

June 7, 2020

Hymns We Love: I Sing the Mighty Power of God

Isaac Watts (1674-1748) was the greatest hymn writer of his age or, perhaps, of any age. Known as the father of modern English hymnody, he wrote more than six hundred hymns. (By comparison, there are five hundred and ten hymns in First Church's Pilgrim Hymnal.) His hymns are credited with enabling Protestantism in England and New England to free itself from the exclusive use of metrical psalms in congregational singing. Prior to Watts, the only hymns deemed appropriate for use in church were biblical psalms that were paraphrased in order to make them fit into a rigid metrical structure in which each line has a set number of syllables.

In spite of strong opposition from the status quo, Watts' hymns helped pull English hymnody out of the ruts of impersonal formalism to achieve new poetic heights, expressing a level of personal devotion seldom found previously in Reformed worship. A beautiful example of this is found in I Sing the Mighty Power of God, published in 1715 in the first hymnal ever written for children, with the lengthy title, Divine Songs attempted in Easy Language for the use of Children. Watts' lyrics draw on imagery from multiple Scripture passages, describing the creation story and the wonders of God's handiwork seen in the natural world:

Lord, how thy wonders are displayed,

Where e'er I turn my eye:

If I survey the ground I tread,

Or gaze upon the sky!

But it wasn't until a century later that Isaac Watts' lyrics really took flight, when set to the tune ELLACOMBE, a hymn melody that manages to be both lively and noble at the same time. Written by an anonymous German composer in the 19th century, the version we sing in our Pilgrim Hymnal dates from Hymns Ancient and Modern, an English hymnal published in 1868.

Now that warmer weather has finally come to New England, I Sing the Mighty Power of God is the perfect hymn to keep in our hearts as we enjoy the all the beauty of God's springtime creation.

Listen to I Sing the Mighty Power of God:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2GFuwi_5yqo

