

12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Year C)

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*Deuteronomy 31:14-22*

*The Lord said to Moses, 'Your time to die is near; call Joshua and present yourselves in the tent of meeting, so that I may commission him.' So Moses and Joshua went and presented themselves in the tent of meeting, and the Lord appeared at the tent in a pillar of cloud; the pillar of cloud stood at the entrance to the tent.*

*The Lord said to Moses, 'Soon you will lie down with your ancestors. Then this people will begin to prostitute themselves to the foreign gods in their midst, the gods of the land into which they are going; they will forsake me, breaking my covenant that I have made with them. My anger will be kindled against them on that day. I will forsake them and hide my face from them; they will become easy prey, and many terrible troubles will come upon them. On that day they will say, "Have not these troubles come upon us because our God is not in our midst?" On that day I will surely hide my face on account of all the evil they have done by turning to other gods. Now therefore write this song, and teach it to the Israelites; put it in their mouths, in order that this song may be a witness for me against the Israelites. For when I have brought them into the land flowing with milk and honey, which I promised on oath to their ancestors, and they have eaten their fill and grown fat, they will turn to other gods and serve them, despising me and breaking my covenant. And when many terrible troubles come upon them, this song will confront them as a witness, because it will not be lost from the mouths of their descendants. For I know what they are inclined to do even now, before I have brought them into the land that I promised them on oath.' That very day Moses wrote this song and taught it to the Israelites.*

*Deuteronomy 31:30-32:18; 32:36-32:39*

*Then Moses recited the words of this song, to the very end, in the hearing of the whole assembly of Israel:*

*The Rock, his work is perfect,  
and all his ways are just.  
A faithful God, without deceit,  
just and upright is he;  
yet his degenerate children have dealt falsely with him,  
a perverse and crooked generation.  
Do you thus repay the Lord,  
O foolish and senseless people?  
Is not he your father, who created you,  
who made you and established you?  
Remember the days of old,  
consider the years long past;  
ask your father, and he will inform you;  
your elders, and they will tell you.  
When the Most High apportioned the nations,  
when he divided humankind,  
he fixed the boundaries of the peoples  
according to the number of the gods;*

*the Lord's own portion was his people,  
Jacob his allotted share.*

*He sustained him in a desert land,  
in a howling wilderness waste;  
he shielded him, cared for him,  
guarded him as the apple of his eye.  
As an eagle stirs up its nest,  
and hovers over its young;  
as it spreads its wings, takes them up,  
and bears them aloft on its pinions,  
the Lord alone guided him;  
no foreign god was with him.  
He set him upon the heights of the land,  
and fed him with produce of the field;  
he nursed him with honey from the crags,  
with oil from flinty rock;  
curds from the herd, and milk from the flock,  
with fat of lambs and rams;  
Bashan bulls and goats,  
together with the choicest wheat—  
you drank fine wine from the blood of grapes.  
Jacob ate his fill;  
Jeshurun grew fat, and kicked.  
You grew fat, bloated, and gorged!  
He abandoned God who made him,  
and scoffed at the Rock of his salvation.  
They made him jealous with strange gods,  
with abhorrent things they provoked him.  
They sacrificed to demons, not God,  
to deities they had never known,  
to new ones recently arrived,  
whom your ancestors had not feared.  
You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you;  
you forgot the God who gave you birth.*

*Indeed the Lord will vindicate his people,  
have compassion on his servants,  
when he sees that their power is gone,  
neither bond nor free remaining.  
Then he will say: Where are their gods,  
the rock in which they took refuge,  
who ate the fat of their sacrifices,  
and drank the wine of their libations?  
Let them rise up and help you,  
let them be your protection!*

*See now that I, even I, am he;*

*there is no god besides me.  
I kill and I make alive;  
I wound and I heal;  
and no one can deliver from my hand.*

*Moses came and recited all the words of this song in the hearing of the people, he and Joshua son of Nun. When Moses had finished reciting all these words to all Israel, he said to them: 'Take to heart all the words that I am giving in witness against you today; give them as a command to your children, so that they may diligently observe all the words of this law. This is no trifling matter for you, but rather your very life; through it you may live long in the land that you are crossing over the Jordan to possess.'*

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Isaac Watts was a beloved hymn writer from Southampton. No, not Southampton, NY but the *original* Southampton in England. Credited with writing over 700 hymns in his lifetime, he wrote many of our most beloved hymns, including some that you probably know well.

When I survey the wondrous cross...

I sing the mighty power of God that made the mountains rise,  
that spread the flowing seas abroad and built the lofty skies.

Our God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come,  
our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home.

Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let earth receive her king!

Born in 1674, from an early age Isaac Watts learned to love words. By the age of four, he was fluent in Latin. By age nine, he had conquered Greek. A year later, French. And at the age of thirteen, he had mastered Hebrew. Isaac Watts loved words. He also loved music. He especially enjoyed putting the two together. As a young boy, it didn't take very long for him to discover the magic of making rhymes.

Legend has it, Isaac Watts loved to rhyme so much that he would actually make a habit of rhyming in everyday language. So for example, he would make rhymes while going about his ordinary business, like checking out at the grocery store, or talking with people on the street, or joking around with friends and family. This was an endless source of amusement for the young, aspiring hymn-writer.

However, not everyone found his incessant rhyming equally amusing. His father, in particular, found his habit of rhyming particularly annoying. One day, the story is told, his father threatened to beat him if he did not stop rhyming.

After a brief pause, the young Isaac Watts replied:

*O, Father, do some pity take  
and I will no more verses make!*

Singing is something that we just can't help from doing. It is something that binds us together. Singing as a faith community gives us a common narrative. Singing the faith is a beautiful and transformative way that we as individuals come together to take part is something *bigger* than us. I suppose it was that truth that inspired Isaac Watts to write all those hymns that we sing to this day, even more than 300 years later.

However, long before Isaac Watts ever learned to rhyme in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century England, the Israelites had already been taught to sing thousands of years prior. The first passage that we read today is the song that Moses, Miriam, and the Israelites sang after crossing the Red Sea in safety and being delivered from the hands of Pharaoh and his army.

*I will sing to the Lord, for his has triumphed gloriously;  
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.  
The Lord is my strength and my might,  
and he has become my salvation.*

After the singing of this song, the Israelites had a long, long, long, long journey with Moses and God through the wilderness. If you have never had the chance to read the remainder of the book of Exodus and Deuteronomy, then please allow me to give you the 30 second summary.

They wandered. And then they wandered some more. They groaned and they complained. God provided for them. They complained some more. God provided for them some more. They wandered some more. God gave them the commandments. They broke the commandments. God forgave them. The Israelites broke the commandments again. God forgave them again. They wandered some more. They complained some more. God provided some more. Hopefully, you begin to see a pattern here!

After a long, long journey. The Israelites were close to the borders of the promised land. But Moses was frail and old. His time had come. He was about to die. But before he died, he had a final task to fulfill. Rather than spend his final breaths talking, Moses chose to spend his final breaths *singing*. He sang these words given to him by God in what we read from the thirty-second chapter of the book of Deuteronomy.

Moses called Joshua, his successor, to his side and told him to remember this song and to teach it to the Israelites. You see, God knew that the Israelites were going to screw up again. God knew that the Israelites, even though they were about to finally enter the land that God had promised them, were going to nevertheless forget God's providence and stray from God's commandments yet again. Knowing this ahead of time, God told Moses to teach the Israelites this song so that they would be reminded, when the going got tough, of *who* it was that brought them and cared for them and delivered them and loved them relentlessly. God knew that the time would come when the Israelites were going to need to be reminded of God and their identity as God's chosen people.

And so, Moses sings the song and teaches it to Israel. And after the last verses leave the withered lips of the fragile body of the elderly man, Moses turns to Joshua and tells him these words before he dies:

Take to heart all the words that I am giving in witness against you today;  
give them as a command to your children,  
so that they may diligently observe all the words of this law.  
This is no trifling matter for you, but rather your very life...

This is no trifling matter for you, but rather your very life.

Friends, I would hope that today would be a reminder that singing hymns together is no trivial matter. It is, rather, our very life. When I sing:

Immortal, invisible, God only wise,  
in light inaccessible hid from our eyes,

most blessed, most glorious the Ancient of Days,  
almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise,

I am joining in a long chorus of witnesses who have been singing about the mystery and majesty of God for thousands of years. It's different from singing Katy Perry, or Adele, or John Mayer, or Bob Dylan, or Elvis (not that they aren't important artists in their own right!). But singing hymns is about something, or *someone*, different!

Singing the faith transforms us in powerful and unexpected ways.

My great-grandmother, who was lovingly called "Nana," lived to be well into her 90's. She was the sweetest, kindest, most genteel person you ever met. Unfortunately, in her later years, she began to descend into the never-ending funeral that is known as Alzheimer's. Towards the end of her life, she barely recognized anyone. Only on her good days did she recognize her husband of nearly 70 years, Jack. Most days, she probably could not tell you who the president was, or what her favorite color was, or who her children's names were. Most days, she could barely form a cohesive sentence.

One day, my mother came to visit her. It was not one of Nana's good days. Today, like many days, Nana simply stared off into the distance with a blank look upon her face. However, this day, my mother brought in a CD player with a CD of olds hymns.

She plugged the device in, and placed the CD in it, and pressed play. After a few seconds of silence, the following hymn filled the room:

*What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear!  
What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer!*

As soon as the hymn began, Nana's face relaxed. Her lips began to form a gentle smile, and she softly began to sing along with the hymn, not missing one word.

Friends, hymns are no trivial matter; *they are our very life!*

Moses knew it was important for the Israelites to remember the song we read in today's passage from Deuteronomy. He knew the time would come when they would need to be reminded of God's truth, God's power, God's love, and God's justice. And so, he taught the Israelites this song.

You see, you and I forget things all the time. We forget God's love. We forget our call to love others. We forget the widow, the orphan, the oppressed, the marginalized. We forget our responsibility to social outcasts. We forget Jesus' call to turn the other cheek. We forget God's Word. We forget so much.

Hymns are there to remind us of who we are and who's we are. Hymns have this unexplainable way of seeping into our souls and burying themselves deep within our psyche. So even when we've forgotten everything else, hymns have the potential to take us back to who we were in order to be reminded of who God is calling us to be.

When we've forgotten that we have a responsibility to care for the precious gift of God's green earth, perhaps it's time for us to sing:

*All creatures of our God and king,  
lift up your voice and with us sing,  
Alleluia! Alleluia!*

When we've forgotten that he who is free of sin is to cast the first stone, perhaps it's time for us to sing:

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound  
that saved a wretch like me.*

When we've forgotten about the importance of our baptism, perhaps it's time for us to sing:

*Come, thou fount of every blessing;  
tune my heart to sing thy grace;  
streams of mercy, never ceasing,  
call for songs of loudest praise.*

When we've forgotten God's comfort in times when we feel discouraged and oppressed, perhaps it's time for us to sing:

*There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole:  
there is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.*

When we've forgotten our Christian calling to seek social justice and righteousness for *all* people, perhaps it's time for us to sing:

*Today we are all called to be disciples of the Lord,  
to help to set the captives free, make plowshare out of sword,  
to feed the hungry, quench their thirst,  
make love and peace our fast,  
to save the poor and homeless first,  
our ease and comfort last.*

Friends, this is no trivial matter; this is our very life.

So I hope you have a Bible in your home. But I also hope you have a hymnal, or two, or ten, or twenty. I hope you understand that this is our story. And, as Christians, we *love* to tell the story! That is our task. That is our calling.

When we are happy, we sing of God. When we are sad and weary, we sing of God. When someone is born, we sing of God. When someone is baptized, we sing of God. When someone gets married, we sing of God. When someone dies, we sing of God. We sing of God because God's spirit has anointed us with the gift of music and that is a gift that we must never take for granted.

So, friends, sing. It matters not whether you can carry a tune or not. What matters is that you join us in singing for that is what we are called to do.

It is no trivial matter; it is our very life.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.