

# North Kildonan United Church

12<sup>th</sup> June 2022 ~Rev. Don Johnson

Proverbs 8: 1-4, 22-31

Romans 5: 1-5

John 16: 12-15

*Eternal God,  
in the reading of the Scripture, may your Word be heard;  
in the meditations of our hearts, may your Word be known;  
and in the faithfulness of our lives, may your Word be shown. Amen.*

If you were asked to list what you might regard as iconic hymns of our tradition, what might come to mind? For instance, what would be **the** hymn for Christmas and why? Would it be *Silent Night*, cloaked with warm and lovely memories of holding candles in a dimly lit sanctuary as the Christmas Eve service draws to a close? Hymnbooks across the country have drops of wax on the words to *Silent Night*, silent testimony to that evening's joy.

How about *O Come, All Ye Faithful*, a strong, theologically rich song of praise that in its five verses accomplishes five things. Think of what is proclaimed. Verse 1 invites us to go to Bethlehem to adore the new born King. Verse 2 tells us, in echoes of the Nicene Creed, who this new born King is. He is the incarnation of God, begotten not created, God of God, light of light who does not despise human birth but rejoices in it. Verse 3 tells of the joy of the angels and the delight of the entire heavenly host, singing with full throated ecstasy "*glory to God in the highest*". Verse 4 introduces the human element once again, this time in the invitation to the shepherds to leave their animals and come worship the baby Jesus. Finally, the entire hymn finds its culmination in verse 5, as we join our praise to sing "*Yea, Lord, we greet thee, born this happy morning, Jesus, to thee be glory given; word of the Father, now in flesh appearing. O come, let us adore him, O come, let us adore him, O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord.*"

Those are just two choices for Christmas. What of Charles Wesley's *Hark! the Herald Angels Sing*, or Isaac Watts' *Joy to the World* or the West Indian carol *The Virgin Mary Had a Baby Boy*? The list goes on, and thank God that we don't have to choose just one carefully selected hymn for Christmas, as though the mystery and joy of the birth of Christ could be succinctly covered with only one set of words.

The same holds for Easter. Is the finest Easter hymn *Jesus Christ Is Risen Today*, which comes to us from a 18<sup>th</sup> century collection entitled *Lyra Davidica*, or *Harp of David*, or does Charles Wesley once again step forward with his Easter offering of *Christ the Lord Is Risen Today*? Both of these hymns are sung to the same tune, entitled *Easter Hymn*, also out of *Lyra Davidica* of 1708, and they face each other in *Voices United*, so comparisons are easily made of the virtues of each text. A comparison I will not inflict on you this day.

Today is Trinity Sunday, and while other church festivals have an abundance of great hymns associated with them, I think, and it's just my opinion, that **the** superb hymn for this day is the one we sang to open today's worship.

*Holy, holy, holy! Lord God almighty;  
Early in the morning our song shall rise to thee;  
Holy, holy, holy, merciful and mighty,  
God in three persons, blessed Trinity.*

It's such a great hymn, perfect for this Sunday when we focus on God the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, three yet one, or as the hymn puts it, *God in three persons, blessed Trinity*.

And it is not a hymn restricted to this day in the Church Calendar. Those of you who are slightly older than me may remember back to the time when the first verse of this hymn was the start of worship every Sunday. That practice may have been encouraged by the fact that the Blue Hymnary, the first hymnbook of the newly formed United Church of Canada, placed *Holy, Holy, Holy*, as its first hymn. Our more liturgical United Churches sometimes referred to this introit, this opening verse, as the Sanctus, the Latin name for the response used in the Communion Prayer of Great Thanksgiving: "*Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts, heaven and earth are full of thy glory. Glory be to thee, O Lord most high. Blessed is the One that cometh in the name of the Lord: Hosanna in the highest.*"

I've always loved this hymn, and it is one of the few tried and true hymns that I could turn to when at a loss for choosing a known, singable, opening hymn. Congregations still love it, I think, although I remember the comments I overheard at another church I briefly served about "that old thing we used to sing every Sunday, and look its back". I guess it wasn't sophisticated enough for those progressive folks.

Why do I love it? Well, think for a moment about the tune. It was written by John Bacchus Dykes in 1861, a composer who also wrote, among other pieces, *Melita*, the tune for that great naval hymn *Eternal Father, Strong to Save*. Both *Melita* and today's tune *Nicaea*, are strong, easy to sing melodies. *Nicaea* starts with that marvellous ascending, as each of the three holies are sung on higher and higher notes, leading us up to a strong and confident singing of *Lord God Almighty*. It almost feels like climbing up steps to enter into a sanctuary, a holy place. Dykes, the composer, wrote the tune 40 some years after Reginald Heber had written the words. His tune bears strong resemblance to the Merbecke or standard Communion sung setting of the Sanctus, the holy, holy, holy, of his day. Makes me wonder if he was trying to echo that part of the Communion service in his tune.

If so, then every time this hymn is sung, the centrality of the Lord's Supper in Christian worship is acknowledged and remembered. Coincidence or not, the genius of this tune is that it has the ability to be both gentle and strong at the same time, stately with a hint of mystery.

But above all, the tune is matched to superb words, and for me, the words of a hymn are always more important than the tune. This is because the words we sing shape the beliefs we hold, and if we are singing weak or bad theology we are misleading ourselves in our Christian worship, development and growth.

There is nothing weak or bad in this text. A picture is painted in our minds of the saints at worship, the faithful of every time and place, joining with the angels of heaven in their adoration of the One truly worthy of our praise. *Only thou art holy, there is none beside thee, perfect in power, in love, and purity.* The focus of this hymn is God, the praise is directed towards God, and the text speaks of an important truth. As the third verse reads: *Though the darkness hide thee, though the eye made blind by sin thy glory may not see.*

In our arrogance, we make pronouncements about the nature and intention and purpose of God, as though we are good buddies with the divine. But God is mystery, and in this life we do not see God face to face, or truly know the mind and will of God other than from what we glean from scripture. In Jesus Christ the face of God was seen, though few recognized him as such. In the faces of the faithful we catch glimpses of the love of God lived out in a human being, but it is not the face of God.

God is mystery, but God reveals God's love for the world in the creation we enjoy, the wonderful intricacy of plant and animal, of birds in the air and fish in the waters, of all that lives and moves and has its being, and of all that stands still, as silent testimony to God's handiwork. God's presence in the world is through the Holy Spirit, the Spirit that hovered over the formless void at Creation, the Spirit that descended at Pentecost, the Spirit that guides us to life and faith and truth, that moves in and among us, continuing God's care for creation and encouraging God's people to play our part in caring for creation.

God is mystery, and our understanding of the Holy Trinity is ultimately mystery as well. Theologians have spent lifetimes working out and pondering the relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, between the Creator, the Redeemer and the Sustainer, or however the three persons yet one God are named.

Many times our most succinct theological statements are made in the context of prayer. For example, today's opening prayer from the United Reformed Church is a wonderful example of prayer as theology:

*You are holy, God the Creator, giving us richly all things to enjoy.  
You are holy, Christ the Saviour of the world, made flesh to set us free.  
You are holy, Spirit of truth and love, willing to dwell in us.  
You are holy and blessed, O God, eternal Trinity,  
and we worship you.*

Music and art can convey great truths to us when words fail. So it is that the concept of the Trinity is often best illustrated through music and art. I remember seeing a round stained glass window, with three interconnecting circles within that larger circle.

One circle depicted a hand held up in blessing, with YHWH, or Yahweh, the Lord God, and the word Abba, or Father. This is God the Creator or God the Father. The next circle is a classic presentation of Jesus as the Lamb of God. The third circle contains the descending Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, with seven flames just below the bird, the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. Around the three circles was the word Holy, presented three times, and the circles all connected together in the centre. How did the hymn writer put it? *God in three persons, blessed Trinity.*

As God refused to be limited to a special name when Moses asked for the divine name, I AM WHO I AM God declared, so too does all of our language ultimately falter as we attempt to define in human terms what is a mystery beyond our comprehension. So we trust in God's grace, we affirm that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to God's self, and we rely on the Holy Spirit to guide us.

And because our language is limited, we are wise to expand and open up our words of prayer and praise. For much of Christian tradition, the language of the church has been masculine and triumphal, language that often alienated many faithful people. How typical was it to hear most prayers begin with something like "Almighty God and Father"?

Through the advent of inclusive language and growing understandings of theology, we are encouraged to broaden our images of God, to be careful and inclusive and expansive when we address God in prayer, to include all people without necessarily destroying the traditions of the church. Yes we can use Father, Son and Holy Spirit in blessing, as I will this day, because it reflects the formula of baptism, but we can also expand and explore that baptismal language so that it becomes richer and more welcoming. For instance, Brian Wren, a great contemporary hymn writer, offers this:

*Glory and praise to the Trinity, who was, and is, and will always be  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit, One God, Mother of us all.*

Janet Morley is another contemporary theologian who offers us many ways of delving into the wonder and mystery of prayer. Let's conclude with her prayer for Trinity Sunday. Let us pray:

*O God our mystery, you bring us to life, call us to freedom,  
and move between us with love.  
May we so participate in the dance of your trinity,  
that our lives may resonate with you, now and for ever. Amen.*