

O God of Every Nation
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John 6:56-69

⁵⁶Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. ⁵⁷Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. ⁵⁸This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.” ⁵⁹He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

⁶⁰When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” ⁶¹But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? ⁶²Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? ⁶³It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. ⁶⁴But among you there are some who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. ⁶⁵And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.”

⁶⁶Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. ⁶⁷So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” ⁶⁸Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

Ephesians 6:10-20

¹⁰Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. ¹¹Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹²For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. ¹³Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. ¹⁴Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. ¹⁵As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. ¹⁶With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

¹⁸Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. ¹⁹Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

Two weeks ago, in talking about the hymn *You Satisfy the Hungry Heart*, I mentioned that it is not often that you hear about a song being part of a hymn-writing competition. And yet here we are, with *O God of Every Nation*. Written by William Watkins Reid, Jr. in 1958, “it won first prize in a hymn-writing contest cosponsored by the Hymn Society of America and the National Council of Churches’ Department of International Affairs... The text was revised slightly [in 1972] for inclusion in *The*

*Worshipbook - Services and Hymns.*¹ The tune, Llangloffan, is a Welsh folk melody of unknown authorship.²

Before I tell you much about the hymn and its author, I think it is high time I explained a bit about the hymnal so that you might find your way around it easily, particularly because it is a key component of our worship together. In the top outer corner of any page is a small description which identifies which section of the hymnal we are in. You've probably noticed that all of the Advent and Christmas songs have low numbers - that's because Advent is when the church year begins and so it makes sense to begin the hymnal with songs for the beginning of the year. This Advent we will be beginning Year C, the third in a cycle of three years. Next Advent will mark the beginning of Year A. Our hymn today, as well as last week's hymn, is part of the category "God." Some other categories are Palm Sunday, Church: Mission, Lord's Supper, and Evening Hymns. Only the Psalms do not have this marking in the top outer corner. You can see where each category begins on the (unmarked) pages five and six at the start of the hymnal.

And if the tune seems familiar to you but not the words, you can look it up in the back of the hymnal to see what other hymns use it. There are many indices in the back of the hymnal, beginning on page 677. They include an index of authors, translators, and sources, an index of composers, arrangers, and sources, an index of scriptural allusions, a topical index, a metrical index of tunes (for those of you who understand the meter markings listed by the tune name, under the title), an alphabetical index of tunes, and the last and most commonly used index, the index of first lines and common titles. If we turn to the alphabetical index of tunes, beginning on page 707, we can find that Llangloffan is also the tune for 15 - Rejoice! Rejoice, Believers, 291 - O God of Earth and Altar, and 448 - Lead On, O Eternal King.

Last, "when a hymn has a direct scriptural reference, that reference appears on the top of the page,"³ in the inner corners. "When there is more than one reference, the symbol of an open Bible appears next to the reference."⁴ Our hymn this morning does not have any direct Biblical references but that does not mean that evidence of the Word's influence cannot be found. The fourth verse, in particular, is reminiscent of comfort found in the book of Revelation. "Keep bright in us the vision / Of days when war shall cease, / When hatred and division / Give way to love and peace, / Till dawns the morning glorious / When peace on earth shall reign / And Christ shall rule victorious / O'er all the world's

¹The Presbyterian Hymnal Companion (Westminster John Knox Press) pp. 206-7;
<http://books.google.com/books?id=kde8yd0INHsC&pg=PA185&lpg=PA185&dq=%22omer+westendorf%22&source=bl&ots=MjxsyparMh&sig=LWScWAtNiktNM9xtT4G6jP4C2EA&hl=en&sa=X&ei=gEIIUPvxK6-WyAGHnYGwCA&ved=0CE0Q6AEwBjgU#v=snippet&q=289&f=false>

² Ibid., pp. 27-8.

³ The Presbyterian Hymnal (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990) p.11.

⁴ Ibid.

domain.”

Moving backward, verses two and three remind us of all from which we seek comfort. “From search for wealth and power / And scorn of truth and right, / From trust in bombs that shower / Destruction through the night, / From pride of race and station / And blindness to Your way, / Deliver every nation, / Eternal God, we pray. // Lord, strengthen those who labor / That all may find release / From fear of rattling saber, / From dread of war’s increase; / When hope and courage falter, / Your still small voice be heard; / With faith that none can alter, / Your servants undergird.” Remember that still small voice Elijah heard? So did Reid. “He served in the Army Medical Corps from 1943 to 1945 and for eight months was a prisoner of war in Germany.”⁵ I suspect that his time in the service informed these verses.

It might seem odd that a hymn which expresses wishes for wars to cease is paired with a reading that is filled with the language of warfare. The letter to the Ephesians does indeed speak with words from battle but not, we are told, for a physical battle. The author writes, to an audience familiar with fighting, “Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” To follow Christ means to join in this struggle. And we read in John, “When many of his disciples heard it, they said, ‘This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?’”

If we choose to answer Christ’s call as his faithful disciples did, when asked the question “Do you also wish to go away?” we would respond, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.” To stay true to our word, we cannot do it alone, nor are we asked to. In fact, we are encouraged to take up God’s protection, to take up the whole armor of God. Fasten the belt of truth...put on the breastplate of righteousness...on your feet, put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace...take the shield of faith and the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit...and listen for the still small voice. God has everything you need to protect and fortify you from head to toe, to give you courage to follow Christ even when it is difficult.

William Reid was an accomplished writer of hymns, and a Methodist minister, whose “life was marked by his work for social justice and his tireless work on behalf of the imprisoned and impoverished.”⁶ Certainly not an easy task to do, and one which can become discouraging, but one which was clearly lived out through his faith and his belief in the equality of all. If we step backward one more time in the hymn we come to the first verse, which puts into words Reid’s lifelong commitment to working for and with those in need. “O God of every nation, / Of every race and land, /

⁵ The Presbyterian Hymnal Companion (Westminster John Knox Press) pp. 206-7.

⁶<http://boards.ancestrylibrary.com/localities.northam.usa.states.pennsylvania.counties.sullivan/8017/mb.ashx?pnt=1>

Redeem the whole creation / With Your almighty hand; / Where hate and fear divide us / And bitter threats are hurled, / In love and mercy guide us / And heal our strife-torn world.”

“When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” “Where hate and fear divide us / And bitter threats are hurled, / In love and mercy guide us / And heal our strife-torn world.” You know this - we are called as partners in Christ’s service to help heal the strife-torn world with God’s love and mercy and protection and courage. As the angels say, “Do not be afraid.” “Though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.”⁷ Do not be afraid. “Take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand...and...stand firm.” So may it be for you and for me.

Let us pray: God of love and mercy, we pray for truth, righteousness, faith, salvation, and your Spirit, now and always. Amen.

⁷ Psalm 46:2-3