

**“New Songs for Our Hearts:
Love and Peace, Far and Near”**

Psalm 65:1-8; Ephesians 2:11a, 12-22 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – May 12, 2024

*Holy God, bless the speaking, the singing, and the hearing of these words, that our hearts
might stretch and grow to embrace our siblings in all times and places. Amen.*

On a day like today, when we are also celebrating a secular holiday that aims to nurture our familial bonds and turn our hearts toward gratitude for those who mothered us, I am reminded how many of us were taught the faith by our mothers and grandmothers. And those stories are so often connected to music. So many of you, when speaking of a favorite hymn, will mention how your mother or grandmother or mother-figure in the church of your childhood loved it and taught you to love it too. For some of you, that is probably true of the hymn we’re focusing on today. I invite you to pull out that blue hymnal now and turn to number 33, “How Great Thou Art.”

Now, I will be first to say that this song is not universally loved. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that it elicits strong emotions. Many people love it; and some people love to find it irritating. I know this because my own mother is one of the latter; historical tidbit for those folks later! But there was a point in history, not that long ago when “How Great Thou Art” was considered the second most popular hymn in this country. (Can you guess the first? Of course, it was “Amazing Grace,”

and probably still is.) So there's a lot attached to this song. For many, it brings up feelings that are connected to our childhoods, our families, and maybe even our faith journeys.

Many of you probably know that this hymn was popularized in this country by the Billy Graham Crusades. Supposedly Billy said this about it: "The reason I like 'How Great Thou Art' is because it glorifies God. It turns Christian's eyes toward God, rather than upon themselves. I use it as often as possible because it is such a God-honoring song." In that sense, it is truly a worship song, one in which we are singing directly to God about God's glory and majesty. Regardless of who our histories may connect to the song, the song itself connects us to God. The somewhat understated melody of the verses seem to me to evoke a certain humility. And then the soaring melody of the refrain seems designed to help usher us into an elevated state of wonder and awe. I would love for you to consider how the melody is impacting your emotional state when we sing it in just a bit. And I would love to hear how you feel about it and who it might be connected to in your heart.

But the thing I really want us to explore today is the story of the journey this song took before it arrived in our lives. Because Paul wrote to the Ephesians – and dare I say, to us – about those who "were far off," and too often, we assume that must mean someone else, because we're right here, of course. We're right here, singing this song. But our scripture lesson today and the story of this song's journey both remind us that we're not the center of the universe, even if we are the apple of

our Mothering God's eye. Would anyone like to guess what language this hymn was originally written in? If you want a hint, you can find it at the bottom of the page in the hymnal. Swedish. There was a prominent Swedish pastor who experienced a huge thunder storm on his way home one day, one of those storms that comes on suddenly and then almost as suddenly fades into a beautiful clear sky. That was the experience that first inspired the writing of these words. So is this story about a Swedish hymn being translated into English? No, it is not.

Because before arriving in English, this hymn was translated into German by a pastor in Estonia¹. And then a pastor in Ukraine translated it into Russian. That was the version that a British missionary, Stuart K. Hine heard, while he was serving in Western Ukraine. He was the one who wrote the English version, which is considered different enough that he got his own copyright. And indeed, it was while the Billy Graham Crusade was in London that they learned it and began using it. But that's not how it came to America. There's an even more complicated, double story behind that. In 1951, a pastor named James Caldwell introduced the song in Stony Brook, NY. Caldwell was a missionary in Central Africa! Just three years later, a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary brought the song to the San Bernardino Mountains; he had learned it in eastern India!

¹ Most of this information can be found at this Wikipedia entry, though some of it I originally gleaned from elsewhere. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/How_Great_Thou_Art#cite_note-jb-9

This song had literally been around the world before it arrived here. All of us were far off, and all of us have been brought near. It's been sung and shared in multiple languages, some of which have, at various points in history been considered the languages of our enemies. Some of which are languages that use alphabets that look strange and alien to us. And I have no doubt that those hundreds of fellow Christians, who are so far off from us, held this song deep in their hearts just the way many of us do. It brings us all near to the heart of God.

The journey this song has made is a bit mind-boggling, honestly. But it's instructive because it helps us realize what is possible when we turn our eyes toward God, as Billy put it, rather than ourselves. So often, we let our love be a small thing, an intense but limited sentiment with tidy boundaries that shut out anyone who isn't the intended recipient. But the love that God invites us into is boundless. It is for those who are near and those who are far off. It is as big as the mountains and as vast as the seas. It speaks and sings in every language. God's love gently reminds us that we are not the center of universe, but in a way that makes this realization a relief rather than a disappointment. God's love invites us into communion, with God, and with all our fellow humans – indeed, with all creation.

The power of God's love, of course, cannot be contained by just one song. But this song's story even contains hints of how it breaks free of itself. The song had largely disappeared from use in Sweden until guess what happened? Yep, Elvis

Presley's gospel album, for which "How Great 'Thou Art" was the title track, spurred a revival of its use in Sweden!

And again, I promised those of you who find yourselves rolling your eyes at the pathos of the melody your own special tidbit. Wikipedia also tells us that "the eminent British hymnologist Erik Routley so disliked both the hymn and its melody," that he wrote new words for it and re-harmonized the tune in 1982. Most of us just try to avoid hymns we don't like, but I guess there was something about it that wouldn't let him alone, so he had to come to terms with it in his own way!

As we celebrate and remember our closest loves today, I pray that we stay grounded in the boundless love of God, which connects to one another, those who are near and those who are far off. May we be grounded in a humility that reminds us that we may be the ones who are far off. May we be grounded in wonder that reminds us of who and whose we are. May we be held by our mighty, loving God, who holds and nurtures us all, with a compassion that knows no end. Hallelujah and Amen.