues to make Christian worship meaningful and expressive of our love for God and for all creation.

In the United Church, the 1930 blue *Hymnary* was a unifying force, bringing the three founding denominations together in song. The 1971 *Hymn Book* represented efforts to join together with the Anglican Church. From there, *Songs for a Gospel People* expanded into more contemporary music styles, eventually becoming the current *Voices United* and *More Voices*.

Each of these reflected the culture, theological beliefs, historical events, and mood of its time. From organ music to praise bands, from formal choirs to impromptu gatherings by the piano our hymns have been a source of inspiration for generations. Music warms our hearts, uplifts our spirits, teaches our stories to children, and brings us together as people of faith.

Songs that bring us together in worship

Commentary

Early Christians always began their day with prayer and worship. It's only natural that song was a part of that experience of praise to God.

We'll begin with two songs that celebrate the new beginning that God grants us each day: *This is the Day* by United Church of Canada composer and lyricist Bruce Harding, and *God, We Praise You for the Morning* by Jim Strathdee, United Methodist composer and lyricist in the U.S.A.

Songs of praise

Commentary

Music historian Kenneth W. Osbeck wrote, "Hymns breathe the praise of the saints, the vision of the prophets, the prayers of the penitent and the spirit of the martyrs. They bring solace to the sad, assurance to the perplexed, faith to the doubter and comfort to the oppressed. They span the centuries of history and bridge the barriers of denominations. Study them to be pure in heart. Sing them to be joyful in spirit. Store them in the mind to possess a treasury of worship."

John Wesley, the 18th century English reformer and founder of the Methodist movement, wrote these instructions about congregational singing:

- “Sing lustily and with a good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half dead, or half asleep; but lift up your voice with strength.”
- “Strive to unite your voices together, so as to make one clear melodious sound.”
- “Sing in time. Whatever time is sung be sure to keep with it. Do not run before nor stay behind it; but attend close to the leading voices, and move therewith as exactly as you can; and take care not to sing too slow.”
- “Above all sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing.”

The three songs of praise we’ll sing come from a variety of sources:

- *Praise the Lord with the Sound of Trumpet* was written in 1975 by Natalie Sleeth, a composer and professor of music at West Virginia Wesleyan College.
- *We Praise you, O God* is an example of putting a more recent text to a much older Netherlands melody from 1626. *Voices United* takes its name from the words of verse 3.
- *It’s a Song of Praise to the Maker* features the music of Ron Klusmeier, a composer of hundreds of hymns, anthems and songs of worship. He has retired from music ministry at Parksville United Church on Vancouver Island, BC.

Songs from our childhood

Commentary

Children love music and singing, so a natural way to teach them bible stories and the Christian gospel has been through songs that are short, simple to learn and fun to sing. Some even have actions that make their performance even more enjoyable. From Sunday School to church camps, many older people still remember the songs they learned when they were young, and still enjoy singing them.

We’ll be singing four songs from this category:

- *Jesus Came, a Child Like Me* with text by Walter Farquharson, a former United Church Moderator now retired and living in Saltcoats, SK. He and Ron Klusmeier have collaborated on a number of songs in *Voices United* and *More Voices*.
- *Jesus Bids Us Shine*
- *Can a Little Child Like Me*
- *This Little Light of Mine*

Songs that teach and instruct

Commentary

For John Wesley and his brother Charles, hymn texts were really “a condensed course in biblical doctrine in poetic form”. As Eric Routley, noted English hymnist, observed, “The Wesley hymns were composed in order that men and women might sing their way, not only into experience, but also into knowledge; that the cultured might have their culture baptized and the ignorant might be led into truth by the gentle hand of melody and rhyme.” Charles Wesley wrote more than 6,500 hymns in his lifetime, although only a small number are still currently in use.

We'll sing two of them: *Love Divine, All Loves Excelling* and *O For a Thousand Tongues*. As with all the Wesley hymns, the music was written by others or used well-known melodies from that time.

We'll also sing two from the modern tradition: *Bring Many Names* with text by Brian Wren, a United Methodist minister from England who has written hymns and lectured at seminaries throughout North America; and *I Have Called You by Your Name*, a hymn for ordination and commissioning.

Songs of the Christian life

Commentary

It was the "Father of English Hymnody", Isaac Watts, who in 1719 began the practice of writing "human composure hymns" based on one's experience in the Christian life, instead of on psalm texts from the bible.

We'll be singing four examples of this category:

- *Will You Come and Follow Me* from the Iona Community, a center of Celtic Christianity off the west coast of Scotland, featuring the theme of discipleship to compliment our gospel reading about Jesus' call to Peter, Andrew, James and John.
- *Take Time to be Holy*, a late 19th century hymn on the theme of prayer and devotion.
- *I Need Thee Every Hour*, with text by Annie S. Hawks who wrote, "One day as a young wife and mother of 37 years of age, I was busy with my regular household tasks during a bright June morning, in 1872. Suddenly, I became filled with the sense of nearness to the Master, and I began to wonder how anyone could ever live without him, either in joy or pain. Then, the words were ushered into my mind – 'I need thee every hour'. It was not until long years after, when the shadow [of the death of my husband] fell over my way, the shadow of a great loss, that I understood something of the comforting power in the words, which I had been permitted to give out to others in my hour of sweet serenity and peace."
- *I Danced in the Morning*, with a tune from the Shaker tradition on the theme of joy.

Songs of thanksgiving

Commentary

Being thankful was one of the major themes expressed by King David of Israel in the psalms. It's also one of most desired attitudes in Christian worship, as God blesses our lives in so many ways, both spiritually and physically.

It's no wonder that this is the subject of our first song from this category

- *Come, You Thankful People, Come* with text by Henry Alford. It was written in 1844 for the English harvest festivals. Alford was Dean of Canterbury Cathedral, the "mother-church" of England for most of his career. It was said that at the end of a hard day's work, as well as after every meal, it was his practice to stand to his feet and give thanks to God for the blessings just received or enjoyed during the day. This spirit of perpetual gratitude is clearly seen throughout this hymn. The music was written by George Elvey, organist at St. George's Chapel, Windsor

Castle who was knighted by Queen Victoria in 1871. It forms part of a collection that includes oratorios, anthems and service music.

- *O Beautiful Gaia*, a song of thankfulness for the earth, was written by Carolyn McDade, a song writer and music workshop leader at the former Calling Lakes Center, Ft. Qu'Appelle, SK.

Songs to close worship

Commentary

In the early Christian communities, “framing the day”, with morning and evening prayers and devotions was a common practice. We “frame” our worship in a similar manner with opening and closing songs.

We'll close our service today with two selections:

- *Draw the Circle Wide* by Gordon Light

- *May the God of Hope*, with its snappy Argentine folk melody