

MY REPERTOIRE: HYMNS TO STRENGTHEN OUR FAITH

1. “God of Grace and God of Glory”

Colossians 3:12-17; Psalm 146; Ephesians 1:15-23

**Market Square Presbyterian Church in the City of
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania**

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In the Presbyterian way of doing things, “constitutional prerogative” (read: Book of Order) gives pastors of churches the right and responsibility to choose the hymns we sing in worship. That does not mean the pastor has to make the actual selections but he or she ultimately is responsible for them. Prior to coming to Market Square, I always chose the hymns for the services I led. Here, however, there was another arrangement in effect when I arrived wherein the Minister of Music mostly chooses and, until this sermon series, I have gone along with that practice. Half-jokingly, half-seriously, I explained I have a repertoire of about seven favorite hymns I just keep recycling and so, in the interest of a more expansive musical experience, it probably is good for someone else to do the picking.

But I do love my seven hymns! They have undergirded my faith through many years in a thousand different ways and in precisely the times I have needed the support. Thus I have hatched this autumn series in which I am excited to share my repertoire with you, not because my repertoire is better than yours, but because these hymns have strengthened my faith and I am hopeful they will do the same for you. In celebration of the arrival of Tyler Canonico as our new Minister of Music, it seems exactly the right time to lift up some of the great hymns of the church. Kelly wants part of the action, too, and so on her preaching weeks, she is going to call her series, “I Have a Repertoire, Too!”

A final preliminary note: You will notice we are going to sing the featured hymn each Sunday both at the beginning of worship and again at the end of the service. Singing it a second time, I

hope the hymn might reach you in a fresh way, that it will get into your bones and marrow, and become a helpful part of your repertoire, too, if it is not already.

I get my biblical warrant for such a series from St. Paul who wrote in his letter to the Colossians, “*Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God.*”¹ One of the most moving parts of worship to me every week is to stand where I do watching you sing and singing with you. Many of us may not sing at any other time during the week but we do it here, with one another, singing to God our praise and thanks, our prayers and hope.

Batting leadoff in our sermon series - there is my baseball reference for the day - is the hymn *God of Grace and God of Glory*. The text was written by one of the most renowned ministers of the last century, the founding pastor of the Riverside Church in the City of New York, the Reverend Harry Emerson Fosdick.² In fact, he wrote this hymn for the dedication of that church. Before Riverside, Fosdick was a liberal Baptist pastor preaching at the First Presbyterian Church in New York City who became embroiled in the fundamentalist/modernist controversy in the 1920s. His sermon, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” is one of the most famous sermons of the twentieth century. He skewered fundamentalism and in the text of today’s hymn, Fosdick focused his desire to draw in the public mind an indelible picture of an intelligent, broadminded, inclusive, and engaged church in league with a God of justice, love, and passion for a peaceable world.

The text of the hymn gives me chills. Add to it the music and I am, to use a phrase Kelly taught me, over the moon. Thus is this great hymn an anchor of my repertoire and I chose it for Genesis Sunday because it sings a soaring vision of the church and what God can do in it and through it for the sake of the world.

The hymn is a prayer. It is a prayer and it begins by establishing God’s truest identity and character. God of *grace* and God of *glory*. That is the God to whom we pray. A God whose disposition toward us is not condemnation and wrath but grace. Not a God who waits to catch us in our sin so as to count it forever against us but a God who wraps us in mercy and compassion.³ The God to whom we pray is not a tyrant to be appeased but a God who says that with us he is well-pleased for God sees us as we are in Christ Jesus⁴ - “*holy and beloved*”⁵ - (in the words of St. Paul.) *Glory* is a theological word for God’s presence. The God to whom we pray is not far

¹ Colossians 3:16

² Much of the information in this sermon about Fosdick I learned in the reading of his autobiography, [The Living of These Days](#) published in 1956 by Harper and Brothers.

³ Luke 15:20 - See the Parable of the Prodigal Son in which the prodigal’s father welcomes home with exuberance his wayward child.

⁴ Compare Matthew 25:31ff wherein Jesus identifies with people in their need.

⁵ Colossians 3:12

off or far away. God is with us. We pray to the God who enfolds us with love and forgiveness, to the God who comes to us and is present. *God of grace and God of glory.* That is the God we worship and adore.

The hymn is a prayer and so we are bold to pray to God: *On thy people pour your power.* The gospel of our Lord is the medium through which Jesus bids us to carry our cross and to follow him in ministry and service to the people God puts in our paths and to whom God sends us. What we are asked by God to do sometimes seems beyond us. It is sometimes more than we think or imagine we can do⁶ *until* we ask God to pour out God's power on us.

There is a reason this pulpit is so big. It is so you do not see my knees knocking with nerves before I preach. I am back there begging God to pour out the power of God's Spirit on me so I can do what I have been called to do. *On thy people, God, pour thy power.*

At the very end of John's gospel Jesus tells his disciples that as they get older and more mature in the faith and get better at carrying their crosses that, as we said last week, is a willingness to give one's all to the service of Christ even at the possible cost of one's life, Jesus tells them they will be led into places they do not wish to go.⁷ One morning this past week, a few of the women who live around the church called me outside to tell me a man who goes by the street name of "Money" had come to the site the night before and caused trouble including, they said, breaking a window in a church door and pummeling another woman. Banking on the theory that "Money" would not return to the scene of his alleged crimes, I told the women, with no little swagger, that if "Money" returns they should let me know.

It could not have been even half an hour later when they told me "Money" was in back of the church on River Street. What could I do, right? I had to go. I had to go to a place I did not wish to go. (There are times I wish scripture was wrong.) I had to go after "Money." *On thy people, God, pour thy power.* I really was hoping my life was not going to end this way, pursuing someone named "Money" in an alley in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. I caught up to him and we did some walking and we did some talking and he did a lot of denying, of course, but I lived to tell about it and, as far as I know, "Money" has not been back. Maybe even he has thought for a moment or two about what I said to him. *"On thy people pour thy power."*

God does not ask the church and its members to do what we are asked in God's name to do without giving us the power to do it. So we pray, *"On thy people pour thy power."* But toward what end? So that the power of God through us may, in Fosdick's words, *"crown thine ancient church's story and bring its bud to glorious flower."* What lovely imagery! Bring the church's

⁶ Ephesians 3:20

⁷ John 21:18

bud to glorious flower. As I take my morning walks through the neighborhoods near my home, what earlier in the summer merely were seedlings and blossoms now have burst forth into their full and glorious flower. This prayer hymn asks no less for the church, asks no less than for the church to claim the full possession of the power God is pouring into it, into us, so the church's story may burst forth in its full and glorious flower.

What is the church's story for which we are asking fulfillment? It is the story of how the church moves out of the house of fear into the house of love and thus is afraid no longer to confront the earthly powers that hold back and hold down justice and mercy. It is the story of the church saying unequivocally no to bigotry and bias and the banal rantings of white supremacists who cannot countenance the divine gifts of diversity and pluralism. It is the story of the church insisting that the earth is the theater of God's glory⁸ and fully worthy of being protected and preserved. It is the story of the church rushing headlong into cities devastated by hurricanes and providing relief and hope and comforting the comfortless. It is the story of the church, as St. Paul says, "not being haughty but associating with the lowly."⁹

The story of the church is trusting that God will enable and ennoble people like us to respond to the needs of others and in our own times of distress to receive help from others with humility and thanks. The story of the church is how it opens its arms and heart to people of every race and class and nationality; to persons of every gender and sexual orientation; to people who are turned off or turned away in other places; and to prodigals, prodigies, and people of any worldly condition.

The story of the church is how in Christ we care for one another and count it not a burden or inconvenience but a privilege. The story of the church is how we greet one another with the peace of Christ. The story of the church is how we do not give up on others because God in Christ has not given up on us.

The story of the church is how God creates community among disparate peoples and it becomes a thing of beauty. The story of the church is how God comes to us when we feel pushed out, left out, or left alone and finds a way and a place for us. The story of the church is that, even when death comes to call, nothing can separate us from God's love because God's love is stronger than death and all that would undo us.

So, we pray to God to *crown thine - thine; it is God's church - crown thine church's ancient story and bring its bud to glorious flower... in us, through us, among us, and for the sake of the whole world.* Fosdick was not unenlightened when it came to knowing and accounting our

⁸ John Calvin

⁹ Romans 12:16

human faults and frailties that trip us up. He writes of the *fears that long have bound us*, of our proclivity *for warring madness*, of *our pride* that precipitates our fall, of *our wanton, selfish gladness that is rich in things and poor in soul*, of *our weak resignation to the evils we deplore*.

But none of those things finally disqualifies us from being the church of Jesus Christ and members of it because, by God's grace, we are given *the gift of God's salvation* and invited to share in Christ's life and ministry. Thus, we pray: "*Grant us wisdom. Grant us courage.*" We need the wisdom of God, that divine way of life that leads to more life. We need the courage God gives to stand in and up to the scariest parts of life, to *the fears that long have bound us*, and to proceed along the pathways of justice, hope, and righteousness¹⁰ that God prepares for us to be our way of life.¹¹

The wisdom and courage God gives is for the *facing of this hour, for the living of these days*. All the power and promises of God are for right now, for our times, this hour, these days. The power and promises of God are not relegated to some long ago biblical past. Nor are they for some distant future or for the heavenly realm only. Give us *this day our daily bread*.¹² The ancient church's story is as contemporary as this church, our church, right now, these days. For a world so much in need, God promises to pour out God's power on us so we may have the wisdom and the courage to live in it in a way befitting Christ Jesus.

The hymn today is a prayer. Not all prayers are meant to be whispered. Some are meant, like this one, to be sung full-throatedly in a throng of worshipers committed to living as ambassadors of the kingdom of God in this world, in a throng like Market Square. Let us make this hymn the prayer of this church and through it invite the God of grace and glory to work mightily in us.

Amen.

¹⁰ Psalm 23:3

¹¹ Ephesians 2:10

¹² Luke 11:3