

A Perfect Hymn for Advent

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The word “perfect” of the title is intended in two senses. First, it is meant to suggest that the subject of this brief article is in itself a perfect hymn. I know no other hymn in which the theme is reflected and reinforced to such a degree both by its poetic form and its musical setting. Second, the title is meant to suggest that this hymn is perfect specifically for Advent—especially in our present culture, it is significantly and peculiarly suited to this season of the church year.

The hymn in question is number 455 in *The United Methodist Hymnal* (1989). It was written by Bradford Torrey and first appeared in print in the *Boston Transcript* circa 1875. According to the *Presbyterian Handbook to the Hymnal* of 1935,¹ Torrey was “an ornithologist and nature writer.” This hymn of his, it is suggested there, “evidences the quiet attitude of the student of nature, born of his experiences with the furtive life of the out of doors. To study birds the author had to learn to be quiet” (p. 509)!

The subject of the hymn may be summarized as “Be still, and know that I am God,” or, perhaps better, “wait for the Lord.”

The Words

The text is as follows:

Not so in haste, my heart!
Have faith in God, and wait;
Although he linger long,
He never comes too late.

He never cometh late;
He knoweth what is best;
Vex not thyself in vain;
Until he cometh, rest.

Until he cometh, rest,
Nor grudge the hours that roll;
The feet that wait for God
Are soonest at the goal.

Are soonest at the goal
That is not gained with speed;
Then hold thee still, my heart,
For I shall wait his lead.

The theme is reiterated several times, both positively: “have faith in God, and wait” (stanza 1), “until he cometh, rest” (stanza 2), “hold thee still, my heart” (stanza 4); and negatively: “not so in haste, my heart” (stanza 1), “vex not thyself in vain” (stanza 2), “nor grudge the hours that roll” (stanza 3). The appeal for faithful patience is justified by reassurances and promises: “although he linger long, he never comes too late” (stanza 1), “he knoweth what is best” (stanza 2), “the feet that wait for God are soonest at the goal that is not gained by speed” (stanzas 3-4).

The words recognize a real religious experience: the passage of time without any sense of divine presence. The hours (days, years) roll by, God still lingers, does not respond, appears to do nothing. It addresses this experience directly, exhorting us to wait, to be patient, to have faith, and assuring us that God knows best, is never actually *late*. But the most profound claim comes in the second half of the third stanza, where the author suggests the mystery of faith in the paradox: “the feet that wait for God are soonest at the goal.” As suggested by the earlier quotation from the *Presbyterian Handbook to the Hymnal*, it may well have been Torrey’s experience as a birdwatcher that prompted this insight. It is the person who stays still and quiet, waiting patiently as long as it takes, who is rewarded with the advent of the bird—or any wildlife. Any noise or movement only makes the wait that much longer. In any case, the paradox expressed in the hymn claims that faithful waiting for God is more fruitful than impatience, distraction, or trying alternatives.

The most striking formal reinforcement of the message of the hymn is the resumption of the last line of each stanza in the first line of the following stanza (anadiplosis, in the technical terminology of rhetoric). This not only reiterates the message of the last line, but keeps us waiting—still, at rest, as it were—until the second line of the stanza allows us to move on to new material. On the basis of our experience of virtually every other hymn, we expect to encounter new words and thoughts in every stanza, to move on, to progress. But here, not only does the subject remain constant, but, at the beginning of every stanza, even the words remain the same. Thus in more ways than one the hymn not only expresses patience, but, in our singing of it, constrains us to wait patiently.

Yet the hymn is not entirely static. Certainly most of it simply restates the rebuke, exhortation and promise of the first stanza—from the gentle rebuke of the opening line, “not so in haste, my heart!” to the final appeal of the penultimate line, “then hold thee still, my heart.” But in the last line, the hymn issues in the concluding quiet resolve, “for I shall wait his lead.” The hymn has born fruit! The “I” who sings it, who has been addressing the rebukes and exhortations and reassurances to “my heart,” appealing to it to adopt the right spiritual posture, is now settled in the appropriate attitude of faithful waiting.

Clearly, it should be played and sung at a slow, meditative pace. The melody consists entirely of quarter notes; at no point in any voice is a momentary quickening of eighth notes. Of course, in this it is like many other, especially older hymn tunes. Also characteristic of such hymns is the sustaining of the last note of each line. But in this case, the slow, even notes of each line underscore the music’s refusal to hurry, and the sustained last note seems to hold the singer back, not allowing new words to enter the consciousness until the significance of the words just sung has been absorbed.

Not So in Haste, My Heart 455

1. Not so in haste, my heart! Have faith in God, and wait;
 2. He nev - er com - eth late; he know - eth what is best;
 3. Un - til he com - eth, rest, nor grudge the hours that roll;
 4. Are soon - est at the goal that is not gained with speed;

al - though he lin - ger long, he nev - er comes too late.
 vex not thy - self in vain; un - til he com - eth, rest.
 the feet that wait for God are soon - est at the goal.
 then hold thee still, my heart, for I shall wait his lead.

WORDS: Bradford Torrey, ca. 1875
 MUSIC: Austrian melody; harm. by Joseph T. Cooper, 1879

DOLOMITE CHANT
 66.66

The Music

The setting of the hymn is an arrangement by Joseph T. Cooper of an old Austrian melody. Known as “Dolomite Chant,” it first appeared in the 1877² revision of *The Hymnal Companion to the Book of Common Prayer* (London; edited by J. T. Cooper and E. H. Bickersteth)³ and has since appeared in several hymnals with the words of “Not So in Haste, My Heart.” A number of features of this setting make it unusually appropriate for the words.

Most significantly, however, the rhythm of the music changes with the last line of each stanza. In place of the steady two beats per measure through the first three lines, there are now three beats per measure.⁴ Since it is the first beat of the measure that receives stress, this means that instead of the stress falling on every other note, it now falls on only every third note. In other words, in each measure of the last line, one has to wait half as long again for the next stress.

This delay is also reflected in the matching of the words to the melody. While in the first three lines,

every syllable of the words is sung to one note, the second and fourth syllables of the last line are now each held for two beats. As if this were not enough, the last word, which one expects to be the last note of the music, comes on a dominant chord, which is sustained for an additional three beats before finally being resolved.⁵ Thus the rhythm and the words of the last line of each stanza, instead of consisting of six simple, even beats, as in the previous lines, are drawn out over eleven! In this way the music further reinforces the message of the hymn. Not only is there no haste to start with, but the articulation of the words of the last line is almost twice as slow as those of the three preceding lines, holding the singer back and again constraining him or her to wait, to exercise and experience patience.

If we turn our attention from rhythm to melody, it is immediately clear that the first three notes of the first three lines are identical. There is no movement up or down, but, once again, reiteration, stasis. Further, the second line is a precise echo of the first line one scale step higher. Only in the third line is there a new melodic move. After the three repeated notes, the next three rise step by step up the scale. This leaves the last line to bring the melody down to the tonic again. While this could have occurred in a completely banal way, with a sequence of steps down the scale from B to D, the essential structure of this final line is G, F#, F#, E, E, D—four contiguous notes with two repetitions. But the descent is delayed—and the rhythmic extension of the melody (discussed above) reinforced—by the countermovement up a third after the first two stressed notes (F# and E), and the addition of a third, sustained E, delaying the final tonic for a whole measure.

This hymn is a model of consistency and unity. Its musical (rhythmic and melodic) and poetic form reflect, echo, and reinforce the meaning of the words. Those who sing this hymn are constrained by slow, even pacing, by repetition and delay into expressing and experiencing, like no other hymn I know, something of what the hymn is speaking about.

A Setting in the Church Year

There is nothing in the hymn that refers to Old Testament prophecy or to the birth stories of the gospels. And yet . . .

The larger society knows nothing of Advent—nor of the 12 days of Christmas from Christmas Day to Epiphany. Rather, its “Christmas” has displaced Advent, extending from roughly Thanksgiving to Christmas Day. That is when Christmas carols celebrating the birth of Christ are played in the malls and on the radio. In my neighborhood, people buy their Christmas trees in early December and throw them

out the day after Christmas Day. This public Christmas-before-Christmas and absence of Advent inevitably has its impact on the lives of Christians.

Our own celebration of Christmas imposes its own constraints. Advent becomes a particularly busy time of the year, in which presents are to be bought—not just for one person, as on a birthday—food to be prepared, arrangements to be made for house guests or for travel. For many Christians, Advent, rather than being a time of quiet expectation, is the most hectic season of the year.

In this situation, this hymn speaks to and gives a brief taste of the quiet spirit of faithful waiting that is at the heart of Advent. And if it does not refer to the specific events which are usually heralded during this season, that is perhaps an advantage. In Advent, we know the story, we know the outcome. There is no unknown, calling on our faith in God. Indeed, to some, the very familiarity of the Christmas story can become stale over many years. The element of the unexpected, the surprise, the reversal of expectations that is so much a part of the gospel story is lost to us. What this hymn does is remind us of the uncertainty, the open-endedness of waiting for God. We do not know what God will offer or bring. It is precisely the open-endedness of waiting for God, of *not* knowing when or how God will appear to us—as in this hymn—that faith is tested and experienced. Surely it is not inappropriate to be reminded of this during Advent, since this is a season not only for looking back at the expectation of the First Coming, but also for looking forward, in continuing faith and patience, toward the Second.⁶

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Notes

¹Ed. by W. C. Covert and C. W. Laufer (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Christian Education).

²Or 1879? There are conflicting dates in the secondary literature, and I have been unable to find a copy of the original.

³Cooper, a Church of England organist, and Bishop Bickersteth of Exeter, were both collaborators and friends.

⁴Registered by a change of time signature in *The Hymnal, Presbyterian Church in the USA* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Higher Education, 1933). On the other hand, *The Evangelical Hymnal* (St. Louis/Chicago: Eden Publishing House, 1917) puts the entire tune (with different words) into triple meter, giving a completely different effect. (I owe these references to an anonymous reviewer.)

⁵Some hymn books omit this measure, thus losing a significant element of the fitness of this setting for these words.

⁶I am grateful to my colleague, Carl P. Daw, Jr., for a few suggestions based on a reading of an earlier draft.