

What was I thinking?
for Sunday, September 13, 2020

What's in a name?

Not all hymns are the same, but there are things most hymns have in common, like a text and a tune. I say “most” because it’s possible for a hymn text to exist without a tune; finding or writing a tune is left for someone else to do. Most of the time, the words and music were not written by the same person. They may not have been written to be sung together. Someone can write words without a particular tune in mind, and vice versa. (I’ll explain that more in another episode of this series.) Words and music may come from two totally different time periods. But, 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 Grotenhuis, 1985

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

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.

Other music this Sunday

Organ music:

The prelude is a set of variations on the hymn *Morning Has Broken* written by South Carolina organist and composer Robert Powell. Each variation is inspired by text from the hymn. The movements are:

1. *Morning*
2. *Like the first bird*
3. *Sunlit from heaven*
4. *God's recreation of the new day*

The postlude is one of the “Eight Little Preludes and Fugues” once attributed to Bach. To be honest, I’m practicing recycling. I played this piece at last week’s wedding and it’s been a short but busy week, so I’m using something that’s under my fingers at the moment. For the offertory, I put down “improvisation.” What was I thinking? We won’t know for sure until Sunday morning, but let’s just say I’ve been thinking about whirling planets in my left hand, with the tune in canon in my right hand and right foot, my left foot providing the bass part. Wish me luck.

Solo:

John Tsao will sing a piece the Chancel Choir probably remembers; *Now is the Cool of the Day* by American folk singer Jean Ritchie.

Hymns:

I Sing the Mighty Power of God is a text by Isaac Watts originally called “Praise for Creation and Providence,” sung to the tune ELLACOMBE (which we also use with the Palm Sunday text *Hosanna, Loud Hosanna*.)

God, You Spin the Whirling Planets is a text written in 1978-79 for the National Meeting of United Presbyterian Women. The tune is AUSTRIAN HYMN, composed by Franz Joseph Haydn in 1797.

To answer another “what was I thinking” question, along with the rest of the church staff, I’m trying to find ways to help all of you feel connected to our church in these times when we are so disconnected. When it comes to worship, we know it’s hard for you to do it online. We find it hard on this end too. Worship is not meant to be entertainment. We’re not trying to produce a TV show for you to sit back and watch as you drink your coffee on Sunday morning (or something else if you are tuning in at another time). Worship is a verb. It’s something we do. We worship God. God is the

object and subject of worship. God is the audience. Those of us in the sanctuary are worship leaders. All who participate in worship are the performers.

So, as we worship, wherever you are, pray with us. Join in the spoken prayers and responses, speaking out loud. Sing the hymns. If that makes you uncomfortable, close the door. On the other hand, if you are not shy about it, open the windows and sing so that your neighbors can hear you. If Paul and his friends could sing hymns in prison, we can do this. What would it sound like if all of Athens heard *Morning Has Broken* being belted out all over town at 10:10 on Sunday morning?

God be with you till we meet again.

God bless,

John