

## Psalm 100

Today's is Father's Day. It's a great day not only to honor our own dads, but also to honor our fathers in the Christian faith those who are part of our heritage. On Mother's Day Pat and I did one of our favorite things: sharing insights together about encouraging one another at home and in church. Today I get to do another one of my favorite things: sing!

As United Methodists, we have a rich heritage of faith told in story and music. It has been said since the days of John Wesley that Methodists "sing their theology." Our scripture today says, "Worship the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs." So I decided since I like to sing and I know most of you like to sing, it might be appropriate for me to share stories about some of our old favorite hymns and then invite you to join me in "singing our faith." Even if we're familiar with the stories or the hymns, they are word picture reminders of the author's real life struggles and joys. Their faith and their stories can be a refresher for our faith today. So... keep your hymnbook handy!

Our Christian faith began many centuries ago when God told the Hebrews, "I shall be your God and you shall be my people." What did God expect from the Hebrew people then? The same as God expects from Christians today—to love, honor, and serve God exclusively—that is, to be faithful in our relationship to God. The scripture says, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

That theme was often used by Isaac Watts, known as the father of modern hymnody and a prolific hymn writer. As a teenager he repeatedly complained about the ponderous psalms sung in church. His exasperated father told Isaac if he was dissatisfied he should write something better. So he did! For the next two years the young Watts wrote a new hymn every week.

One of those hymns is "**Come, We Who Love the Lord**," better known as "**Marching to Zion**." There's an interesting story associated with this hymn. It's probably the only hymn used to end a threatened strike in a church. A New England church was having a difference of opinion within the congregation. The argument had progressed to such an extent the choir had become rebellious. Dr. Samuel West, the pastor, heard the choir was about to express its displeasure by refusing to sing the following Sunday. (I'm sure our choir would NEVER do that!)

The pastor cleverly averted any trouble by announcing as the opening hymn "Come, We Who Love the Lord." After reading the first verse, he turned to the choir and asked them to lead in the singing of the second verse: "Let those refuse to sing who never knew our God." What could the choir do but abide by their pastor's resourceful request! Living out our loving and serving of the Lord is not always easy, but let's join to sing about it—and let no one refuse to sing!

**"Marching to Zion," p.733.** Let's sing verses 1 and 2.

1. Come, we that love the Lord, and let our joys be known;  
Join in a song with sweet accord; join in a song with sweet accord  
And thus surround the throne, and thus surround the throne.

**Chorus**

We're marching to Zion, beautiful, beautiful Zion;  
We're marching upward to Zion, the beautiful city of God.

2. Let those refuse to sing, who never knew our God;  
But children of the heavenly King, but children of the heavenly King.  
May speak their joys abroad, may speak their joys abroad.

**Chorus**

If our commitment to God requires our love, honor, and service to God, what does God commit or promise to do for us? For the Hebrews, God promised to lead them through the Red Sea and the desert to the Promised Land, but they had to trust God. That trust wasn't easy for them then, and it's not easy for us several thousand years later. But, God's great promise is still valid. If we seek God and trust God, God will lead us through the troubled seas and deserts of our lives.

During the Civil War, young Reverend Joseph H. Gilmore was preaching in Philadelphia. Because of the dark depression of the War Between the States, Gilmore selected as his theme the 23rd Psalm, emphasizing God's leadership during dark days. He reflected on the line from the Psalm, "He leadeth me beside the still waters." Over and over again he repeated the phrase, "He leadeth me." Later Gilmore was so filled with the thought of that theme he was unable to contain himself. Seizing a piece of paper, he jotted down these lines: "He leadeth me: O blessed thought! O words with heavenly comfort fraught!" When he finished there were four stanzas and a chorus. Gilmore forgot all about what he had written, but his wife, recognizing something good, sent a copy to a Boston periodical. There William Bradbury, famous composer and publisher of church music, discovered it and set it to music.

Let's sing verse 1 of this hymn that expresses God's promise to lead us in all our days, in all our decisions. **"He Leadeth Me," p.128.**

1. He leadeth me: O blessed thought!  
O words with heavenly comfort fraught!  
Whate'er I do, where'er I be, still 'tis God's hand that leadeth me.

**Chorus**

He leadeth me, he leadeth me, by his own hand, he leadeth me;  
A faithful follower I would be, for by his hand he leadeth me.

In our covenant with God, God not only promises to lead us, God also promises to sustain us through the hard times we experience in life. We cannot fully answer the question, "If God loves us, why do bad things happen to good people," but trusting people believe God is still ultimately in charge and can somehow redeem "bad" things for good in our lives.

No one struggled more with this great truth than Horatio G. Spafford who wrote, **“It Is Well with My Soul.”** His wife and children were sailing to France on one of the largest ships afloat. It was rammed by an English iron sailing vessel and sank to the bottom of the ocean, killing 226 people. Mrs. Spafford lived, but their four children were lost. Just weeks before this tragic drowning, Spafford had lost everything he owned in the great Chicago fire. And now, if not tested enough, like Job, he lost all of his beloved children.

As soon as it could be arranged, he sailed to Europe to join his wife. On the way, in December 1873, the captain of his ship pointed out to him the exact spot where the tragedy had occurred. There in the dark of night, with a heart heavy with grief and pain, yet filled with faith and hope, Spafford wrote these words: “When peace like a river attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea-billows roll; whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say, It is well, it is well with my soul!”

Let’s sing the first verse of this hymn, **p. 377**, also trusting God for whatever “lot” is ours to experience.

1. When peace, like a river, attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll; whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say, it is well; it is well with my soul.

### **Chorus**

It is well with my soul, it is well, it is well with my soul.

Somehow over the years the Hebrew people began substituting “keeping the law” for “loving and trusting God.” That was not God’s purpose for the law. So God revealed the “new covenant” in Jesus Christ. This new covenant didn’t nullify the old one. It clarified what God had intended all along: a relationship with God based **not** on how good or righteous we are, but rather on the love, faith and trust. God knew we could never be perfect, so God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to take care of our sin and our problems with the law once and for all.

What do we need to do in response to God’s faithfulness to us? The same as before: believe God; trust God, and most of all, to love God with our whole hearts as a child. That great, yet simple, truth was an inspiration for Charles Wesley.

Charles, John’s brother, is one of the founding fathers of Methodism. John’s gift was preaching. Charles’ gift was writing hymns. Charles is among the greatest hymn writers the church has ever known. From the time of his conversion, he wrote an average of two hymns a week every week for fifty years, composing between five and six thousand hymns during his lifetime. Most of these hymns were written on horseback as he traveled with his brother, John. The early days of Methodism were filled with persecution and hardship. One reason Charles wrote so many hymns was to encourage Methodists to be a singing, joyful people—like we are!

Charles had known from childhood that Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty for sin. But on May 21, 1738, he accepted that truth and applied it personally to himself. He never got over the fact of the amazing love of God on

behalf of an undeserving people—including himself. He wrote “**Love Divine**” as one expression of his great amazement and gratitude.

Let’s sing the first verse of this well-known hymn, **p. 384**.

1. Love divine, all loves excelling, joy of heaven, to earth come down;  
fix in us thy humble dwelling; all thy faithful mercies crown!  
Jesus, thou art all compassion, pure, unbounded love thou art;  
visit us with thy salvation; enter every trembling heart.

There is more to our great heritage of faith. Not only did God promise forgiveness and acceptance, God promised eternal life in God’s presence to all who believed. As important as Christmas is, Christianity is based on Christ’s resurrection. The foundation of our faith says Christ lived, died, and rose to live again, and because Christ did that, so can we. God’s people need not fear death.

Bill and Gloria Gaither are famous modern day gospel song writers. They have written or arranged hundreds of contemporary Christian songs since the 1960’s. In the late 60’s they were going through a traumatic time. Bill was recovering from mono. They and their church family were enduring a time of false accusations and belittlement. Gloria was pregnant with their third child and fearful of what the future held for their children in the crazy, mixed up world of that “God is dead” era. She felt hopeless.

On New Year’s Eve Gloria sat alone in her darkened living room. As she prayed, God replaced her panic with a deep peace and assurance that the future would be fine, left in God’s hands—including the future of her unborn child. This experience led her to pen the words to “**Because He Lives.**”

The first verse shares the gospel story and expresses God’s faithful promise of eternal life. The second verse pictures the life of a newborn baby and the assurance that her little one, and all children of God, can have a victorious, hope-filled life, because Jesus lives.

Let’s sing verses 1 and 2, **p. 364**.

1. God sent his Son, they called him Jesus; he came to love, heal, and forgive;  
he lived and died to buy my pardon, an empty grave is there to prove my Savior lives.

**Chorus:**

Because he lives, I can face tomorrow; because he lives, all fear is gone;  
Because I know he holds the future, and life is worth the living just because he lives.

2. How sweet to hold a newborn baby, and feel the pride and joy he gives;  
But greater still the calm assurance, this child can face uncertain days because he lives.

**Chorus:**

Our faith heritage is to be a people of the covenant. Some of the great truths of that covenant are: God promises to lead and sustain us; God promises forgiveness, acceptance, and eternal life in Christ. Our part is to believe, trust, and love God to the best of our ability. However, we often deny we are one of God's people by our words, our conduct, even our apathy. Why would God stay committed to us when we so often break our commitment to God? The answer is grace, amazing grace—undeserved favor with God. God says, “I still love you. I'm not angry with you. I still want a relationship with you. Come on back.”

If Charles Wesley thought himself unworthy of that grace, John Newton felt even more so. The gift of forgiveness is often best appreciated by those who need it the most. After years as a slave trader, Newton was converted and became a preacher of the gospel he had so long despised. The song “Amazing Grace,” written in 1779, is the story of his life. Every line of his hymn is filled with remorse, because of the greatness of his sin, and expressions of joy, because of the discovery of God's grace.

Let's sing together our own gratitude for God's “**Amazing Grace,**” p. 378, verses 1 and 6.

1. Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me!  
I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see.
6. When we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun,  
We've no less days to sing God's praise than when we'd first begun.

Singing God's praise for His love for us reminds me of the little girl who wrote the letter to God saying, “Dear God, I bet it's hard for you to love everyone in the whole world. There are only four people in my family and I can't do it!” signed, Nancy.

I don't understand how God can love as God does, but I would say God's love for us has been the theme for me and my ministry through the years. You may remember the “God speaks” billboards of some years ago that proposed messages from God to people today. My favorite is this one, (**show sign**) “Tell the kids I love them, signed, God.” So today, as we worship and sing together honoring our heritage on Father's Day, this is a great time for me to give God the glory by reminding you of who we are and Whose we are because of God's amazing love and grace.

But, whatever the day, whatever the situation, it is always a good time for us to be grateful and to remember—to sing our faith.