

How Can I Keep from Singing?

Hymns at Home

October 11, 2020

Do what you can with what you have

In our relatively new Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship: Daily Prayer*, which was designed for personal devotion and worship at home or in small groups, there are daily prayer services for morning, midday, evening, and night. While they can be done with larger groups, these can be done when two or three are gathered, or even by one person. In each of these services, we find the instructions (called “rubrics” in the church language): *A hymn may be sung.*

Barbara Crafton, a wonderful Episcopal priest, author, and frequent chaplain at the Sewanee Church Music Conference, wrote a book called *Let Every Heart Prepare: Meditations for Advent and Christmas*. In it, each daily meditation is based on a phrase of an Advent or Christmas hymn or carol. In the preface, Barbara wrote about the hymn singing rubric as part of daily private worship:

Good idea. Go ahead and sing. Never mind if you’re on a bus or sitting in your cubicle. Never mind if other people can hear you – it’ll be good for them. Maybe it will put them in mind of Advent when they were children, if they grew up that way. And if they didn’t, if all they knew growing up was that Santa Claus was coming to town, you’ll give them something new to ponder. You’ll also have your seat to yourself. Lots of people won’t sit next to someone who has inexplicably burst into song.

I love Barbara’s sense of humor and the fact that she seems to pull no punches. Barbara lost her husband not long ago, yet in her time of grief, she still leads many people across the country through daily prayers multiple times a day in her Facebook livestreams.

In her Advent book, Barbara points out that it’s easier to remember words to a song than to remember a paragraph:

That is why you can still remember the lyrics to “One-eyed One-horned Flying Purple People Eater,” half a century after its untimely birth, even though you wish with all your heart you could forget. And now that I’ve brought it up, guess what you’ll be singing to yourself all day?

We can do better than that. I hope you do find yourself humming these old familiar hymns to yourself as you read, and I hope the condition persists for the rest of the day. I hope that the words they carry speak to you of Christ, who can be found in the most ordinary of your daily tasks. I can think of worse things to be haunted by than hymns.

Do you have a hymnal at home? It doesn't have to be a Presbyterian hymnal, though I hope you'll consider adding one to your library. If you would like to have a copy of the 1990 Presbyterian Hymnal, the one we have in the pews in our church, I don't think it's still in print, but they can still be found on Amazon, eBay, and other places. If you are not tech-savvy, find someone who is to help you. You can save some money buying a used copy if you don't mind a little wear and tear and maybe some markings to erase. You may get lucky and find a new copy. (Also know that the same book can be found with the ecumenical title *Hymns, Psalms, & Spiritual Songs*.)

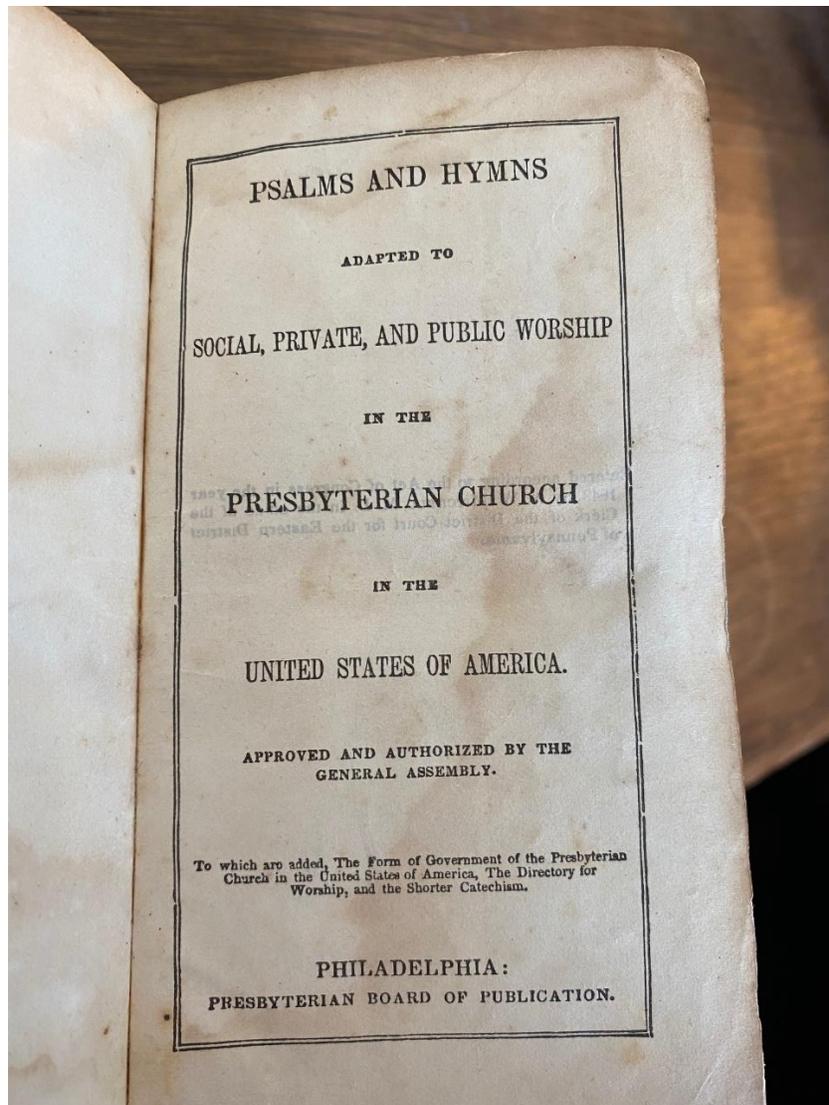
If you're singing along with us on Sundays, and I hope you are, I believe we are sending out the hymns with the bulletin. If that's not working for you, let me know. But if you've got a hymnal like the ones at church, use it. Sing!

If you would like to have a copy of the new Presbyterian Hymnal, visit pcusastore.com/hymnal.

What I really hope is that you have a collection of hymnals at home, including some old ones. I have this treasure:



This belonged to my grandmother. You can probably see how small it looks in my hand.



As you can see, it's a Presbyterian hymnal. It was published in 1843. Notice that it was intended for private worship as well as public.

One thing that's frustrating about some of these hymnals, especially to choir members, is that they only contain texts. There's no music printed. When it comes to singing, especially if you read music (and almost all of us can to some degree, though many won't admit it), and especially if you are an alto, tenor, or bass, it's frustrating not to have musical parts provided. But some old hymnals did it that way, and "across the pond," many hymnals still don't have music printed. That's frustrating if you want to sing, and hymns are meant to be sung. So, while I treasure this little book, I do prefer hymnals with tunes and harmony.

Our denomination has published some resources for worship during our unusual time. The title of this article was borrowed from their documents: “Do what you can with what you have.” We have the challenge of being separated, but we also have the opportunity to worship together from home through the magic of the internet. We also have the opportunity to worship together with our families. That worship should include singing. So, get a hymnal, or at least print out the hymns for each Sunday, and as Barbara Crafton wrote, go ahead and sing.

Our singing at home may be humble for now, but that’s OK. It’s actually good. Families used to sing together at home and it’s sad that we don’t do that anymore. Give it a try.

But hymns can also be of value in other ways. Use hymns as part of your daily devotion. Pray the texts of some hymns (many are prayers). You may see and “hear” the words in a new way. I was in a class on hymnody at Montreat one summer, and we were looking at some new hymns. We talked about them and examined the texts, but we also sang most of them. I noticed when I was singing hymns that were not familiar to me, especially trying to sing the tenor part, my mind was focused more on getting the notes right than on the words. While the music was beautiful, the words were the most important part. Reading the words without singing them can be enlightening.

One way hymn texts can be used is in *Lectio Divina*, a contemplative way of reading, praying, and meditating on scripture, but it works just as well with hymns. Read the text and look for a word or phrase that draws your attention. Ponder that. Read the text again and see what comes to mind. You might notice things you didn’t catch before, even in hymns you’ve sung for many years. Sometimes those are the ones we take for granted.

I’ve been taught that hymns are the most important music I play in worship as an organist. They are not “just hymns.” Hymns are to be learned, practiced, and well prepared if the organist’s job is to lead and inspire a congregation in their singing. In preparation for services, I read the texts of hymns. I try to find ways to bring the text alive in the way I play hymns. I choose registrations (combinations of stops) that reflect the text as much as possible. I’ve mentioned in previous articles that when I prepare to improvise on a hymn tune, I look at the text for inspiration. *God, You Spin the Whirling Planets* made me think of a “spinning” part in one hand, while the other played the tune. When I improvised on *Look Who Gathers at Christ’s Table* not long ago, I was thinking of communing with the saints, following their example, so I used the technique of canon, with one voice starting the tune, and then another entering soon after, following along.

By the way, when worship planning, I start with hymns, and I try to find organ music based on the hymn tunes we will sing in worship. The point of that is either to prepare you for a hymn that will be sung or to reflect on a hymn that has been sung. The hope is whatever message the hymn had, hearing the tune again will reinforce the hymn's message. While I know he says this jokingly, Dr. Baer has said to me, "no one ever went home whistling a sermon." That doesn't mean the sermons don't teach us something. They certainly do! But, hopefully, the message of that sermon, which came from scripture, is reinforced by hymns and other music in the service. While someone may go away whistling something, I hope they are thinking of all that was read, said, and sung in the worship service.

Hymns will always be a great part of our worship services. They will always be one of the most important things we do together in worship. But while we are not able to be together physically, we can all sing, wherever we are. We can still learn from, be inspired by, and find comfort in our hymns. Get a hymnal. Sing, wherever you are. It's good for you.

God be with you till we meet again.

John