

HYMN INTERPRETATION

MARY KAY BEALL

“Lord, Who Throughout These Forty Days”

Now, Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the spirit into the wild. For forty wilderness days and nights he was tested by the Devil. He ate nothing during those days, and when the time was up he was hungry. The Devil, playing on his hunger, gave the first test: “Since you’re God’s Son, command this stone to turn into a loaf of bread.” Jesus answered by quoting Deuteronomy: “It takes more than bread to really live.” For the second test he led him up and spread out all the kingdoms of the earth on display at once. Then the Devil said, “They’re yours in all their splendor to serve your pleasure. I’m in charge of them all and can turn them over to whomever I wish. Worship me and they’re yours, the whole works.” Jesus refused, again backing his refusal with Deuteronomy: “Worship the Lord your God and only the Lord your God. Serve him with absolute single-heartedness.” For the third test the Devil took him to Jerusalem and put him on top of the Temple. He said, “If you are God’s Son, jump. It’s written, isn’t it, that ‘he has placed you in the care of angels to protect you; they will catch you. You won’t so much as stub your toe on a stone!’” “Yes,” said Jesus, “and it’s also written, ‘Don’t you dare tempt the Lord your God.’” That completed the testing. The Devil retreated temporarily, lying in wait for another opportunity.¹

The scripture reading in Luke 4:1–13 provides the foundation for the hymn “Lord, Who Throughout These Forty Days.” I have used the contemporary translation here as it offers a cutting-edge rendition of the well-known story of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness. The hymn is unique because it is one of a very few that directly relate to the period of the Christian Year that we call Lent . . . the period that extends from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday. There are several well-known hymns that we regularly include in our Lenten observance but in general most of these hymns speak more to the message of Jesus on the cross and of his love and sacrifice for us. “Lord, Who Throughout These Forty Days,” however, recounts Jesus’ temptation story with the express intention, I believe, to encourage us by example in our ongoing personal battle with temptation in the wilderness of our conflicting desires. And, most notably, the title and content of this hymn place us firmly in the season of Lent and allude to its prescription for the mindful practice of the spiritual disciplines of these penitential days.

The word “lent” is an old English term for spring. The forty days of Lent seem to have originally begun as an approximation and some scholars believe that “forty” is merely a euphemism for “a long time.” Nevertheless, the number turns up again and again in significant episodes in the ongoing story of the Christian faith: 40 days and 40 nights of rain (Gen. 7:4); 40 days of preparation for Jacob’s burial (Gen. 50:3); 40 days on Mt. Sinai as Moses received the 10 commandments (Ex. 24:18); 40 days spying out the Promised Land (Num. 13:25); 40 years of wandering in the wilderness (Num. 14:33); 40 days of Goliath’s taunts to Saul’s army (I Sam. 17:16); 40 days as Elijah flees from Jezebel to Mt. Horeb (I Kings 19:8); 40 days of grace for Ninevah to change its course (Jon. 3:4) and 40 days of preparation for ministry (Luke 4:2). Clearly there is underlying theological significance to the number “forty” and thus to the number of days of Jesus’ wilderness experience. At the very least, the number “forty” is a connecting link for Christians through the ongoing story of their faith from Genesis to Jesus.²

Lord, who throughout these forty days,
for us did fast and pray,
teach us to overcome our sins
and close by you to stay.

As you with Satan did contend,
and did the vict’ry win,
oh, give us strength in you to fight,
in you to conquer sin.

As you did hunger and did thirst,
so teach us, gracious Lord,
to die to self, and so to live
by your most holy Word.

And through these days of penitence
and through your Passiontide,
for evermore, in life and death,
O Lord, with us abide.

Abide with us and through this life
our doubts and pain relieve.
An Easter of unending joy
we shall at last receive.³

The text for "Lord, Who Throughout These Forty Days" was written by Claudia Frances Hernaman born in Addlestone, Surrey, England, October 19, 1838. Though she wrote many hymns, this one is the only one that remains in common use today. Claudia was the daughter of W. H. Ibotson, Vicar of Edwinstow, Motts, England, so we can speculate that she was likely steeped in scripture from an early age. In 1858, at the age of twenty, she married the Rev. J. W. D. Hernaman, one of Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools. Claudia's creative interests focused on children and, in the course of her life, she wrote a total of 150 children's hymns and also translated some hymns from the original Latin. This particular hymn first appeared in her book, *The Child's Book of Praise (A Manual of Devotion in Simple Verse)* published in 1875. Other publications by this author include *Hymns for the Children of the Church* (1878), *Story of the Resurrection* (1879), *Hymns for Little Ones in Sunday Schools* (1884) and *Lyra Consolationis, from the Poets of the 17th, 18th and 19th Centuries* (1840). Claudia died in Brussels, Belgium, October 10, 1898.⁴

Some hymns, as we know, are sung to several tunes before they eventually find the tune that seems best suited to the text. When a text and tune become undeniably conjoined we say they are "wedded" and thereafter, when we think of the text we think of it in combination with its partner melody. "Lord, Who Throughout These Forty Days" has been paired with several tunes over its lifetime and I cannot honestly say that it is wedded to any. ST. FLAVIAN is most often associated with the text. It is the first half of a tune from *The English Psalter* (1562) that was originally set to Psalm 132. Its present form and most of the harmonization of this melody are found in Richard Redhead's *Church Hymn Tunes* (1853). It was not until 1875 in the *Revised Edition of Hymns Ancient and Modern* that the name ST. FLAVIAN was firmly attached to the tune. The composer of ST. FLAVIAN was John Day (alt. Daye or Daie), an artist in the printing trade. Born in 1522 in Dunwich on the Suffolk coast of England, he went to London early on and there learned and perfected his trade. His business eventual-

ly located in Aldersgate and from there he produced many fine works including a number of psalters. His reputation grew and in 1580 he became Master of the Livery of the Stationers' Company. John Day had two wives in his lifetime, each of whom bore him thirteen children; somehow in the midst of his burgeoning family and his growing responsibilities as a printer, he found the time to compose the well-known tune, ST. FLAVIAN.⁵

Another tune, now known as RICHMOND, is also associated with "Lord, Who Throughout These Forty Days." This tune was composed in 1792 by Thomas Haweis but was altered in 1803 by Samuel Webbe, Jr. and given its name in honor of Leigh Richmond who was the composer's friend and rector at Turvey, Bedfordshire. Although many consider it easy to sing, it does not seem to have achieved real popularity in combination with this text.⁶

A third tune is often paired with this hymn. LAND OF REST originated in *The Christian Harp* (1832, 1836 ed.). The familiar version of the melody found in today's hymnals is from *Folk Hymns of America* (1938) compiled by Annabel Morris Buchanan and is based on her personal recollection of the tune as sung by her grandmother to the words of a folk hymn, "O Land of Rest for Thee I Sigh." An observation: I have to confess that I personally find this tune more appealing than either ST. FLAVIAN or RICHMOND but I have to wonder if it may be too lilting a melody for the somber nature of the text.⁷

An interesting altered version of the text appears in *The Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978) under the title "O Lord, Throughout These Forty Days." Here Gilbert Doan Jr., Chairman of the Hymn Texts Committee of the Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship, paraphrased the original text and set the paraphrase to the tune, CAITHNESS from *The Edinburgh Psalter* (1635). This tune, sometimes called CATHNES TUNE derives its name from Cattiness County in northeast-ern Scotland.⁸

Finally, I noted that contemporary composer Keith Landis created a new tune ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S PICO RIVERA, for the hymn. That new tune was harmonized by Betty Pulkingham and appears in *Songs for the People of God* (1994), along with the more familiar setting using the tune, ST. FLAVIAN, on the opposite page.⁹

The hymn, "Lord, Who Throughout These Forty Days" appears in a good number of hymnals and that is due, I think, to its particular definition of the Lenten season (40 days) and its firm penitential understanding and prescriptions for the Christian. While other hymnals may include this hymn, I located it in the following: *The Adoremus Hymnal* (p. 360), *ICEL, Resource Collection* (p. 47), *Hymnal of the Hours* (p. 65), *Worship, Third Edition* pub. GIA (p. 417), *The Catholic Hymn Book* pub. Gracewing (p. 54), *Hymns, Psalms & Spiritual Canticles* (p. 212), *The United Methodist Hymnal 1989* (p. 969), *Come, Let Us Worship Korean*

Hymnal (p. 181), *Worship and Rejoice* pub. Hope (p. 252), *Songs for the People of God* (p. 213), *Hymnbook for Christian Worship 1970* (p. 166), *The Worshiping Church 1990* (p. 200), *The Covenant Hymnal 1996* (p. 214), *The Hymnal — Presbyterian 1933* (p. 144), *The Chalice Hymnal 1955* (p. 180), and *The Lutheran Book of Worship 1978* (p. 99).

Claudia Hernaman's original text recounts the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, his ultimate victory over Satan and a prayer woven through the text that we, like Jesus, might have sufficient strength to conquer sin and to learn and practice self-denial. Stanza three does not appear in every published version. Perhaps later publications did not wish to be specific about the fasting experience i.e. ("as you did hunger and did thirst") or perhaps in today's climate, "to die to self" is considered to be beyond our self-indulgent, earthbound capabilities. Stanza five broadens the message beyond Lent to all of life and points to eternal life as the "Easter of unending joy." The paraphrase of Claudia Hernaman's original text by Gilbert Doan maintains the common meter but does not seem to achieve any great accomplishment by the reworking. He substitutes "strove" for "did contend" and the idea of enduring faithfulness for "victory." Where the original pleads, "O give us strength in you to fight, in you to conquer sin," Doan's paraphrase says, "Lend us your nerve, your skill and trust in God's eternal Word." Here, I think the paraphrase does make a somewhat daring leap into a contemporary mode and does offer a stronger, clearer plea while managing to avoid the archaic reverse syntax of the original version.¹⁰

Clearly the hymnwriter, Claudia Hernaman, wrote this hymn originally to teach children the story behind the Lenten season and what the season should mean for them as young Christians. Though it might not seem a suitable teaching hymn for children these days, I believe the writer did her best to provide nineteenth-century children with a hymn that would expand their understanding of Lent and the sacrificial practices associated with the season. Given the fact that so many people do not have a positive feeling about Lent, I firmly believe that we could all benefit from a new perspective on the season. With that in mind, I conclude with the Lenten prayer from my own devotional collection *Singing in the Spirit*.

*When we finally stop complaining, Lord,
and allow the silence to settle around us
perhaps we might catch a glimpse
just a glimpse
of what Lent is all about.*

*It's about hearing the story again . . .
for the very first time.*

It's about walking where You walked.

*It's about touching Your robe
and feeling Your power surge through us.*

*It's about feeling Your fear and Your pain on the cross
and knowing it was for us You died.*

*It's about basking in the sunshine
of Your love and forgiveness.*

*It's about holding out our empty hands
and receiving the costly and generous gift of your
amazing grace.*

*Perhaps if we could make a real effort to see
the bigger picture*

Lent just might become our favorite time of year.

AMEN and AMEN.¹¹

MKB 1998 ☞

Notes

¹Eugene Peterson, *The Message//Remix (The Bible in Contemporary Language)*, (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2003), Luke 4:1-13.

²Joseph Francis Alward, "Everything Took Forty Days," from an Internet article, May 8, 1999.1.

³This updated version of the hymn is from *The Covenant Hymnal: A Worshipbook*, #214.

⁴Gene Claghorn, ed., *Women Composers and Hymnists (A Concise Biographical Dictionary)*, (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1984), 117.

⁵Mary Kay Stulken, ed., *Hymnal Companion to the Lutheran Book of Worship*, (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1981), 234.

⁶Carlton R. Young, ed., *Companion to the United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 510.

⁷Ibid, 474..

⁸Mary Kay Stulken, 99-100.

⁹Keith Landis, ed., *Songs for the People of God* (Whittier, CA: Praise Publications, 1994), 213-214.

¹⁰Churches in the Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship, *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House and Philadelphia, PA: Board of Publication, Lutheran Church in America, 1978), 99-100.

¹¹Mary Kay Beall, *Singing in the Spirit (A Devotional Collection for Music Ministry)*, Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing Company, 1998), 63.

Mary Kay Beall is the founding pastor of Tree of Life Community Church in Columbus, Ohio. She has written the texts for hundreds of sacred anthems, numerous scripts for extended musical works, a devotional collection for music ministry entitled Singing in the Spirit, and, with her husband, John Carter, a sacred opera, Ruth, and a small hymn collection, Hymns for a Troubled World, published by Hope Publishing Company.