

Week 4: God as Comforter

How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds

Text: John Newton (1725–1807), 1774

- Following the death of his mother when he was 7, he headed to sea at age 11
- At 18, was punished as a deserter from the Royal Navy, then lived as a servant to a slave-dealer in Africa, later becoming captain of a slave ship
- Reading works of Thomas à Kempis at sea sparked his conversion, with eventual ordination at 39
- Lacking hymns relevant to his ministry, he wrote over 280 of his own (including “Amazing Grace”)

Tune: Alexander Robert Reinagle (1799–1877), 1836

- Born into a musical family: grandfather was “trumpeter to the King” in Austria, uncle a theater composer, father a cellist and friend of Franz Joseph Haydn
 - Acclaimed organ teacher and publisher of two hymn tune collections
 - The tune ST. PETER is named for St. Peter-in-the-East, the church where he served as organist for over twenty years
1. Knowing that John Newton was the author of both, what echoes (if any) of “Amazing Grace” do you find in “How Sweet the Name”? Does the background of Newton’s life affect how you read the hymn?
 - a. “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound” ↔ “How sweet the name of Jesus sounds”
 - b. “and grace my fears relieved” ↔ “drives away his fear”
 - c. “a wretch like me” ↔ “weak is the effort of my heart, and cold my warmest thought”
 - d. “when this flesh and heart shall fail” ↔ “refresh my soul in death”
 2. In Newton’s original publication of Olney Hymns, this text is found in Book I (subtitled “On select texts of Scripture”), accompanied by a quotation of Song of Solomon 1:3: “Because of the Savor of thy good ointments, thy name is as ointment poured forth”. How do you see this reflected in the hymn?
 - a. Chief purpose of ointment is to heal and soothe wounds, reflected in verses 1 & 2
 - b. Also served ceremonial purposes, anointing Jesus as Priest, and King
 - c. “Husband” fits well with Song of Solomon, but later editors revised it to “Brother” or “Shepherd”

Dear Refuge of My Weary Soul

Text: Anne Steele (1717–1778), 1760

- Born into a Baptist family in England
- Suffered early loss when her fiancé tragically drowned on the morning of their wedding
- Never married afterward, led a mostly quiet life
- First published under the pseudonym “Theodosia” (Greek for “gift of God”) at the age of 41
- One of the first female hymn writers to gain widespread recognition

Tune: Anonymous, 1749

- Tune name is IRISH, as it appears to have originated in Ireland
 - First appeared in Collection of Hymns and Sacred Poems in 1749, printed by a “S. Powell” in Dublin
 - Often (likely erroneously) attributed to Isaac Smith (1734–1805), about whom little is known
1. Steele’s hymns are known for their plain language but emotional content (almost certainly a reflection of her life experiences). Many of them have slowly fallen out of use over the years, though - including “Dear Refuge of My Weary Soul”, whose most recent inclusion in a hymnal was in 1949. When you think of other hymns on the topic of comfort and assurance, how does this one compare? What do you think could be responsible for its waning popularity?
 - a. Shared metaphor: “when waves of trouble roll” ↔ “when sorrows like sea billows roll”
 - b. Rather blunt description of doubts in verse 3 is somewhat unique
 2. Verse 5 references God’s “mercy seat”. Is anyone familiar with this term and what it means?
 - a. The “mercy seat” (“kapporet” in Hebrew) is the solid gold covering on the Ark of the Covenant, inside of which the tablets with Ten Commandments were held.
 - b. Here, that the “mercy-seat is open still” means Christ has given us access to God

Abide With Me

Text: Henry Francis Lyte (1793–1847), 1847

- Born a poor orphan in Scotland, entered ministry at an Anglican church in Ireland at the age of 21
- Transferred in 1823 to a church in the coastal town of Lower Brixham, Devonshire
- Hymn was written a few hours after Lyte preached his last sermon in Brixham
- Died just two months later, in France

Tune: William Henry Monk (1823–1889), 1861

- Musical editor of “Hymns Ancient and Modern”, seminal hymnal for the Church of England
- According to his wife, the EVENTIDE tune was written “at a time of great sorrow”, while watching “the glory of the setting sun”
- Lyte had originally composed his own tune with the hymn, but was soon eclipsed by Monk’s version

1. The very first phrase says “fast falls the eventide”, setting the tone for the rest of the hymn to follow. What is the “eventide” and what is its significance here?
 - a. Metaphor for the end (“evening”) of life
 - b. Our life is little more than one day for God
 - c. For Lyte, who lived by the sea, “eventide” is also literally the “evening tide”
 - d. Connects to verse 2, as a life simply “ebbs out”
 - e. Paired with Luke 24:29 in the original manuscript, the story of Jesus at Emmaus: “Abide with us, for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent.”
2. How would you describe the overall “feel” or mood of the hymn? How does the tune help set or reinforce this mood? How do the various contrasts in the text, specifically light & darkness, affect it?
 - a. Rather flat melody, restricted to the space of a major 6th; keeps a sense of calm, stasis
 - b. Augmented (vi+) chord and inner motion in third phrase lends a strong emotional “pull”
 - c. Earth associated with: change, decay, dim joys, faded glories, gloom, “vain shadows”
 - d. God associated with: unchangingness, blessings, triumph