

Music and Song Stories

A sermon by Cathy Love

Sunday, September 5, 2021

Psalm 96 / Romans 10:5-15

Prayer: Gracious God, our firm foundation, may we open our minds and hearts to the words you have provided, wonderful words of life, stepping stones for our feet to follow. We pray in Jesus Name. Amen.

As most of you know, I love researching the history behind our hymns and worship songs. What made someone write such profound hymns of faith, how did they write them in the midst of, or after surviving, unspeakable tragedies or just struggling through life in general? So many hymns and songs come out of the composer's deep pain and tragic life experiences. Events that might have crippled them.

And I also love to hear how songs impact others. Have you ever just floated along in a song when you were just desperately holding on? When life is so difficult or, have you sung a favourite song in absolute joy? Have you ever really paid attention to the words of your favourite hymns or songs. Do you know their history? Do some of them speak to you in times of turmoil and pain or in celebration?

Some of you may have heard my message that developed from the Mercy Me song Even If. This message may be considered a continuation of that message.

The first song I am going to talk about is the one we watched prior to the children's story. It isn't the story behind the song that impacted me but an experience I had with this song. One day, it was actually three years ago in August, our granddaughter spent some time at our house because her brother had been rushed to the hospital as he had choked on something. Not to worry, he was fine!! We settled into her usually bedtime routine as it turned into an overnight stay. Instead of the usual songs I sing to her as she goes to sleep, she asked me for the song "Back on my Knees Again" otherwise known as "Where Do I Go". We had heard it as part of the Vacation Bible School (VBS) program presentations.

Where do I Go? Back on My Knees

**Where do I go when I need a shelter,
where do I go when I need a friend ,
where do I go when I need some helping?
Where do I go? Back on my knees again.
Sure as the winter comes after the fall;
Sure as true love tears down any wall.
Jesus is able to carry it all he will answer your call.**

This song has a wonderful message about the one thing to do and the one place to go when life is hard. We go to God. Isn't this a great song for children to learn? If we can teach them at a young age that life can be hard but it is at those very times that we need to remember to turn to God in prayer how strong would their faith be?

A devotional reading I had from this week was Proverbs 22 "Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it." Of course, we need to remind them of the most difficult part which is to remember that it is God's will that is going to be the result of these prayers, not necessarily our wish, plea, or hope. The words are simple and repetitive and perfect for young children.

Last week Rev. Fred spoke to us about God's Mighty Hand and, among other important messages, he spoke of sharing this information with our children and grandchildren. He told us of God's goodness in times of trial. I don't recall him telling us exactly how and when to share this message but this song would certainly help ease your way into a conversation.

Our granddaughter was four when she asked for this song. God blessed us that night with saving our grandson and, like Reverend Fred, I can think of so many more instances that God stepped in and helped me, and those I love, through hard times.

Our granddaughter then asked me for several VBS songs such as Made for this, My hope is in the Lord, God is for me (If God is For me, who can be against me).

We have a variety of songs that I have sung to her since she was a baby and yet it wasn't the traditional ones that we sing that brought her comfort that night such as Kumbaya, Kookaburra, He's got the Whole World, It Only

Takes a Spark and Mockingbird, but these songs of faith. These songs with their promise of God's love and encouragement of faith of a child, brought her peace that night and many others.

As I watched some of my last year's Sing conference interviews, one interview that stood out was by Joni Erickson Tada about life after her diving accident when she was 17 years old that left her paralyzed from the shoulders down. Prior to this accident, she was a typical teenager, active and living life to the fullest – horse back riding, playing tennis, hiking and swimming. She dove into the Chesapeake Bay after misjudging the shallowness of the water.

She states in her bewilderment, in her depression and discouragement after the accident, God brought back to her memory hymns her parents taught her around the campfire, dinner table, Sunday afternoon devotions and Sunday mornings at Church.

She speaks of the second verse of the hymn "Be Still My Soul"

Be still, my soul: thy God doth undertake

To guide the future, as He has the past.

She says that part was a comfort to her

Thy hope, thy confidence let nothing shake;

Joni says not even paralysis

All now mysterious shall be plain at last.

Joni states "I can't figure this quadriplegic thing out but I am going to trust God".

Be still, my soul: the waves and winds still know

The one Who ruled them when He dwelt below.

Joni goes on to state "That hymn I learned as a child, sustained me on my sickbed in that hospital where I lay for a full year not even getting up in a wheelchair – so depressed and discouraged."

She thanks God that the Holy Spirit brought back the hymns she had memorized because they were her anchor, her lifeline, her lifeboat at a time she desperately needed hope and encouragement. Joni learned to paint with her teeth and founded Joni and friends – an organization to accelerate Christian ministry in the disability community.

Joni has taken a situation which would have had many giving up and made it her life's mission. She is now in her 70's and has changed the world for so many. Imagine if she hadn't heard God's voice speaking to her in the hospital bed or if she had refused to listen? She sings, writes, paints and leads her mission.

Hymns we heard as a child sustain us as adults. It is so important to make sure we include our children and our youth in our services, especially through music as we just never know what they will need and when they will need it. I have to commend those who give their time to the ministry of our children through Logos and VBS because it is a crucial part of their lives. Some children and youth do not hear God's word anywhere else other than our programs.

As I said, I find the history of the songs so incredibly fascinating and I am so grateful that Jennifer Levitan introduced me to the books by Robert J. Morgan that give the history of many of the songs we know, love and sing. And Sharon Paris recently shared a book with me as well. What I can't find in these books, I look for the interviews of the writers/composers.

Build My Life

And I will build my life upon your love, it is a firm foundation

And I will put my trust in you alone

And I will not be shaken

And I will build my life upon your love, it is a firm foundation

And I will put my trust in you alone

And I will not be shaken (Holy)

Don't you love the message in the words? I thought These words were so impactful. God's love is a firm foundation.

Pat Barrett says Build My Life is a song that has personally carried him through so many years of change and uncertainty. He and his wife are parents to three children and he states parenthood has taught him life rarely behaves with our plans. Don't most of us know this! And you don't have to have children to learn this hard truth.

How many times have you looked forward in your life to what you believe to be the best path and how many times have you had your path changed causing you despair and uncertainty? For some of us, that change may have led us to a different and pleasing path or it prepared us for some significant event.

Going back to the song explanation, it is in the uncertainty, Pat says, the not knowing and the trials that reveals what we put or trust in and what we've been standing on. Luke Chapter six explains how Jesus teaches it is like a man who dug a hole, built his house on a rock and when the storms came, the house held firm. Pat reminds us we have the freedom to build our life on anything we want. The invitation of Jesus is to build on things that last.

Mighty To Save

Well everyone needs compassion A love that's never failing

Let mercy fall on me

Everyone needs forgiveness the kindness of a Saviour

The hope of nations

Saviour, he can move the mountains

My God is mighty to save He is mighty to save

Forever author of Salvation He rose and conquered the grave

Jesus conquered the grave

This song came about not as one negative circumstance but as a sum of many. Ben Fielding talks about our all-powerful God who "chooses not to turn His power against us but towards us, drawing us to himself, writing us into a new story- his salvation story. God is all about restoring people to himself."

I love Ben's next set of comments: "Jesus said "out of the overflow of the heart mouth speaks" **Luke 6:45** – He states it is almost as if Jesus was speaking to songwriters. There's nothing better than sitting down to write and having a thought from God's word bubbling up and spilling out onto the page. Mighty to save comes straight from **Zephaniah 3:17** "The LORD your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing." "God is with us, He delights in us, his heart is towards us."

Ben states cowriting "Mighty to Save" was a lengthy process with his cowriter Reuben Morgan. He credits God's grace for taking a song from a living room in the suburbs of Sydney to places they could never have imagined. He states when writing music it is an immediate responsibility and commitment to serve their own local Church. The song has two verses with singular points. First the need for our Saviour and second, surrendering to his way.

A wonderful message Ben shares is "the Good News of the Bible is that while we were still distant from God, in need of rescuing, He reached out and made a way through Jesus.

We all need His compassion and unfailing love. (Remember that is the lead into the song, everyone needs compassion, a love that's never failing). God's love for humanity is unchanging and His grace is available to us, though it requires our response that puts Jesus in His rightful place in our lives, not as an add-on but as Lord." I think that phrase is worth repeating "God's love for humanity is unchanging and His grace is available to us, though it requires our response that puts Jesus in His rightful place in our lives, not as an add-on but as Lord." God's saving character and intent is then coupled in the chorus with the promise of Romans 10:9 that if we confess with our mouths that He is Lord, (surrender), and believe in our hearts that Jesus conquered the grave, we will be saved.

Ben finishes the interview saying a song is one of the most powerful ways to connect a thought with an emotion. His goal for writing songs is to connect people with God, to connect His truth with our reality. The ultimate goal is worship. If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

One of the most interesting life stories I read was the story of the creator of our Hymn #498, Wonderful words of Life. The story references other hymns but I love this hymn so decided to use it as an example of the inspiring music Philip Bliss provided as with a life altering decision.

Sing them over again to me, wonderful words of life.

Sing them over again to me, wonderful words of life

Let me more of their beauty see, wonderful words of life

Words of life and beauty teach me faith and duty.

Beautiful words, wonderful words, wonderful words of life
Beautiful words, wonderful words, wonderful words of life.

Philip Bliss and his wife experienced a situation in which someone offered his opinion on a path which would affect his financial security, life goals and was an interpretation of God's will. Haven't many of us experienced a time when we have experienced something similar? Think of how we responded.

Philip lived from 1838 to 1876 just to give you a timeline to this story. Philip was taught by his mother from the Bible, had little formal education and left home at age 11 to make his own living. During this time, he furthered his education and at 17, completed his teaching requirements. He married Lucy in 1859. You know this is a powerful story, she was a Presbyterian !!

Philip and Lucy's story goes like this. He nurtured his musical interest through his youth and early adult years. One night, he became friends with D. L. Moody, an American evangelist and publisher, who urged him to give up his business, drop everything and sing the Gospel. They were hesitant and as Lucy stayed, "I am willing that Mr. Bliss should do anything we can be sure is the Lord's will and I can trust the Lord to provide for us, but I don't want him to take such a step simply on Mr. Moody's will". Moody told them, "You have not faith. If you haven't faith of your own on this matter, start out on my faith. Launch out into the deep."

Imagine how you would feel being asked to follow someone else's faith and confidence in the direction of your life. I have **a small** understanding of someone's faith in in me that I didn't have – as I stand up here still amazed with my ever-developing relationship with God!! Still amazed that I can stand here in Rev. Frances absence and speak the words God gives me to share. Philip had several experiences in which other people supported this thought process and urged him to give his life to singing the Gospel. He eventually sang at an evangelistic event in Waukegan, Illinois.

Here, Major Daniel Whittle was preaching the word. Philip sang his hymn "Almost Persuaded" in such a way that it was reported to be filled with power. The next afternoon, Philip, Daniel and the pastor gathered in prayer and Philip surrendered everything to God. He gave up his business and his writing of secular music.

Daniel Whittle later said of Philip, "gave up everything and in a simple, childlike trusting prayer, placed himself with any talent, any power God had given him at the disposal of the Lord for any use He could make of him in the spreading of His Gospel". Philip then spent the rest of his life in service to God. It is reported that he returned his money from his royalties to support evangelical work and to charities.

It is also reported that on December 29, 1876, he and his wife were on a Pacific Express train traveling near Ashtabula, Ohio when a trestle bridge collapsed sending the train carriages into the ravine. Although he escaped the wreck, when the carriages caught fire, he returned to the carriage to save his wife however, no trace of their bodies was ever recovered.

It is related that found intact in his travelling trunk, which somehow survived the crash and fire, was a manuscript with the lyrics to "I Will Sing of My Redeemer". James McGranahan set the words to music and this hymn became the only Bliss Gospel song for which Philip did not write the tune.

Did you know that the song that survivors from the Titanic allegedly sang as they rowed for shore was a hymn by Philip Bliss entitled "Pull for the Shore"? to encourage the rowers to continue to row.

So our beautiful music has often been created from pain, sorrow, personal disaster, tragedy, transformation and crisis.

Do you have songs that give you comfort? Maybe a song that is a family favourite, that you sang at a special event or you heard on a radio, at a concert? Some of my favourite hymns and songs were not included today as I have shared them so often I feel many of you will know the stories by heart!!

For many of us, whose talents lie elsewhere, don't despair, you don't have to be a songwriter to offer comfort to others. A kind word, a prayer, quiet companionship, a simple act of kindness shared, and so many other ways, we can comfort those around us and help them through a difficult time.

Prayer: Gracious God, While we may not all be songwriters who will develop hymns of faith, hope or comfort, we each have a gift to share with others. We pray you will use each of our gifts to make a difference in the lives of those around us. We thank you for the talents of those who offer their gifts for us to use in our search for comfort and faith. We ask this in the precious name of your son, Jesus. Amen.