

How Can I Keep from Singing?



Hymns at Home

November 15, 2020

Calling

So, how have the last couple of weeks been for you? Good thing we got that election behind us. We don't have to think about that anymore, right? Like other things this year, it seems like an endless situation. I don't know about you, but I'm feeling a wee bit stressed, anxious, frustrated, and tired, among other things. There are times when we want to say, "Stop the world, I want to get off." But it's not so easy.

In these articles called *Hymns at Home*, my intention is to share ways you can use hymns to worship at home. I've encouraged you to sing with us during the hymns on Sunday morning, or whenever you join us for worship. I know that feels strange. It feels awkward for us in the sanctuary too, but we made a conscious decision to keep worship as "normal" and authentic as possible. Our hymns aren't intended to be solos. Hymn singing is something we all do together.

Hymns can also be used as prayers at home. Many hymns are, in fact, prayers. It's easy to lose track of time these days, so I honestly don't remember how long ago it was, but I was honored to be asked to lead one of Carol Strickland's classes on prayer exercises. I focused on hymns as prayers. I'll write more about this particular hymn

soon, but take a look at *Now Thank We All Our God*. It was written as a blessing to be said (or maybe sung) at home. Look at *Away in a Manger*. It starts off telling the Christmas story, but halfway through, it changes to the prayer of a child. *Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus* is a prayer calling on Jesus to come and save us. *Be Thou My Vision* and *Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah* are prayers for guidance. Many hymns are prayers, and you can find one for almost any situation in a good hymnal.

In this Sunday's scriptures, we'll hear about Jesus calling Simon Peter to go catch people instead of fish. Simon Peter tells Jesus to go away because he's unworthy. We'll also hear about God calling Isaiah, who also feels he's unworthy, but God clears the way.

We will sing some "old favorites" this Sunday, including *Holy, Holy, Holy!* and *Amazing Grace*, but we'll also sing a hymn that's probably less familiar, yet one we need to sing and hear, *How Clear Is Our Vocation, Lord*. Vocation literally means calling. God calls us, and not always to do easy things at convenient times. In the words of Sunday's hymn:

But if, forgetful, we should find your yoke is hard to bear,
if worldly pressures fray the mind and love itself cannot unwind
its tangled skein of care: our inward life repair.

Worldly pressures have certainly frayed our minds lately! We're not the first people to go through difficult times:

We mark your saints, how they became in hindrances more sure,
whose joyful virtues put to shame the casual way we wear your name,
and by our faults obscure your power to cleanse and cure.

That stanza always reminds me of my grandfather, John Duncan MacLean. He was proud to be an Elder in Bethesda Presbyterian Church in Aberdeen, NC. He very rarely missed church and I think he went 50 years without missing a Sunday of serving communion. (He lived to be 100.) It was a joyful virtue for him. He didn't treat serving his church or serving God casually. We know that in the Bible, names have meaning. The name MacLean means "son of the servant of St. John." The name John and the name MacLean (my mother's maiden name), connect us with servants of the past. The MacLean clan also has as their motto "Virtue Mine Honour." I can't say all of my ancestors were virtuous. Some of them were called before the Session for not-so-virtuous behavior, but God calls the imperfect.

Do we wear God's name in a casual way? Do we consider our calling to be a joyful virtue? When things get hard, when worldly pressures fray our minds, when God's yoke is hard to bear, do we tell God to go find someone else because we're not worthy? When Simon said that, Jesus replied, "Do not be afraid."

In what you give us, Lord, to do, together or alone,
in old routines or ventures new, may we not cease to look to you –
the cross you hung upon – all you endeavored done.

Whatever we are called to do, together or alone, in old ways or in new ventures, I think we should remember those who have gone before us and set an example, who in hindrances became more sure.

The image shows a page of a hymnal with the title "How Clear Is Our Vocation, Lord" and the number "419". The text is attributed to "Fred Pratt Green, 1981" and "C. Hubert H. Parry, 1888". The music is in 4/4 time and features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The lyrics are as follows:

CHURCH: MISSION
REPTON 8.6.8.8.6.6

1. How clear is our vo - ca - tion, Lord, When once we heed Your call:
2. But if, for - get - ful, we should find Your yoke is hard to bear,
3. We mark Your saints, how they be - came In hin - dranc - es more sure,
4. In what You give us, Lord, to do, To - geth - er or a - lone,

To live ac - cord - ing to Your word, And dai - ly learn, re - freshed, re - stored,
If world - ly pres - sures fray the mind And love it - self can - not un - wind
Whose joy - ful vir - tues put to shame The cas - ual way we wear Your name,
May we not cease to look to You -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YSfm9Hc7x1I>

God be with you till we meet again.

John

