

God of the Sparrow God of the Whale

Robin Knowles Wallace

One of the most popular new hymns for many congregations in the last several years has been the unrhymed and unpunctuated "God of the sparrow God of the whale." Filled with biblical references and metaphors, set with a very singable tune, this hymn appeals to persons of all ages. A survey of 125 churches conducted by Don Saliers named this hymn as one of six new hymns from the 1989 *United Methodist Hymnal* which "have really established themselves in the congregation's repertoire." A Spanish translation may be found in *Mil Voces Para Celebrar* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1996), #37, by Argentine hymn-writer and translator Federico J. Pagura.

The author of "God of the sparrow God of the whale," Jaroslav J. Vajda (b. 1919, Ohio), was made a Fellow of The Hymn Society at the Annual Conference of The Hymn Society in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, in 1988. (The April 1988 issue of *THE HYMN* carried an interview with Vajda.) Carl Schalk (b. 1929, Illinois) wrote the tune ROEDER in 1983 for this text. It was first sung at the 1987 convention of The Hymn Society in Fort Worth, Texas.

The Carl Schalk Hymnary (Chicago: G.I.A., 1989) #39, *Hymnal Supplement II* (Carol Stream IL: Agape, 1987) #38, and *The Presbyterian Hymnal* 1990, #272, include Schalk's descant for stanzas two, four, and six. The *Hymnary* and *Hymnal Supplement II* print the descant as a vocal line, including the necessary word adjustment. *The Presbyterian Hymnal* places the descant in small notes above the melody line. This makes it particularly easy for keyboard players to play the melody and descant in the right hand with either the bass clef in the left hand, or, on the organ, taking the bass in the pedal and the tenor and alto lines in the left hand (producing a five-voice texture). This adds a nice variation to the accompaniment even if the descant is not sung.

This hymn is built on strong images, each directly related to God. Vajda has drawn these images from the Bible and from Christian experience. Any discussion of the text needs to open up its understanding, keeping the same form as the hymn while all participants provide their own answers. This hymn makes a marvelous study for a Sunday school class of any age. Children or youth might also draw pictures or make a banner of the various images and share that artwork when the hymn is sung in worship.

The opening words call to mind "His eye is on the sparrow" as well as Ps. 84:3, "Even the sparrow finds a home." The immediate contrast of whale shows the range of God's creation, from small to large. The swirling stars remind us that God holds the universe in God's hands (cf. Job 38:6b-7). By beginning with creation, this hymn is clear that God is the center of creation.

In his article "God and Nature" (*THE HYMN* 42:1), Paul Schilling suggested that the second stanza openly voices "the doubts and perplexities aroused by the violence of nature, yet expresses truth that divine purpose will ultimately triumph, and that in the meantime God will give us strength to endure." Biblical references include the earthquake when Paul and Silas were singing in jail (Acts 16:25-26), the storm stilled by Jesus in Mark 4:37-41, and the trumpet blast which sounds the day of the Lord (Zeph. 1:16) and the coming of the Son of Man (Mt. 24:31).

Stanza three contains the signs of divine initiative (compare Peter Bower's article in *Reformed Liturgy and Music* 28:3, "An Artistic Creation"). God's grace, offered to us in the rainbow covenant with Noah, by Jesus' death on the cross, and ultimately by the triumph of life over death in the empty grave at Easter, calls forth our profound thanks.

The first actual references to humanity occur in the fourth stanza. Mary's *Magnificat* celebrates that God will fill the hungry with good things. The ministry of Jesus was full of healing encounters with children, women, and men. The story of the prodigal

(Luke 10:29-37) is the story of how God welcomes us home when we have strayed.

The fifth stanza moves into community, specifically to the neighbor and the foe. The story of the Good Samaritan clarifies who is our neighbor, and the Sermon on the Mount includes Christ's teaching to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Mt. 5:44). The reference to pruning hook is found in Isaiah 2:4 and Micah 4:3, as spears are turned from weapons of war and violence into peaceful means of agricultural production.

Stanza six claims God who holds the ages and yet is ever near. God of the loving heart (cf. 1 John 4:8) changes the response of the creature into that of God's children. In Jesus Christ, we are given the power to become children of God (John 1:12). Home brings us back to the opening image of the sparrow finding her home, and echoes the vision of the new Jerusalem proclaiming, "See, the home of God is among mortals" (Rev. 21:2). To reinforce the sense of home, have the congregation fill out the final C major chord and let it resound in the sanctuary.

In the relatively short life of this hymn, it has found its way into many circumstances. I have heard it claimed as a favorite by an eight-year-old as well as an 84-year-old and heard it sung on a walk for hunger by a youth choir. One family sang it at the burial of a pet bird. It has been used on Earth Sunday, at Eucharist, and at confirmation.

The accompanying reading might be used during worship to enhance the singing and understanding of this hymn. Four readers will echo the varieties of the text, but if rehearsal time and persons are limited, the reading will work with just two persons alternating. When using the reading, play the introductory two measures with each stanza to bring the congregation back in.

This is a hymn which can grow with Christians and which speaks differently to persons of many ages. Use it in worship and let your congregation take it to heart that it might feed them in their daily walk with God. ■

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In addition to publishing many articles on worship and music, she has served as church musician for almost 30 years.

Responsorial Version

Children and youth sing stanza one

Reader 1: Awe and wonder —

Reader 2: at the glories of creation.

Reader 3: Praise —

Reader 4: Praise God for the many gifts we have been given.

Adults sing stanza two

Reader 1: Woe to you.

Reader 2: Woe to us.

Reader 3: Christ Jesus came to save the lost.

Reader 4: Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

Everyone sings stanza three

Reader 1: Grace to you.

Reader 2: Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

Reader 3: O give thanks.

Reader 4: Thanks be to God.

Women and girls sing stanza four

Reader 1: Care — Jesus said,

Reader 2: You took care of me when you took care of one of the least.

Reader 3: Life —

Reader 4: Life abundant for all.

Men and boys sing stanza five

Reader 1: You shall love God with all your heart.

Reader 2: You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself.

Reader 3: Peace be with you.

Reader 4: Grace and peace to you from the Holy One.

Everyone sings stanza six

Reader 1: Joy —

Reader 2: Sing for joy.

Reader 3: Even the sparrow finds a home.

Reader 4: And I will come to them and make my home with them, says our God.

Together: For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.

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God of the sparrow God of the whale

God of the sparrow

God of the whale

God of the swirling stars

How does the creature say Awe

How does the creature say Praise

God of the earthquake

God of the storm

God of the trumpet blast

How does the creature cry Woe

How does the creature cry Save

God of the rainbow

God of the cross

God of the empty grave

How does the creature say Grace

How does the creature say Thanks

God of the hungry

God of the sick

God of the prodigal (wayward child)

How does the creature say Care

How does the creature say Life

God of the neighbor

God of the foe

God of the pruning hook (olive branch)

How does the creature say Love

How does the creature say Peace

God of the ages

God near at hand

God of the loving heart

How do your children say Joy

How do your children say Home.

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