

HYMN PERFORMANCE

EILEEN M. JOHNSON

Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley

“And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him” (Mark 1:12-13, NRSV).

For all three years of the lectionary cycle, the gospel lesson for the first Sunday in Lent is the temptation of Jesus. I like the sense of urgency that Mark’s version brings to the story: Jesus, barely having had time to dry off from his baptism, is abruptly driven into the wilderness. Once there, he faces Satan, and has wild beasts for company. There is any number of hymns one could choose to go with this story,¹ but I find I am often drawn to “Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley.” The image of Jesus facing trials in a lonesome, lonely place is a compelling one, and sets the scene for the trials yet to come during Holy Week. This hymn also serves as a reminder that we participate with Jesus in our life of discipleship, as we “walk our lonesome valley” and “stand our trials.”

Example 1

Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley

The musical score is written in 12/8 time with a tempo marking of quarter note = 55. It features a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The piano part consists of a right-hand line with chords and a left-hand line with a simple bass line. The lyrics are: "Je - sus walked this lone - some val - ley, He had to walk it by him - self O etc." Chord symbols N.C., F, Bb, F, and C are placed above the piano accompaniment.

Words and music traditional

LONESOME VALLEY
8.8.10.8

Historical Background

Until recently, "Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley" had not seen wide inclusion in North American hymnals. In fact, it is listed in only ten collections in the *Dictionary of North American Hymnology*, with publication dates ranging from 1947–1975.² However, the hymn seems to be gaining in popularity, as evidenced by its appearance in several recent hymnals and supplements.³ In these books, it is variously referred to as: American spiritual, traditional spiritual, African American spiritual, and American folk hymn. Although there is lack of agreement on its origins, it seems clear that "Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley" *does* exist as an African American spiritual, although in a slightly different version than the one in our hymnals:

I must walk my lonesome valley,
I got to walk it for myself,
Nobody else can walk it for me,
I got to walk it for myself.

I must go and stand my trial,
I got to stand it for myself,
Nobody else can stand if for me,
I got to stand it for myself.

Jesus walked this lonesome valley,
He had to walk it for himself,
Nobody else could walk it for him,
He had to walk it for himself.⁴

Aside from the reordering of the verses, two differences are immediately apparent: first, the use of "I" (as opposed to "we" and "you") in the first two verses; second, the use of "for" instead of "by" in the second and fourth lines ("for myself" instead of "by myself"). One could argue that using "for" can overcome some potential theological objections to the idea of "walking *by* ourselves." As aptly put by James Cone, "the journey of salvation is like a lonesome valley with hard trials, and the believer has to travel the valley for himself."⁵

Example 2

Lonesome Valley

♩ = 60

The first system of musical notation for 'Lonesome Valley' consists of two staves, treble and bass clef. The time signature is 12/8. The melody in the treble clef begins with a quarter note G4, followed by a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, and a quarter note C5. The bass line consists of a series of chords: G2-B2-D3, A2-C3-E3, B2-D3-F3, and G2-B2-D3.

The second system of musical notation continues the piece. The treble clef melody has a half note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, and a quarter note C5. The bass line continues with chords: G2-B2-D3, A2-C3-E3, B2-D3-F3, and G2-B2-D3.

The third system of musical notation continues the piece. The treble clef melody has a half note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, and a quarter note C5. The bass line continues with chords: G2-B2-D3, A2-C3-E3, B2-D3-F3, and G2-B2-D3.

The fourth system of musical notation concludes the piece. The treble clef melody has a half note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, and a quarter note C5. The bass line continues with chords: G2-B2-D3, A2-C3-E3, B2-D3-F3, and G2-B2-D3.

Arr. © 2006 Dan Damon. Used with permission.

Example 3

Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley

♩ = 72

Leader:

1. Je - sus walked this lone - some val - ley; he had to
 2. We must walk this lone - some val - ley; we have to
 3. You must go and stand your tri - al; you have to

People: 1. Je - sus walked this lone - some val - ley,
 2. We must walk this lone - some val - ley;
 3. You must go and stand your tri - al;

walk it by him - self. Oh, no - bod - y else could walk it
 walk it by our - selves. Oh, no - bod - y else can walk it
 stand it by your - self. Oh, no - bod - y else can stand it

had to walk it by him - self; Oh, no - one else could
 have to walk it by our - selves. Oh, no - one else can
 have to stand it by your - self. Oh, no - one else can

for him; he had to walk it by him - self.
 for us; we have to walk it by our - selves.
 for you; you have to stand it by your - self.

walk it for him, had to walk it by him - self.
 walk it for us; have to walk it by our - selves.
 stand it for you; have to stand it by your - self.

WORDS and MUSIC: American folk hymn, arr. Patrick Matsikenyiri
 Arr. © 2003 Patrick Matsikenyiri. Used with permission.

LONESOME VALLEY
 8.8.10.8.

Which Version?

As the above example shows, when working with folk material, there is no “urtext” to which we can refer for the “authoritative version.” Among the several versions of “Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley” that I found in current use, no two were exactly the same. There were variations in the melodic pitches and variations in the rhythm (for example, the same melody notes might appear with two different rhythms). There were several different harmonizations. There was one musical arrangement which appeared three times, but with three different versions of the text—one with the traditional verses, and two with newly written additional stanzas. These numerous versions demonstrate why, when leading a folk hymn, I do not feel the need to follow the printed music in the way that I would if I were leading a composed hymn tune. Instead, I tend to let the congregation be my guide; I try to find out “their way” of singing a traditional piece. When working with this type of material, I think it is important to recognize the local practice, and affirm it, even if it is different from my own performance practice.

However, sometimes this method does require a little refinement. I usually let my choir or my band members (depending on the service) serve as the authority on the “local version” of a folk hymn. There have been occasions when the choir and/or band members have different versions among themselves! In these cases, if one of the versions matches the printed version, I may ask everyone to sing it “as written.” Or, if none of their versions match the printed version, then I may ask them to agree among themselves.⁶ If there are just too many variations, then I will ask them to sing the printed version, simply for the sake of standardization.

Sometimes the process of figuring out which version to use can produce something new; for example, the group may collectively agree that they want to try the hymn a certain way, which may be different from the way they have been used to singing it. In the course of rehearsing the material, we quickly find out whether our “new way” feels comfortable and workable.

Performance Possibilities

When preparing to lead a folk hymn, I find that the lack of a definitive version can make things really *fun*. There are so many different possibilities—even when taking the “local version” into consideration. Quite often, the deviations from the printed page are small variations in the melody line—differences in pitches, rhythm, or both. This still leaves a great deal of room for song leader to “mess around.” I offer several different ways one can approach “Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley.” I think they all have merit; which one(s) you choose will depend on your own sense of what will work best in your particular setting.

One choice that needs to be made right away is

whether to use even eighth notes, or have more of a 12/8 “swing” feeling (the printed music is in 4/4). Using 12/8 at a slower tempo gives a bit of a bluesy feeling (see example #1). If you decide to use even eighths, I suggest that you only use a triplet figure at the start of the third line (“O, nobody else . . .”) and use eighth notes elsewhere.⁷ Of course, in 12/8, even eighths become a quarter note followed by an eighth note.

Next comes the question of instrumentation. Provided that your musical setting is not too pianistic,⁸ this hymn works very well on the organ, whether played straight or swung. I would be inclined to add some passing chords (if your version doesn’t have them already) on the second beat of the held half notes. The piano can provide a more rhythmic feel, and easily lends itself to a more jazzy treatment of the tune. Because this hymn *is* folk material, it will work very well with guitar. Remember when arranging for guitar to make sure that the chord changes are only every half bar at the most (i.e. a fairly slow harmonic rhythm). Other instruments can be added, as appropriate to your arrangement. For example, if you decide to use a country or bluegrass style, you could add a banjo or fiddle. Finally, I would be remiss if I didn’t suggest singing the hymn unaccompanied, whether in harmony or in unison. Even if you are going to sing the hymn accompanied, try using a single unaccompanied voice to introduce the hymn. Have the soloist sing the first verse, quite freely and expressively. Then, bring in the accompanying instrument(s) and either repeat the first verse with the congregation, or go on to the second verse. In this case, since the soloist will not necessarily be establishing a tempo, the entrance of the instruments needs to be firm and definitive. The soloist can assist with bringing in the congregation when it is time for them to sing.

This column includes three specific examples that incorporate some of the above suggestions. All of these arrangements have been used successfully in different settings. The first is a quite simple 12/8 version in a blues style,⁹ which I use with my band. We use piano, bass, drums and guitar, which is fairly typical instrumentation for this style. However, the arrangement could be done with piano only. If a blues guitarist who knows how to solo is available, so much the better! In that case, the band would take at least one instrumental verse, either in between the sung verses, or at the end, or both. However, regardless of the instrumentation used, note that the melody is carried by the voice, not by the accompanying instrument(s), so a song leader is needed for this version. The tempo is quite slow, reflecting the serious character of the text. Keeping a steady pulse in the bass line is crucial to maintaining the proper “feel” at this slow pace.

The second example is for piano. It features a more sophisticated harmonization, with chord changes occurring on each beat. Although it also is in 12/8,

the style is more characteristic of gospel than straight blues: the slightly faster tempo adds a gentle lilt, and the tenths¹⁰ provide a warmer sound.

In some ways, I think the third example is the most unusual of all. It is an arrangement by Patrick Matsikenyiri, our colleague from Zimbabwe. Patrick's setting is for unaccompanied voices. As often occurs in African music, there are parts for a leader and for the people. The leader is the one who actually sings the melody. The people's part is almost a chant, on even quarter notes. The steady rhythmic pulse created by these repeated quarter notes definitely evokes the sense of walking, steadily and firmly. In fact, given the integral part that movement and dance play in African worship, it should come as no surprise to us that when Patrick leads this hymn, the people actually walk as they sing. The steps are on beats one and three, in an "easy but rhythmic pace."¹¹

I find it particularly fitting to conclude with this example. We see "Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley" coming full circle from its origins as a song sung by African slaves in America to a song sung by Africans in Zimbabwe, a very troubled country.¹² In both cases, Christians found (and continue to find) strength in singing their faith with the gathered community of believers, even in the midst of terrible adversity. May it be so for us as well.

Eileen M. Johnson, CAGO, is Music Director at El Sobrante United Methodist Church, El Sobrante, CA.

Notes

¹For example, the United Methodist Church General Board of Discipleship website lists twenty-five possible choices for Mark's gospel alone. These hymns do encompass the entire reading (Mark 1:9–15), not just the temptation story. See <http://www.gbod.org/worship/lectionaryhymns/030506hymns.asp>.

²*Dictionary of North American Hymnology*, CD-ROM, version 1.0, comp. Leonard Ellinwood and Elizabeth Lockwood, ed. Paul R. Powell and Mary Louise VanDyke (Hymn Society in the United States and Canada, 2003), s.v. "Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley."

³Hymn books include the *Chalice Hymnal*, *Hymns for the Family of God*, *Journeysongs*, 2nd ed., *Presbyterian Hymnal*, *The Faith We Sing*, *Worship*, 3rd ed., and *Worship and Rejoice*.

⁴James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1972), 67.

⁵*Ibid.*, 66–67.

⁶My usual comment to them is "It doesn't matter to me which way you do it—just make sure you all are doing it the same way."

⁷The versions in *Worship*, 3rd ed. and *The Faith We Sing* follow this method.

⁸For an example of a more pianistic arrangement, see the setting in the *Chalice Hymnal*. The setting in *Worship*, 3rd ed. is unison, but the accompaniment is very stylistically appropriate for organ. Four-part settings will always work well on the organ.

⁹LONESOME VALLEY is not, strictly speaking, a traditional twelve-bar blues, but it works very well with a blues-like treatment.

¹⁰In measure 3, pianists with smaller hands can sound the "A" melody note on the downbeat, then move quickly to take the lower voices with both hands. I think this is more effective than rolling the chords. The melody note will continue to sound, and it will also be carried by the congregation as they sing.

¹¹Patrick Matsikenyiri, e-mail message to author, March 28, 2006.

¹²There has been much suffering in Zimbabwe under the presidency of Robert Mugabe.