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Sermon: A Song for All Seasons
Text: II Corinthians 4:1-15
July 23, 2023

II Corinthians 4:1-15

4 Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. 2 We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God. 3 And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. 4 In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. 5 For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. 6 For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

7 But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. 8 We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; 10 always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. 11 For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. 12 So death is at work in us, but life in you.

13 But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture—"I believed, and so I spoke"—we also believe, and so we speak, 14 because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. 15 Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

Perhaps the best measure of the impact of a hymn on our faith and on our lives is when we apply this statement to it: 'I want that hymn at my funeral.' Many years ago in seminary, I had the opportunity

to hear Andrew Young speak on campus. I don't remember a lot that the civil rights veteran and New Orleans native said, but one thing I do remember him talking about was the time he and Martin Luther King, Jr., met Billy Graham and how a good portion of their conversation was a lengthy discussion about their favorite hymns and both Billy Graham and Andrew Young settled on 'How Firm a Foundation' as their favorite hymn. Play it at my funeral they both expressed, thereby sealing it as their favorite hymn. I am not sure if in fact it was sung at Billy Graham's funeral, but I do know that he quoted the last verse at the service of remembrance after September 11th invoking Andrew Young who had used the hymn at his wife's funeral, and Graham also quoted from it when he participated in the service on the site of the Oklahoma City bombing.

In another congregation, when we would sing an impactful hymn, one particular congregation member would discover a hymn they loved that perhaps they had not heard before or heard in a new way or heard because of something they were experiencing in that moment that spoke a word from the Lord to whatever they were living with or experiencing, and they would say 'I want that sung at my funeral.' Well, we lost count after about twenty hymns of those that 'I want that sung at my funeral,' because they just kept adding to the playlist.

Then there is Psalm 40 today. Some of you may have heard our psalm today put into song form almost word for word by Bono of U2 fame, in the song '40' named directly after our psalm. You can find several versions of it online, perhaps the most famous version is '40' live at Red Rocks Amphitheatre in Colorado. The psalm is not written out of comfort and tranquility but begins with a cry to the Lord and a plea to be heard. By verse two though, the psalmist expresses that though she has been in the desolate pit and in the miry bog, God drew her up from the pit and out of the bog, placing her high upon a rock and making her steps secure. My favorite verse of the psalm though is verse 3...after drawing us up out of the miry bog and lifting us up out of the pit, the psalmist declares about the Lord, 'he put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God.' Not only does God hear our cries, find us, lift us up, and

secure our paths, but God puts a new song in our mouths, as we move forward in thanksgiving and praise. Or in Bono's words: I will sing, sing a new song.

The first hymn we sang today, 'I Want to Walk as a Child of the Light,' is a fairly new hymn. It was written by an Episcopal musician named Kathleen Thomerson who I have heard was a music director at a church in the Austin area of Texas. You can find a beautiful arrangement of this hymn online sung by the University of Notre Dame Liturgical Choir. That is another sign of a special hymn I think...kind of like Sarah's point last week about 'Come Thou Fount,' is how well certain hymns can be beloved in many different denominations and traditions. Fittingly, I first heard this sung at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary where then President Ted Wardlaw used it a seminary-wide service. We may have also sung it at his retirement service as well, so it sounds like it may be on his favorite hymn playlist. I think it is a beautiful hymn about the life of discipleship and our north star in Jesus Christ. After hearing it sung in Austin, we made sure that we sang it regularly as well too, and I remember not long ago attending the funeral of a dear member who died too early and being at their funeral and seeing this hymn in the funeral order and thinking they heard this hymn sung recently and thought I want that sung at my funeral and here we are. Perhaps that is what makes it hard to hold back a tear, when we sing these words, 'when we have run with patience the race, we shall know the joy of Jesus...in him there is no darkness at all. The night and the day are both alike. The Lamb is the light of the city of God. Shine in my heart, Lord Jesus.' 'Let light shine out of darkness,' our passage from II Corinthians extols, reminding us that each one of us has been given the treasure of the gospel so that in spite of our frail and fragile earthenware lives, we might also shine brightly and beautifully with the light of Jesus Christ.

Our second hymn 'Sometimes a Light Surprises,' was written by the English poet and Anglican hymnwriter, William Cowper. Regarded as one of the forerunners of English Romantic poetry, Cowper struggled throughout his life with mental illness and at one point was institutionalized. He found solace in Christianity though he continued to have struggles and many dark nights of the soul. A friend

of John Newton famous for writing 'Amazing Grace,' Cowper like Newton was also a fervent abolitionist and wrote a number of anti-slavery poems and hymns, including some that were often quoted by Martin Luther King, Jr. Perhaps Cowper's most famous hymns are what are called the Olney Hymns which includes 'God Moves In a Mysterious Way, his wonders to perform.' It is likely Cooper struggled all his life with mental illness and died of a broken heart. Both the text of the hymn and the tune of Salley Gardens are equally beautiful, reminding us like psalm 40 that 'when comforts are declining,' the Lord grants our souls again 'a season of clear shining to cheer it after rain.' God does not help us avoid life's problems or challenges, but accompanies us through them.

One of the things that I think is beautiful about the hymns we sing today is that none of them are singular types of effusive praise. One of the lasting stories of my father's childhood family stories that continues to stick with me was the time he was a young child sitting with his mother in worship as a beloved hymn was being played and he could see that she was weeping. Alarmed, he said 'mom what is wrong?' To which she replied, 'I am just so happy.' I think it is important for us to invoke and utilize the widest possible breadth we can of our hymns because they speak to the wide variety of emotions and various ways of bringing our praises but also our please and fears and doubts and hurts and anguish and hopes before God. We need not apply one psychic set or think there is one appropriate form and narrow emotional upper that pleases God. Treating worship and the hymns we sing only as a kind of plastic painted smile praises that have no other dimension. The whole anatomy of life and faith from gratitude to praises and sorrows are all expressed beautifully in the hymns we sing. Richard John Neuhaus poignantly puts it this way as the mile wide and inch-deep peppy lyrics are sung: 'I imagine someone in the third row from the back responding, 'No, I'm sorry. My wife is dying of cancer. My heart is not happy but broken. I do not want to give thanks but to rage against the unfairness of it all.'¹ We have songs to sing in such circumstances, indeed, our first hymn, 'I Want to Walk as a Child of the Light,' is entitled Houston because Kathleen Thomerson wrote it on the road to Houston on her visits

¹ Richard John Neuhaus, *Freedom for Ministry*, 142.

to see her mother who lived in Houston and was dying. Interesting as well that she used her own low moment and grief and struggle with her mother's death to produce something beautiful for God and helpful to others in their struggles and life of faith, as we will all face mortality and grieve death.

Our last hymn may be the hardest to sing, not because it is unfamiliar, we all will recognize the tune *Finlandia*, in fact we sang it just a few Sundays ago. No the hymn is written especially in view of those who struggle with memory diseases or those whose bodies are outliving their minds or vice versa. In the words of hymn writer Mel Bringle, a fellow Presbyterian, the text of this hymn 'affirms that although our human memories fade and our human arms weaken, the memory of God uphold us everlastingly.' Richard John Neuhaus again tells the story of the ministry intern who declared, 'I don't see the point of visiting Mr. Watson any more, he's over ninety and senile and just babbles on or goes into deep silence, no matter what you say.'² He then adds this: 'to dismiss someone as senile is an easy way to relive ourselves of the responsibility of reverence of those who have entered into languages and communications that we do not understand.' I'll never forget visiting just such a person many years ago in deep stages of dementia and closing with the Lord's Prayer when suddenly an otherwise incomprehensible conversation turned into every word perfectly state and prayed to God. To paraphrase, we may not understand, but we are not the only being in that room, God not only understands but is able to overcome all kinds language barriers, even those caused by challenges at the end of life. We should have learned that lesson at Pentecost.

So may you always know it and may you always sing it, in every season of life, in every five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes, year after year, may you know, feel, sing, and live as if whatever is to come will bring with it nothing God will not bear us through, and may that assurance and the God above, under, behind, and before it, always put a song on your mouth, continue to tune your voice, and uphold your life, until Christ's kingdom comes. Amen.

² Richard Neuhaus, *Freedom for Ministry*, 115.