

7<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost, Year A  
Singing our Faith, Preaching our Hymns Sermon Series  
July 16, 2023  
Rev. Sarah Chancellor-Watson  
St. Charles Ave Presbyterian Church  
Psalm 139:1-12  
Romans 8:31-29

### “Prone to Wander”

In brainstorming thematic titles for this sermon series on the hymns of our faith, among the discarded ideas was “Behind the Music” – referencing the VH1 TV show popular in the late 90s and early 2000s, which told the origin stories the hottest musicians and entertainers of the day and often the inspiration and surprising meanings behind their songs. This morning we are going “behind the music” of a couple of well-loved hymns, “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing” and “Take My Hand, Precious Lord.”

Come Thou Fount of Every Blessings is probably the epitome of “an oldie, but a goodie” to me. Baptist minister and theologian, Robert Robinson, penned this hymn at the age of 22 in 1758<sup>1</sup>. Whether played on an organ or with the full complement of a praise band this hymn has stood the test of time and remains popular across generations and denominations. It is a personal favorite of mine, I even picked it to be sung at my wedding, and rarely can I sing this song without instantly being transported back to warm summers singing this song gathered with sweaty kids for evening vespers at church camp. Perhaps you too have a strong sense memory tied to this or another hymn – that’s one of the beautiful things about our hymns, the way they tether us to moments along our journey of faith.

At my camp in eastern Oklahoma we built labyrinth out of stones and gravel in a spot just off the path that led to the creek. It was the perfect clearing for a labyrinth, surrounded by trees so as to shade the labyrinth at most hours of the day and create a canopy that helped even the most energetic of campers settle into a reverent calm. For those of you who may not be familiar with labyrinths, labyrinths in a spiritual context are a path set in an intricate circular pattern that weaves the walker back and forth until they reach the center of the labyrinth. There is one way in and one way out, no dead ends or confusing turns to make. The oldest labyrinths that have been found in Christian churches date back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century, making them one of the most ancient forms of spiritual practice we have. Those who engage in this practice use walking the path as a form of prayer and contemplation. I personally have found this practice to be very beneficial to my own spiritual life, as sitting down to meditate or engage in contemplative prayer, often leads my mind to wander and my body to ache, whereas walking the labyrinth allows me to occupy my body and better free up my mind for a deeper and more meaningful time of prayer. In addition to being a great practice that allows one to engage in prayer in more embodied

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert\\_Robinson\\_\(Baptist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Robinson_(Baptist))

ways, I have always found the labyrinth to be a wonderful symbol for the journey of faith. If we imagine that the center of labyrinth is God, then in one moment you are walking the path, sure that you are heading straight for that center, and the next moment the path switches back and you're headed to the far outreaches of the circle not sure when you'll turn back towards to center. Much like our lives, it can at times feel like your wanderings are aimless and headed nowhere, but then you look up and suddenly the path leads you right to the center.

There is a story, that may be more the stuff of folklore than reality, but it tells of a time in Robert Robinson's life, many years after he wrote *Come Thou Fount*, where he was riding in a stagecoach going on a journey, when a fellow passenger began to sing his hymn to break up the monotony of the trip. Upon finishing the song, she asked Robinson what he thought the hymn, to which he replied, "Madam, I am the unhappy man who wrote that hymn many years ago; and, I would give a thousand worlds, if I had them, if I could feel now as I felt then." To which she responded, "Well the streams of mercy still flow."<sup>2</sup>

Robinson is certainly not alone in his struggles of faith, and if he, someone who could so eloquently put to word and tune timeless truths about God's goodness and enduring faithfulness, could also experience profound doubts and a crisis of faith, why should it surprise us then that we also encounter similar twists and turns on our journeys of faith. Our scripture texts reflect this reality as they are written to reassure the community of God's continued presence in the midst of struggle and strife. Our psalm itself is a hymn of ancient Israel, reminding the people that there is no where we can go where God won't be with us. Even in the darkest places in this world and within ourselves, God is there. Paul's words further reflect this truth, as he assures the Christian community in Rome that despite the oppression and conflict they face from not only the imperial Roman powers, but also their own communities and even families, there is truly nothing that can separate us from God and God's love in Jesus Christ.

It is no small feat for us to continue to walk our journey of faith in the midst of struggle, sorrow, and doubt. It is one thing to hear and say these words when things are going relatively well in our lives and we are able to easily take strength and hope from them. It is another thing all together to let these promises take hold within us when we feel far from God. Our closing hymn, *Take My Hand Precious Lord*, speaks about the utter helplessness we can feel in these times of sorrow or darkness. Written in 1932 by Thomas A. Dorsey in response to the death of his wife and infant son in childbirth. In these words he expressed his grief and also his complete need for God's strength and guidance in the lowest moment of his life. *Precious Lord* was a favorite hymn of Martin Luther King, Jr. who often requested

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<sup>2</sup> Terry, Lindsay "Story behind the song: 'Come Thou Fount,'" *The St. Augustine Record*. Sept. 17, 1015. <https://www.staugustine.com/story/lifestyle/faith/2015/09/17/story-behind-song-come-thou-fount/16263811007/>

that it be played at the worship services and rallies where he spoke. It is recorded that King's last words before his death were about arranging the song to be played at an upcoming event, "Ben, make sure you play 'Take My Hand, Precious Lord' in the meeting tonight. Play it real pretty." Now I can only speculate as to why this song was a favorite of King's, but I imagine the way this song expresses feelings of weariness and exhaustion and asking for God's strength to stand in the midst of great struggle likely cut deep to King's own fight for justice and the toll that takes on a person.<sup>3</sup>

It takes a tremendous amount of faith and trust to navigate the path along the journey of faith. Thankfully, even faith itself is a gift from God. In the verses before what we just read in Romans chapter 8, Paul also says that the "Spirit helps us in our weakness" and when we cannot pray, "intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words." The same Spirit who was powerful enough to raise Jesus from death to life, also dwells within us, and so our faith is not totally reliant on our own strength or will power. Sometimes all we can do is put one foot in front of the other, trusting that God is leading us – to the people and places who can help us in our healing, to wholeness, back to ourselves, and back to the center. It is not a matter of if, but when we wander, feeling lost and far from God. But not all who wander are lost, and no one is ever lost to God.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Take\\_My\\_Hand,\\_Precious\\_Lord](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Take_My_Hand,_Precious_Lord)