



**Westminster**  
**Presbyterian Church**  
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

**Songs of the Saints**  
**Colossians 3:16**

I have a very close friend who I have known all my life. This friend has inspired me, comforted me, taught me, and challenged me. My friend has been with me through thick and thin. I have gathered with this friend in high and holy moments, in times of great sorrow and in times of joy. Often my friend and I are together within a larger congregation, but sometimes it is just me and my friend driving down the road together. This friend is so faithful that when the moment comes and I find myself facing death, my friend will be there to bring comfort and hope.

You know my friend. As a matter of fact I hope that you are as close to my friend as I am. My friend is the hymns of the church. One thing I appreciate about my friend is that he cares not that I don't know anything about music. About all I know about music is from the phrase "Every good boy does fine," which reminds me of the note on the lines of the treble clef. And of course the word FACE reminds me of the notes between the lines. I always wondered why someone didn't just say start at the bottom and remember e-f-g-a-b-c-d. That gets the lines and the spaces.

I give thanks for those who know the notes and how to play them, but all my friend expects of me is to allow him to help me offer my praise to God, to use my friend to help express deep prayers, to feel the pain of mourning with hope of comfort, and to teach me wonderful truths about God.

The people of God sing. Oh, there are some whose voices fail them, but in even in their hearts there is a song.

God's people have always sung. In the Bible the Israelites sang a song after crossing the Red Sea. Singing was part of Israel's formal worship in both tabernacle and temple and then in the synagogue. The Psalms bear rich testimony that in joy and sorrow, in praise and lament, the faithful raise their voices in song to God. Hymn singing was practiced by Jesus and his disciples. This morning we heard the account from Mark that following the Last Supper, Jesus and the disciples sang a hymn. The text I chose for this sermon is the Apostle Paul's

instruction found in Colossians 3:16 **“With gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him”**

If you believe the book of Job, there was singing at the creation of the world, and in Revelation we read that every creature will in the end sing to the lamb on the throne.

In our Reformed Tradition, we understand that singing is a ministry that belongs to all the people of God. I hope you understand that the entire congregation is the choir. The role of professional or volunteer musicians and choirs is to aid the whole people of God in their worship. And as one theologian has recorded, “A diet of worship which does not regularly include ample opportunity for all the members of the congregation to join in song will be impoverished in its worship, and the life of the church and the faith of its people will suffer.”

This past Wednesday, November 1, was All Saints Day, and it is our custom to remember those saints from our past and throughout history that faithfully passed down the faith to us. And one way to accomplish this is to remember the songs of the saints.

For example, 107 of the hymns in our hymnbook are from the Psalms. Now those are the really old hymns that folks like John Calvin encouraged us to sing. He would say, “Don’t just read the Psalms, they were written to be sung.” And, imagine that on Sunday morning when we sing Psalm 23 we are singing about the faith of King David who lived three thousand years ago. We use different tunes, but it is the same message.

For you who like the “old hymns,” more than likely during the upcoming Advent season we will sing “Savior of the Nations, Come.” Actually, I believe the choir cantata this year will be based on this hymn. This hymn, though we sing it to 16<sup>th</sup> century German music, it was written by Ambrose the Bishop of Milan in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Ambrose put his life on the line by confronting Emperor Theodosius and demanding he repent of his violent nature, and Theodosius gave in.

There was an ad in the paper this past Thursday written by the Catholic Bishop of Tyler. I appreciated what he said about necessity of church unity, though I raised an eyebrow at his solution. But speaking of unity we have at least one hymn in our hymnbook that was written by a Pope. Did you know that? Pope

Gregory I was a prolific writer who gave much of his life and wealth to carrying the gospel to new places. He lived in the 6<sup>th</sup> century and he wrote “The Glory of These Forty Days.” It is hymn #165, a Lenten hymn that tells us of Jesus’ fast and the testing of Moses, Elijah, Daniel and John the Baptist. Yes, there is a lot of the Bible we learn in our hymns.

On Easter Sunday we often sing, “**The Day of Resurrection,**” which was written by John of Damascus in the eighth century.

In the thirteenth century one of my all-time favorite hymns was written Francis of Assisi, “**All Creatures of our God and King.**”

All these hymns have a history. They are all written by saints from times past, who lived, suffered, celebrated, and died in the Lord.

On Thanksgiving we always sing, “**Now Thank We All our God.**” It was written by Martin Rinkart in 1636. It was written as a table blessing during the Thirty Years’ war when so many were dying from the plague. He wrote these words during that turbulent time when each week he was conducting the funeral services of scores of people he loved. “O may this bounteous God through all our life be near us, with ever joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us; and keep us in God’s grace, and guide us when perplexed, and free us from all ills in this world and the next.” That was written during the Thirty Years’ War, during a time when the plague had killed so many of his friends. “**Now Thank We All Our God**” is one of the 853 songs of the saints contained within the pages of my dear friend – the church’s hymnbook

Last week we sang hymns that came out of the Protestant Reformation. We sang Luther’s “**A Mighty Fortress**” and the hymn attributed to John Calvin, “**I Greet Thee Who My Sure Redeemer Art.**” Just in case any of you end up having to pick hymns for my funeral, you had better choose “I Greet Thee Who My Sure Redeemer Art,” or I will come back to haunt you.

There are many hymns written during the 1700’s, 1800’s and early 1900’s. Some refer to these as the old gospel hymns: ***Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing, Great Is Thy Faithfulness, How Firm a Foundation, I Love to Tell the Story, It Is Well with My Soul, My Hope is Built on Nothing Less, How Great Thou Art, and Rock of Ages.***

Do you know the story that goes with “It Is Well with My Soul”? Horatio Spafford was a Presbyterian elder who lost his business in the Chicago fire in 1881. His son died of scarlet fever. Later, deciding to take a family vacation to

England, he sent his family ahead while he took care of a business matter. There was a shipwreck and his four daughters lost their lives and only his wife survived. On his way to England to be with his wife, it is said that at the spot in the Atlantic where his daughters perished he wrote the words of “It Is Well with My Soul.” “When peace like a river attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll, whatever my lot Thou has taught me to say, it is well with my soul.” Oh, yes, there is a great faith expressed and inspirational words expressed by my friend the hymnbook.

Take John Newton, the ship captain and slave trader. He tells us of the almost unbelievable grace of God when he turned to Christ and received pardon for his sins, and he wrote Amazing Grace. “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.” John Newton was a wretch saved by grace.

Did you know that the hymn, “**Just as I Am,**” which is often sung in churches that have altar calls, was written by Charlotte Elliott who was a member of the Anglican Church? Charlotte was an invalid for most of her life; and maybe that fact will help you better understand what she meant when she wrote, “Just as I am, without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me.”

There are many modern hymns that we sing. Of course, in our current hymnbook the newest hymns are at least four years old. But as our faith was expressed three thousand years ago it is still being expressed in the writing and singing of new hymns. And all our hymns are the songs of the saints, the songs our fathers and mothers sang. Our grandparents sang them. Some, the Psalms, have been sung by the church for three thousand years, some for four years, but they express our hope, our love, and our wonder of the love and presence of God.

If I were imprisoned and could only have one book, it would be the Bible, but if I could not have that, I would want my old friend the hymnbook. Its songs touch our souls. Its melodies move our spirit. It proclaims what cannot be simply proclaimed without the music. It teaches theology, it teaches the Bible, it teaches about surviving the struggles in life, and expresses the joy of knowing Jesus.

I would suggest that if you do not already have a hymnbook that you purchase one. It should not only be in the pews, but also in our homes. It should not only be used for singing, but it should be studied, for we don’t just sing the hymns without thought, but you have to know what you are singing.

If there are hymns that are particularly meaningful to you and we never sing them in worship, let me know, and if it fits an occasion and is appropriate for worship, I will put them on the list.

So remember the exhortation from the pen of the Apostle Paul, **“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.”**