

What was I thinking?

September 12, 2021



Back to the beginning (What was I thinking? Season 2)

One of the strange consequences of this pandemic is that it's thrown off our sense of time. Sometimes it feels like we've been frozen in time, and other times it seems like time has passed very quickly. I've missed two Sundays and part of the last two weeks due to illness (which thankfully turned out not to be Covid). Add to that Labor Day, which causes many things in our schedule to be moved ahead one day, and it has made for some confusion. As I worked to get back on track this week, I was reminded that we need certain things in our schedule, in our rhythm of life, to keep us centered. When things change, we can feel disoriented and confused.

One thing that's changed during this pandemic is the day garbage is picked up at home. It used to be Monday morning, which meant I rolled the garbage and recycling bins to the street on Sunday evening. It became such a routine to come home on Sunday evening after youth and children's choir rehearsals, eat, clean up, and take the garbage down to the street. Our Sunday evening rehearsals stopped due the pandemic, and that was confusing. Garbage pick-up day moved to Thursday mornings, meaning I had to put it out on Wednesday evenings. It took a while to get used to that and I can't tell you how many times I forgot to put the garbage out for pick-up. I put up notes to remind myself. Also, our Wednesday evening rehearsals were put "on hold," which caused even more "what day is it?" syndrome. I came to realize how much my life centered around our choir rehearsal schedule at church, and how lost and disoriented I have felt without it.

A few years ago, the focus of the Worship and Music Conference at Montreat was the liturgical year, meaning our seasons of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost, and the many special holy days we observe. It was pointed out that following the liturgical year and some kind of lectionary (there are several) keeps us rooted in the biblical narrative. Many churches follow what's known as the Revised Common Lectionary. Dr. Baer has introduced our church to the Narrative Lectionary. Both lead us through the Christian year, the cycle of seasons, and while the readings change some each year, they follow a general pattern. Using a lectionary helps us to keep telling our story, it helps us grow. Going through the seasons and repeating our story helps us understand. Advent, for example, the first season in our liturgical year, helps us understand the discipline of waiting.

We might think it's repetitious and boring to tell the same stories every year but imagine not telling the story of the birth of Christ at Christmas or the resurrection at Easter. As tempting as it is, we can't just tell the "good parts" of the story. Christmas can be "warm and fuzzy," but not all of the story is perfect, and we also need to hear in Advent about those waiting in darkness for the Messiah to come.

It was also pointed out at that Montreat conference that while the same stories may be repeated, we are not the same as we were when we last heard them. We have changed and we hear them with "new ears." During that conference, we heard the story of Mary and Joseph wandering in their travels, having no place to stay in a land that was not their home, and then fleeing from Herod who was after their newborn child. There were some obvious similarities with current events, of immigrants trying to find a safe place and trying to protect their children. I asked the conference preacher if that was intentional. He said it was not; he was merely reading the scriptures. Those stories have always been there, we were just hearing them with "new ears" and finding similarities to our time. It was proof that we don't have to work very hard to make scripture relevant, we just need to pay attention to our story.

In our current chaotic world, we need more than ever to have something that can keep us rooted. That brings us to this coming Sunday. As I was planning music for this Sunday and thinking about this article, I realized the Narrative Lectionary was coming back around to the creation story at the beginning of Genesis. Without even looking at what we did last year, it dawned on me that I had chosen some of the same hymns, including *Morning Has Broken*. That hymn immediately made me think of the very first *What was I thinking?* which was as about *Morning Has Broken* and the story of the tune to which it is sung. If this was a TV show, I could have taken the easy way out and sent you a re-run. Being a bit behind and playing "catch up" this week, it was tempting.

Writing this series of articles has been an interesting journey for me, and not one I have plans to stop, at least not yet. The response from you has been positive and overwhelming. By request I have added to the e-mail list, and I have been asked by some if they could forward and share these e-mails. Of course, the answer is “yes.” A couple of you even suggested I publish these as a book. I’ll have to think about that. This series began an effort to reach out and connect with you, the people of the church, at a time when we could not do that in-person. I’m glad it got started. Though there is much about the last eighteen months we’ll be glad to put behind us, we have learned a few things that we can keep.

Something else I’ve learned – even though I missed going to conferences “in-person,” I have been able to take part in more online conferences than I could have attended. I learned more than I would have in a “normal” summer, and I have a pile of newly purchased music to prove it. In one of those conferences, my teacher and mentor Dr. Marilyn Keiser presented a recital and was interviewed following the recital. (She performed recitals in two of the conferences. She turned 80 this summer and is playing circles around the rest of us!) In that interview, Dr. Keiser said something she’s said before: “Never stop learning new music: new organ music, new service music, and new choral music.” That’s good advice. So, before I give you a snippet from the past (a little bit of a re-run), I’ll point out that for Sunday’s prelude, I’m playing a new setting of *Bunessan*, otherwise known as *Morning Has Broken*.

The circle brings us back around the beginning. We’ve made another trip around the sun. We will continue to tell and re-tell our story. It would be hard for any of us to say we haven’t changed in some way over the last year, hopefully for the better. As we hear the biblical narrative tell us again of our story, let us listen with new ears.

The following is from the first *What was I thinking?* (And for the record, I learned the phrase “that’s not the way God wrote it!” from Marilyn Keiser.):

After we’ve sung texts and tunes together for so many years, it seems like they have always been paired. As one of my teachers used to say, “that’s the way God wrote it!”

Let me ask a question – who wrote *Morning Has Broken*? It’s a trick question. If I ask who wrote *Georgia On My Mind*, many proud Georgians might say “Ray Charles!” He sang and recorded it, but he didn’t write it. Any proud Indiana Hoosier will point out that Hoagy Carmichael wrote that song. Before anyone gets offended, remember I was born in Georgia. I went to school in Indiana. I can have a foot on both sides of the fence.

Back to the question – who wrote *Morning Has Broken*? Some of you might say “Cat Stevens.” He recorded it and had a hit in 1972, but he didn’t write it.

This Sunday our scripture and theme are part of the creation story from Genesis, and *Morning Has Broken* fits for reasons I will explain below. But first, let’s look at the hymn as it appears in our hymnal.

MORNING AND OPENING HYMNS
Morning Has Broken 469
BUNESSAN 5.5.5.4 D

Eleanor Farjeon, 1931
Gaelic melody
Arr. Dale Grottenhain, 1985

C Am Dm G Dm G C

1. Morn-ing has bro - ken Like the first morn - ing. Black-bird has
2. Sweet the rain's new ken fall Sun - lit from heav - en, Like the first
3. Mine is the sun - light! Mine is the morn - ing Born of the

Em Am Em F G C Am F C

spo - ken Like the first bird. Praise for the sing - ing! Praise for the
dew - fall On the first grass. Praise for the sweet - ness Of the wet
one light E - den saw play! Praise with e - la - tion. Praise ev - ery

If you look just under the title, you’ll see the word BUNESSAN. What in the world is that? Or really, we should ask where in the world is that? Remember, a hymn has a text and a tune. The tune is usually given a name (which often appears in all capital letters in hymnals) and there’s usually a story behind that tune name. BUNESSAN (pronounced *boo-NESS-un*) is the name of the tune. In the upper right corner of the page, just above the music, you’ll see that it’s a Gaelic (Celtic/Scottish) melody. Many folk songs are passed down through an oral tradition, so they were not actually composed or written down initially. This particular tune is said to have been overheard as it was sung by a wandering Scottish highlander in the 19th century. Someone else “collected” it, as they say of folk songs, meaning they heard it and wrote it down.

I have a personal story about this tune. Years ago, after finishing a choir tour in Scotland, a few of us decided to stay longer and take a little pilgrimage, so we rented a car and drove (and took a ferry) to the Isle of Mull and later, drove some more (and took a boat) to Iona. My ancestors, on my mother's side of the family, MacLeans of Duart, are from Mull. While driving across Mull, as we entered a little village, I saw a sign. I don't remember who was driving, but I insisted we stop because I had to take a picture. Everyone else thought I was nuts, but there was a good reason in my mind. I had always heard our hymn tune came from Mull, but seeing this sign made it real for me:



Bunessan is a village on the Isle of Mull in Scotland. This is the place after which the tune was named.

It was first published in the Irish *Church Hymnal* in 1919, and the Scottish *Church Hymnary* in 1927. It was paired with the words of a Christmas hymn, "Child in the Manger, Infant of Mary," a translation of a Gaelic poem by Mary MacDougall MacDonald, who was born in Bunessan. That's how the tune got its name. I'm going to brag and say it was probably a MacLean who was singing the tune to begin with.

So, the tune was around before the words, "Morning Has Broken" were written. The words were written by Eleanor Farjeon, originally titled "Thanks for a Day," first published in 1931. Farjeon was a writer of children's poetry and books. I don't believe she had the tune BUNESSAN or any other tune in mind when she wrote the text. The theme of creation and "the first morning" are why this text fits with our scripture for this Sunday. There is also reference to John 1:1-3, "fresh from the Word." At the end of the second stanza, there's a reference to God walking in the garden (Genesis 3:8).

The Presbyterians were the first denomination in the U.S. to publish *Morning Has Broken* as we know it, in the 1955 hymnal. It was not included in the 1972 hymnal, but it returned in the 1990 hymnal that we have in our pews today. So, that's the way God wrote it.

God be with you till we meet again.

John