

# North Kildonan United Church

28<sup>th</sup> February 2021 ~Rev. Don Johnson

## “The Wondrous Cross”

Genesis 17: 1-7, 15-16

Psalms 22: 23-31

Mark 8: 31-38

*Gracious God, may your Word be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

At a church I was once associated with, long ago, back in the days of the Red Hymn Book, one of the great hymns by Isaac Watts had been chosen for the service. The secretary of that congregation was more than thirty years in that position, and she rarely made mistakes in anything, let alone the bulletin.

Well, that Sunday was an exception, because she typed the title of the hymn as "*I'm not ashamed to own my **Ford***". You can imagine the ribbing she received for that mistake, and more than a few joking comments were made about the worth of a Ford compared to a Chevy or other vehicles.

What Isaac Watts intended was, of course, this hymn, which sadly is not included in our Voices United hymnbook.

*I'm not ashamed to own my Lord, or to defend his cause,  
Maintain the glory of his cross, and honour all his laws.*

*Jesus, my Lord! I know his name: his name is all my boast;  
Nor will he put my soul to shame, nor let my hope be lost.*

*I know that safe with him remains, protected by his power,  
What I've committed to his trust till the decisive hour.*

*Then will he own his servant's name before his Father's face,  
And in the new Jerusalem appoint my soul a place.*

For hymn writers like Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley and others, their faith in the redeeming power of Jesus was without question. "*Nor will he put my soul to shame, nor let my hope be lost.*"

Isaac Watts was born in 1674 in England, at a time when it wasn't easy to practice a non-Anglican expression of Christian faith. His family were known as non-conformists, or Independents, or as we would call them today, Congregationalists. His father had been imprisoned twice for his religious views and in those days, non-conformists could not study at Oxford or Cambridge universities, or find employment in the government.

Receiving permission from the State to construct a church building was not easy for these dissenters. When they were allowed to put up a church, usually the structure was very plain, unassuming and sometimes hidden away from public view. The authorities of the day had no interest in promoting religious diversity and by placing these dissenters away from the main roads they hoped to limit the growth of the non-

conformists. The Church of England was to be the only denomination fully recognized by the State, with all the privileges and benefits that entailed. There was great personal cost to be a non-conformist in those days, including imprisonment, as Watts's father twice endured. Taking up one's cross was a real thing for many who desired a different way of knowing and worshipping Christ, then and now.

In 2007, a group of pilgrims from the Vancouver School of Theology, the seminary I graduated from, held a worship service in a non-conformist church in rural England. I don't believe the building is still used as a meeting place but the structure dates back to the time of Isaac Watts. It is a simple building, made of stone with a shallow and somewhat rickety balcony. Simple benches served as pews, with an equally simple pulpit and communion table. No stained glass windows, no fine linens or banners or table runners. A humble building, simplicity itself we might say, hidden away from street view, this church was home to generations of Congregationalists in that community. And I should add, though I'm sure you know this already, that the Congregationalists were one of the three founding denominations which formed the United Church of Canada in 1925. So this visit was more than just a matter of exploring an historical structure. In a real sense we were in a family home, our family home, and the honest unadorned plainness of that structure has been duplicated how many times across Canada as we built our houses of worship, especially on the prairies.

When Isaac Watts was a young man, singing in church was restricted to the psalms. Isaac found many of the texts less than satisfying and he complained about them to his father. *"Well then, write some of your own if you think you can do better"* his father replied.

Isaac did just that the following week and his work was well received. In fact many regard him as the father of English hymnody. Isaac used the psalms as his starting point but brought the texts into a more modern context. Where would we be without his compositions, hymns like *"Joy to the World"* at Christmas, *"O God Our Help in Ages Past"* on Remembrance Sunday, *"When I Survey the Wondrous Cross"* during Holy Week, or *"Jesus Shall Reign"* in Eastertide.

Isaac Watts was writing hymns around the time that Charles Wesley began his hymn writing career and when John Wesley was travelling throughout the United Kingdom preaching the Gospel of Methodism. For Isaac, Charles and John, the cross of Christ was central to their hymn writing and, since all three were clergy, central to their preaching as well.

Think for instance of Watts's profound hymn *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross* written in 1707, coincidentally the same year of the birth of Charles Wesley. This is as much a meditation as it is a hymn, an act of faith and praise to the One whose love for all gathers us around the cross.

*When I survey the wondrous cross  
on which the Prince of glory died,  
my richest gains I count as loss,  
and pour contempt on all my pride.*

*Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast  
save in the death of Christ, my God:  
all the vain things that charm me most,  
I sacrifice them to his blood.*

Think especially of the third verse, as much a prayer as a song, certainly meant, in my mind, to be sung with full adoration and praise, yet quietly and gratefully:

*See from his head, his hands, his feet,  
sorrow and love flow mingled down!  
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,  
or thorns compose so rich a crown?*

Then Isaac combines it all together in the call to discipleship which is the fourth verse, sung with full voice:

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,  
that were a present far too small:  
love so amazing, so divine,  
demands my soul, my life, my all.*

What did Jesus teach his disciples? *'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?'*

St Augustine is credited with saying "*one who sings prays twice.*" That is certainly true with so much of our hymnody and one of the great aching pains of this pandemic time is our inability to sing together, at least not yet.

For many years now, February has been observed as Black History Month, a time to reflect on the experiences, the realities of the black people of Canada. And a strong aspect of that history, and of the present day as well, is the role of song.

The writers and the congregations of the African-American tradition, like Isaac Watts and the Wesleys, knew full well the redeeming power of Jesus, and the hope the gospel holds for those who believe. In those first centuries of slavery, in the indescribably horrible conditions as slaves, then in the tough times of eeking out a living after slavery was abolished, faced with laws to make them second class citizens, faced with vigilantes full of hate and violence in their hearts, in those years of slavery and then emancipation, the lives of black women and men in North America were more than tragic at times.

The gospel of Jesus Christ spoke to them in a way their white slave owners couldn't comprehend, and couldn't control, even though they tried. The slave could see their own experience in the man of sorrows wrapped in grief, they could identify with Christ's sufferings and they knew, deep down in their hearts, that the Lord loved and cared for them and suffered along with them. They knew what it was to carry a cross, they knew the cost of discipleship, they knew rejection and injustice. But they also knew the love and joy Christ offers, and their songs reflect that blend of pain and freedom and hope.

Their songs were shaped and formed by the whole Bible and they could relate to the stories of freedom and new life found in Scripture. *"When Israel was in Egypt's land, let my people go."* That first exodus story would become their exodus, they hoped and believed. *"Nobody knows the trouble I've seen, nobody but Jesus"* speaks of the Saviour they could trust.

*"There is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole,  
there is a balm in Gilead, to heal the sin-sick soul."*

*Sometimes I feel discouraged, and think my work's in vain,  
but then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again.*

*If you cannot preach like Peter, if you cannot pray like Paul,  
you can tell the love of Jesus and say, "He died for all."*

*There is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole,  
there is a balm in Gilead, to heal the sin-sick soul."*

The gospel tradition of the African-American or Black spirituals are truly sacred songs, life-giving music set in the midst of heart-rending conditions, written and composed and sung to give hope for the day and brighter hope for tomorrow.

They are a gift to all who honour the tradition from whence this music comes, the texts and tunes created to speak in a unique way of the human quest for dignity and freedom, for faith in a loving ever-present God, faith in Jesus Christ who is both our Lord and our brother, and faith in the Holy Spirit at work in the world.

Let's end with a few verses from *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, by J. Rosamond Johnson and James Weldon Johnson

*"Lift every voice and sing till earth and heaven ring  
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty  
Let our rejoicing rise, high as the listening skies  
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea."*

*God of our weary years, God of our silent tears  
Thou who has brought us thus far on the way  
Thou who has by Thy might, Led us into the light  
Keep us forever in the path, we pray  
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee." Amen.*