

**“New Songs for Our Hearts:  
A Song for Spirited Times”**

Revelation 3:14-16, 19-22; Acts 2:1-21 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – May 19, 2024

*Holy God, bless the speaking, the singing, and the hearing of these words, that the Spirit  
might fill our souls till our faith is bold enough to meet this moment you have given us.*

*Amen.*

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We are now three weeks into our “New Songs for Our Hearts” worship series, and today, we’re going to get started with the music itself. Today’s featured hymn is one that I believe we are less familiar with, so I’ve asked Deborah to play it for us as we begin. [song is played]

So first of all, if that tune was at all familiar to you, would you raise your hand? We haven’t sung it, that I’m aware of, in the 12 and a half years that I’ve been here, so if you know it, it must have come from somewhere else. I wonder if you could share some words about how that tune made you feel, what emotional state did it evoke? Words that come to my mind are dramatic, even melodramatic, serious, fraught; it is a tune that sounds like it must be sung with conviction. You couldn’t put just any set of lyrics to a melody with that kind of power.

So let’s turn to the words now. The version we’re looking at first is #634, called “To Us All, to Every Nation.” I invite you to open up that blue hymnal and find it. I have no doubt that many of you are going to find the first half of verse two

objectionable, and we could spend all our time unpacking that today, but there are much more interesting things to talk about, so let's not. Personally, I don't think it matches the rest of the song very well anyway. So let's look and see what this hymn is about. "To us all, to every nation, comes the moment to decide, in the strife of truth with falsehood, for the good or evil side; some great cause, God's new endeavor, offering each the bloom or blight, and the choice goes by forever 'twixt that darkness and that light." The writer is describing a situation in which the stakes are high. These words were written in 1845, less than 20 years before the Civil War, so it's not hard to imagine what it is he's telling people they need to decide about. Things have shifted, he's saying, and it's no longer tenable to try to be neutral. (Or "lukewarm" as the writer of Revelation might put it!) Though much of my adult life, the scenario this hymn is speaking to has seemed far more dramatic than modern life, but lately, it's starting to feel more familiar.

Here's the part that will make you cringe, but hang in there because the second half of verse two is astonishingly important: "By the light of burning martyrs, Jesus' bleeding feet I track, toiling up new Calvaries ever with the cross that turns not back." Yes, ew. But hear this next part: "new occasions teach new duties, time makes ancient good uncouth; they must upward still and onward, who would keep abreast of truth." Did you get that? "New occasions teach new duties." We can't assume that the right thing to do is the thing we've always done, because things change. "Time makes ancient good uncouth." "Uncouth," meaning wrong or inappropriate,

offensive, even, which is what happens when we try to respond with worn-out clichés to problems that are complex in new and different ways. “They must upward still and onward, who would keep abreast of truth.” If we want to know what’s really going on, if we want to know how to respond appropriately, faithfully, fruitfully, we have to pay attention; we have to listen and keep learning.

Lest that all seem overwhelming, the third verse is then a testament to hope, even when the odds seem despairingly bad. “Though the cause of evil prosper, yet ‘tis truth alone is strong, truth forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne. Yet that scaffold sways the future, and, behind the dim unknown, God is standing in the shadow keeping watch beside God’s own.” We must never forget that no matter how bad things seem, God has not abandoned us, truth will be revealed and it will set us free. I find that a proclamation of hope is strongest when it fully acknowledges the depth of the difficulty and despair it is speaking into.

Does it make sense to you that words like this need to be sung to a melody as striking as this one called “Ebenezer”? Both words and tune are intended to make an impact, and when they’re combined together, the effect is heightened. There is only one other hymn in our hymnal that uses this tune, and I invite you to turn to it now. It’s #472, “We Are Living, We Are Dwelling,” which was written around the same time, though it was also adapted some for our hymnal in 1995. We won’t unpack this one quite as much, but notice how these words are similarly compelling; there are lots of exclamation points:

“We are living, we are dwelling in a grand and awful time, in an age on ages telling, to be living is sublime. See the waking of the nations to a wider unity. Hear it sounding: all creation’s groaning to be whole and free.

“Will you play, forever stalling? Will you dally far behind? Up! To Work! For God is calling! Give your strength, your heart, your mind! See the plan of God unfolding. Seek for good with all your might. Still the cross of Christ beholding, on, right onward for the right!

“Sworn to yield, to waver, never; consecrated, born anew; sworn to be Christ’s people ever, O to Christ be ever true. O let all the soul within you spread the word of truth abroad! Move! Let every nerve and sinew tell on ages, tell for God.”

As I said, these are the only two hymns in our hymnal that use this tune, but there is another one that suggests it as an alternate tune. If you look at #675, “When Will People Cease Their Fight?” you’ll find a more modern song that aims for the same level of fervor.

This hymn really does show us what a difference the choice of melody makes. While this tune is unusual and particularly dramatic, it actually uses a very common meter. Meter refers to the number of syllables in each line of the music. This tune’s meter is called 87.87D, which you can see at the bottom of the page. If you know how to use the Meter Index in the back of our hymnal, you can create some interesting mash-ups. You start to understand why it makes such a difference to find the right match between words and music.

For instance, if I sing “Savior, like a shepherd lead us, much we need thy tender care...” that just seems wrong, doesn’t it? Or how about “What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear...”? Even more humorously, you could sing “Joyful, joyful, we adore thee, God of glory, Lord of love...”. What is even more interesting is to consider what it feels like to use this tune for some of the songs that do aim to profess our convictions, just not quite as forcefully. How is it different to sing “We, your people, God, confessing Jesus Christ your Son as Lord” instead of “We, your people, God confessing Jesus Christ your Son as Lord”? We could bring this heightened drama to the season of Advent by singing “Come, O long-expected Jesus, born to set your people free...” How would our grief be impacted if we sang “In our end is our beginning; in our time, infinity; in our doubt there is believing; in our life, eternity. In our death, a resurrection; at the last, a victory, unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.”?

I think these juxtapositions between lyrics and music can teach us an important lesson about how our faith and our convictions are formed by far more than just words. As Disciples, a particular kind of Christians who strive never to impose our beliefs on others, we have often hesitated to express our faith in forceful terms. But why shouldn’t we sing with fervor about eternity in the face of death? Why shouldn’t the songs with which we confess our faith evoke strong feeling and intense commitment? And on this Day of Pentecost, why would we want to be lukewarm, when the moment God is putting in front of us demands clarity?

We are living in fraught times, my friends. The stakes are higher than they've ever been in my lifetime. We are being asked, on many levels, to make choices in the "strife of truth with falsehood," to decide for "bloom or blight." We are being asked to recognize "new occasions" and realize that our "ancient good" may no longer be sufficient for faithful response. We must listen and learn. We must claim and confess. We must stand and speak and sing, with clarity and conviction. Let us not be a lukewarm church, practicing a studied non-offensiveness. Let us catch fire in the pursuit of justice. Let us freeze out prejudice and hatred. Let us speak about God's deeds of power, in every way that we can, with courage and compassion.

If we are to be a church that is alive with the Holy Spirit, we cannot harbor a spirit of fear. If we are going to proclaim Christ crucified and risen, we cannot be afraid. If we want people to understand that we stand for something, something important, something crucial and life-giving and precious, we need to say so, out loud, convincingly, with fervor and hope and joy. Nothing lukewarm, nothing muffled, no dulcet tones or bland cliches. Let us be the church God is calling us to be, the church breathed into life by the Spirit of the Risen Christ, alive in our midst! Hallelujah and Amen!