

Singing through the Liturgical Year

This is one in a series of articles introducing Glory to God, the new Presbyterian hymnal.

Introduction

Whenever we sing God's praises on earth, we join a song that began before we were born and will continue long after we die. Revelation 4–5 speaks of angels and elders surrounding the throne of God, "singing with full voice" (5:12), "day and night without ceasing" (4:8). At certain times and places we seem to hear echoes of this music. Celtic spirituality refers to these as "thin" places—sites and occasions where the veil between heaven and earth is light like gossamer. The high seasons of the Christian year, from Advent to Pentecost, provide such "thin" occasions. This study contains suggested resources from *Glory to God* for joining our voices to the communion of saints in singing through the liturgical year.

Advent

Materials for Advent, as for all the high times and thin places of the year, occur within the hymnal's overall framework of salvation history. We begin by singing about the triune God who was before the beginning of time, who created the world, and who remains at work in the world, continually calling us back into covenant relationships of justice and peace. Like the first beneficiaries of God's

covenant, we await the full flowering of those relationships in the dawning of a messianic age.

Advent is the season when our hope for this age comes to explicit expression as we anticipate both God's coming to us in the Christ child and Christ's second coming in the fullness of time. *Glory to God* contains numerous hymns for the first and second Advents. Hymns for the first occur under the heading "Jesus Christ: Advent," beginning with "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus" (#82 and #83, the same two tunes that were included in the 1990 hymnal) and ending with "Awake! Awake, and Greet the New Morn" (#107). Hymns for the second Advent appear under the heading "Christ's Return and Judgment," beginning with "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence" (#347) and continuing through "Blessing and Honor" (#369). Scriptural and lectionary indexes in the back of the hymnal offer further songs to complement the appointed readings for lectionary years A, B, and C; the topical index suggests other hymns with Advent themes.

In contrast to earlier Presbyterian hymnals, a distinctive feature of *Glory to God* is the number of short songs it contains. Characterized by a few repeated phrases rather than multiple stanzas, these songs can serve as musical prayers

throughout worship when used as calls to confession, prayers for illumination, or recurring petitions within the prayers of the people. The lighting of an Advent wreath provides a further opportunity for incorporating a single “short song” week after week as a part of the litany. Examples of such songs include:

- Wait for the Lord (#90)
- Come, Come Emmanuel (#91)
- While We Are Waiting, Come (#92)
- Prepare the Way of the Lord (#95)
- Come Now, O Prince of Peace (#103)

“Hybrid songs”—kin to short songs in their simplicity, but offering a number of stanzas with minimal word changes in each—include pieces like “Light One Candle to Watch for Messiah” (#85) and “He Came Down” (#137). Churches that focus on “hope,” “love,” “joy,” and “peace,” studying one concept each week of Advent, can readily supply these words for successive weekly singing of “He Came Down,” even though the words in the hymnal are “love,” “light,” “peace,” and “joy.” Songs like this one from Cameroon emerge out of a call and response tradition in which the people sing whatever phrase is suggested by the leader, with considerable room for improvisation.

Contrary to some popular misconceptions, however, no one set of themes is prescribed in the Reformed tradition for the four Sundays of Advent. While many churches do use hope, love, joy, and peace, others focus on personages from Scripture: Isaiah, John the Baptist, Joseph, and Mary, for example. Still others may employ the four messianic titles in Isaiah’s prophecy: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (9:6; see also the refrain to “The People Who

Walked in Darkness,” #86). Imaginative themes could also be drawn from the lilting Advent carol “People, Look East” (#105), which honors love as the guest, the rose, the bird, and the star on successive Sundays, waiting for Christmas Eve to sing: “Love, the Lord, is on the way.”

Christmas

As our hopes for the coming of “Love, the Lord” culminate in the joy of Jesus’ birth, many in our congregations primarily want to sing beloved, traditional carols and hymns. These are present in *Glory to God* in abundance. With only a handful of exceptions that had low usage statistics, all the Christmas songs from the 1990 hymnal have carried forward to the 2013 collection. For this reason the bar for adopting new material into the Christmas section of the hymnal was higher than for any other.

Still, a further handful of new Christmas songs and hymns did rise to the criteria for inclusion. “New” must, however, be qualified as meaning “not in a prior Presbyterian hymnal,” because the Sussex Carol, “On Christmas Night All Christians Sing” (#112) has a text dating from the seven-

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teenth century. And the African American adaptation of “Hark! the Herald Angels Sing” (#127) to incorporate the refrain “We’ll walk in the light”

dates to 1890. (To allay any concern: the traditional version of “Hark! the Herald Angels Sing” is also present, as #119.) “Love Has Come” (#110) contains words from the late 1990s, but the tune is that of the well-known French carol, “Bring a Torch.” Other new songs may already be familiar to congregations from anthem versions: “Where Shepherds Lately Kneled” (#120), for example, may be part of a choir’s repertoire from a prior year’s carol service. A good approach for helping less well-known Christmas pieces become part of a congregation’s new list of favorites would be to present them first as anthems, sung by a soloist, ensemble, or even a youth or children’s choir.

Epiphany

Children could certainly handle the lovely song from the Philippines, “In the Heavens Shone a Star” (#131), with its melody line on a five-note scale and its three-note refrain. Indeed, in a reversal of expected practice, children and youth could sing the slightly more complex melody of the verses, with adults in the congregation joining in on the simpler chorus—a living reminder of how “a little child shall lead them.”

“In the Heavens Shone a Star” appears among the Christmas carols in *Glory to God*, which, unlike the 1990 hymnal, does not have a separate section of hymns marked “Epiphany.” Additional songs about the manifestation of Jesus Christ to the world are included toward the end of the broader section, “Jesus Christ: Birth.” Old favorites celebrating the arrival of the magi are here (“As with Gladness Men of Old,” #150, and “We Three Kings of Orient Are,” #151). So is a new hymn about Simeon and Anna’s recognition of the infant Jesus as the promised Christ (“Mary and Joseph Came to the Temple,” #148). A rich text by Carl Daw (author of the two-sentence explanatory notes at the bottom of each hymn in *Glory to God* as well as the forthcoming hymnal companion) reminds us that Epiphany traditionally encompasses the baptism of Jesus

and the wedding feast at Cana as well (“Sing of God Made Manifest,” #156).

Lent

Just as hymns for Advent are concentrated in two principal places in *Glory to God*, materials for Lent also appear in a variety of sections in the book. Again, the indexes can assist with locating the right hymn. One place to look for Lenten hymns is within “Jesus Christ: Life,” since the forty-day season is based on Christ’s days in the wilderness prior to embarking on his public ministry. Familiar hymns like “The Glory of These Forty Days” (#165) and “Lord, Who throughout These Forty Days” (#166) appear here.

Other selections for Lent—again including numerous short songs—appear under the heading of “Confession” within the hymnal’s central section devoted to “The Church at Worship.” *Glory to God* contains three different settings of the classic penitential Psalm 51, “Have Mercy, God, upon My Life” (#421) and “Create in Me a Clean Heart, O God” (#422 and #423), as well as one setting of the penitential Psalm 130, “Out of the Depths” (#424). Congregations that open the season of Lent with an Ash Wednesday service may find useful a hymn at the end of the “Confession” section: “Sign Us with Ashes” (#433), which features a refrain that worshipers can sing, without a book in hand, while moving forward for the imposition of ashes. The stanzas, which can be sung by cantor, choir, or congregation, are intentionally crafted not to be sequential or cumulative; hence any number of them can be used without disrupting the meaning of the text, depending on the length of time required for the whole assembly to come forward.

Two more key places in *Glory to God* offer Lenten materials. The “Service Music” section of “The Church at Worship” contains multiple settings of the traditional *Kyrie eleison*, a cry for God’s mercy (#578–#579), as well as the *Agnus dei*, calling out to the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (#602–#604). A congregation

could fruitfully sing one of these short songs as a regular part of its time for confession throughout Lent. Further, a rich collection of hymns titled “Lament and Longing for Healing” gives voice to our heartfelt prayers as we anticipate the coming passion. The penitential Psalm 143, “Hear My Prayer, O God” (#782), occurs in this context. So, too, does a hymn, “When We Are Tested” (#783), with imagery that takes us back to the temptations Jesus faced at the close of his wilderness journey.

Holy Week

As with Christmas, so with Holy Week: traditional hymns have deep roots in the hearts of worshipers, and to alter this canon would be both foolhardy and unnecessary. Thus, in the sections of *Glory to God* devoted to “Jesus Christ: Passion and Death”

Now the heavens start to whisper, as the veil is growing thin . . . (#94)

and “Jesus Christ: Resurrection,” the continuation of materials from prior Presbyterian hymnals is extremely high. Every Palm and Passion Sunday hymn from the 1990 hymnal, for example, is carried forward, and a few new options are added, including “A Cheering, Chanting, Dizzy Crowd” (#200), whose title alone conveys the mood of that fateful day of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, and “Filled with Excitement / *Mantos y palmas*” (#199), whose engaging Latin rhythms invite a dancing, palm-waving processional.

Virtually every hymn about Christ’s passion from the 1990 hymnal also continues in the new collection, from Lutheran chorales like “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded” (#221) to Victorian classics like “Beneath the Cross of Jesus” (#216) to African American spirituals like “They Crucified My Lord” (#219) and “Were You There” (#228). The choice of hymns for Maundy Thursday and

Good Friday is further enriched by a translation of Peter Ab’elard’s twelfth-century poem that begins by noting that it is “the night for weeping” (#206) and by a hymn specifically written for a Tenebrae service in which appointed Scripture passages are read and their corresponding hymn stanzas are sung, followed by meditative silence and the extinguishing of a candle (“Sharing Paschal Bread and Wine,” #207).

Easter

At certain places and at certain times throughout the church year, the veil between earth and heaven grows thin and we hear heaven’s music more clearly than ever before. But at one unrepeatable moment of history, the veil between earth and heaven splits completely in two. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all write of how shadows continued to lengthen during the hours of Jesus’ crucifixion as darkness fell over the land, even though it was midday. All three synoptic gospel writers report that the veil of the temple—the curtain in front of the Holy of Holies—was torn from top to bottom.

By the miracle of grace, through the self-sacrificial death of Jesus, the separation between God’s goodness and our unworthiness was symbolically ended. How can we not sing out our joy with familiar and beloved songs of triumph? Some hymns worthy of this excitement are “Jesus Christ Is Risen Today!” (#232), “Alleluia, Alleluia! Give Thanks” (#240), and “Christ Is Risen! Shout Hosanna!” (#248). New songs add further dimensions to the celebration. Hymns suitable for the Easter vigil carry us from the predawn hours up to the empty tomb: “In the Darkness of the Morning” (#229) and “Joyful Is the Dark” (#230). All nature joins the rejoicing. “Now the Green Blade Rises” (#247) provides an Easter text for a traditional French Christmas tune, NOËL NOUVELET. “In the Bulb There Is a Flower” (#250) uses imagery

from the natural world (bulb and flower, cocoon and butterfly) to point toward the supernatural gift of the resurrection, which is something only God can do. “Christ Has Arisen, Alleluia” (#251) offers infectious, percussive rhythms from the church in Tanzania. “Be Not Afraid” (#243) extends the global exultation with a chorus from the Taizé Community in France.

Glory to God also extends the corpus of Easter hymns to ones suitable for Eastertide and not just Easter morning. “Day of Arising” (#252) recounts the Emmaus story. “The Risen Christ” (#257) tells how, after the resurrection, Jesus walked on city streets and appeared to grief-struck disciples, hiding behind locked doors. “These Things Did Thomas Count as Real” (#256) addresses not only the early disciple’s doubt but also our own reluctance to be drawn beyond the confines of our “small world of fact.” “A Hymn of Glory Let Us Sing!” (#258) uses a different set of stanzas from those included in the 1990 hymnal to continue the narrative of salvation history from Jesus’ earthly resurrection appearances to his ascension from the Mount of Olives to reign over earth and heaven until he comes again in glory.

Pentecost

While we await that return, God fulfills the promise to send us an Advocate or Comforter (John 14–15). The Presbyterian hymnal of 1990 contains one hymn that recounts events of the actual day in Jerusalem when the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples like the rush of a mighty wind: “On Pentecost They Gathered” (#289). *Glory to God* supplements this with an additional hymn, “O Day of Joy and Wonder!” (#290). The coming of the Spirit to give birth to the church two thousand years ago is thus an event that continues into the present day as we too are strengthened for ministry by God’s ongoing gift.

Sensing our need for this gift, we continue to call out for the Holy Spirit’s presence and empowerment. As in the 1990 hymnal, so in *Glory to God*:

a significant number of hymns in the sections respectively titled “Day of Pentecost” and “Gift of the Holy Spirit” are invocations: “Come, Holy Ghost, Our Souls Inspire” (#278); “Come, Holy Spirit, Heavenly Dove” (#279); “Come, O Spirit, Dwell Among Us” (#280); “Come Down, O Love Divine” (#282). *Glory to God* fittingly adds to this body an assortment of prayers from the global church, enabling us to celebrate Pentecost as the first disciples did, surrounded by languages from around the world: “Holy Spirit, Come to Us / *Veni Sancte Spiritus*” (#281) from the ecumenical community of Taizé; “Come, O Holy Spirit, Come / *Wa wa wa Emimimo*” (#283) from Nigeria; “Gracious Spirit, Heed Our Pleading” (#287) from Tanzania; and “As the Wind Song” (#292) with a text from New Zealand and a tune from Singapore.

Trinity Sunday

Since it was after that multilingual celebration in Jerusalem that the one God in three persons was first proclaimed throughout the world, the observance of Trinity Sunday aptly occurs on the first Sunday after Pentecost. To find hymns for Trinity Sunday, however, we turn back to the beginning of *Glory to God* where, with all the saints, we join in singing “Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!” (#1) and other Trinitarian texts. This very turn is symbolic. It shows us that the God in three persons is both the culmination of our liturgical year and the foundation of all our worship: our end and our beginning, the source and reason for our song.

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