HYMN INTERPRETATION

MARY KAY BEALL

“Lord, Who Throughout These Forty Days”

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 (1 Sam. 17:16); 40 days as Elijah flees from Jezebel to Mt. Horeb (1 Kings 19:8); 40 days of grace for Nineveh 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.3

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,

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.⁴

The text for “Lord, Who Throughout These Forty Days” was written by Claudia Frances Hernaman born in Addelstone, 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. Hermann, 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 Dalie), 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 that 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, Cathiness from *The Edinburgh Psalter* (1635). This tune, sometimes called Cathines TUNE derives its name from Cathiness County in northeastern 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 Pulkinson 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), ICEI, 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
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

Notes


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


7 Ibid., 474.

8 Mary Kay Stulken, 99–100.


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.