

HYMN INTERPRETATION

MARY LOUISE BRINGLE

“Light Dawns on a Weary World”

Members of The Hymn Society have a peculiar custom of telling time by cities. I first noticed this when attending my inaugural conference seven years ago. Since then, I have become increasingly aware of the habit, as I have found myself practicing it as well. So, for example, a conversation like the following is quite common: “1999? No, that was the year of Vancouver.” “Oh, right, of course, *Boston* was 2000.” Births, deaths, marriages, partnerships, job changes, degree completions, cross-country moves: all get situated temporally in this fashion. There is something quasi-biblical about the cadence: in the year that Quirinius was governor of Syria; in the year King Uzziah died; in the year The Hymn Society met in San Antonio . . .

What follows in this column is a hymn story from 2001 (“Ah yes, the year the Hymn Society met in Independence”). The prior year, composer William Rowan had embarked on a project of writing what he called—*homage à Mendelssohn*—“Hymns without Words.” Rowan’s hypothesis was that a composer might arrive at structurally interesting settings for future hymns by letting musical forms rather than words animate the creative process. This is admittedly backward from more standard practice, whereby a textwriter initially comes up with a hymn poem, which a composer subsequently paints musically.

The experiment seemed worth trying, however. Judging from the hundred or so texts Rowan received for his initial eighteen tunes presented in Boston, wordsmiths were excited by the new opportunity. He therefore composed a further set of unworded tunes to present in a sectional in Independence. One of those tunes, originally known simply as WW #26, gave birth to the hymn, “Light Dawns on a Weary World” (see attached), written during the Independence conference. Rowan subsequently named the tune TEMPLE OF PEACE in honor of the Community of Christ worship space where The Hymn Society had gathered.

A few days before the sectional in which WWs #19 through 34 were to be presented, I was honored with a sneak preview (or more accurately, “pre-hear”) of #26, because Rowan was so sure I would like it. He was right. We waited one afternoon until all other people had cleared out of the room where Paul Richardson had conducted his sectional on *The Missouri Har-*

mony, which we had both attended, and pre-empted the piano so that Rowan could play the new melody for me. It was love at first listen. While I played the tune through a few further times myself to get it into my ear, he scribbled it onto a piece of scrap paper for me to take back to my room at the Red Roof Inn.

Words came that very evening, refrain first. What had most captivated me on my initial hearing of the composition was the little sixteenth note run on beat four of measure 12 (in the “alto” line). In that figure, I heard the tinkling water of a fountain. “Hmmm,” I thought to myself (as is my habit when lying in quiet wait for a text to appear), “that sounds like a ‘watered garden.’ Where in scripture would I find references to a watered garden?”

Blessing the Gideons, I pulled out the Bible from the bedside table, and turned to the latter chapters of Isaiah—those sections thought by scholars to derive from the historical period surrounding the end of the Babylonian Captivity, when Cyrus of Persia proclaimed release to the captives and permitted them to return from exile to their former home in Judah. To those who were intending to go back and “rebuild the ancient ruins,” the prophet declared: if you create a newly-just society, putting an end to oppression of all kinds, “you will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail” (Is 58:11).

From this point in scripture, I began flipping pages, scanning backward and forward. My eye caught on chapter 55, verse 12 (again, referring to the return from exile): “You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace.” I began humming the melody of the refrain of WW#26 and looking back at the scripture passage. I sang Isaiah’s words softly to measures 13–15, and then with increasing conviction. They fit as if text and tune had been written for each other. With only a bit of adjusting, another portion of verse 12 easily adapted to the music of the preceding two measures: “the hills and mountains shall break forth with singing.” The culminating phrase in Isaiah’s verse—“and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands”—supplied the opening image for the refrain, only a few bars of which then remained to be worded. “The dry lands gush with springs” came to mind for measures 9–10, as a way of alluding to the “watered garden” I had initially heard in the music, as well as to other passages (e.g. 43:19–20) where Isaiah speaks of God’s providence as a gift of water in the desert.

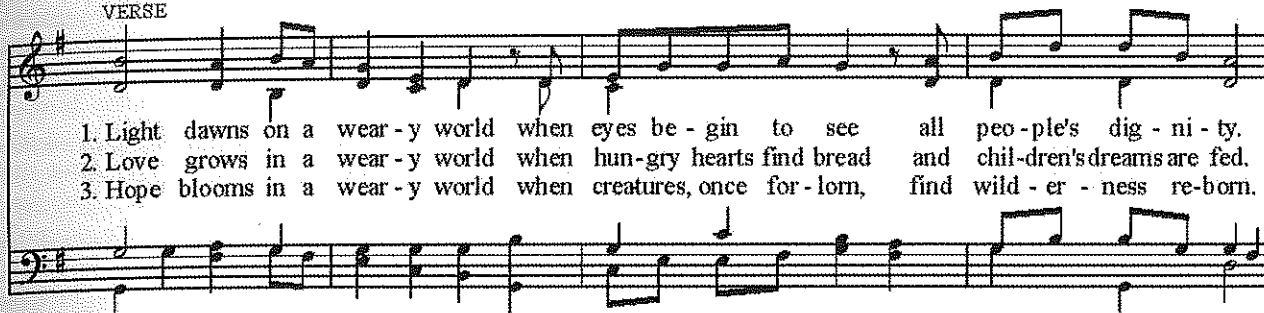
The origins of the last line of the refrain require a little more explaining. On the morning of the day I began working on a text for WW#26, Fred Kaan had delivered a plenary address on “Peacemaking through Worship.” He had spoken powerfully of the need for Christians, Jews, and Muslims to work together in

Light Dawns on a Weary World

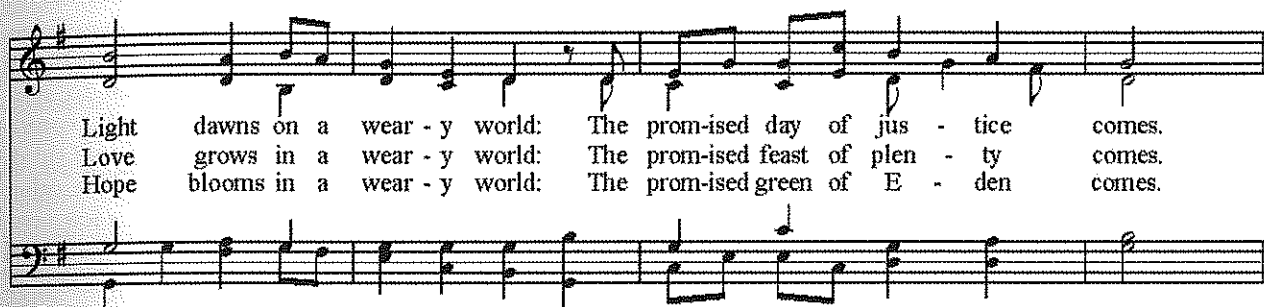
Words: Mary Louise Bringle, 2001

Music: TEMPLE OF PEACE, 7 12 7 8 with refrain; William P Rowan, 2001

VERSE



1. Light dawns on a wear-y world when eyes be - gin to see all peo - ple's dig - ni - ty.
2. Love grows in a wear-y world when hun - gry hearts find bread and chil - dren's dreams are fed.
3. Hope blooms in a wear-y world when creatures, once for - lorn, find wild - er - ness re - born.

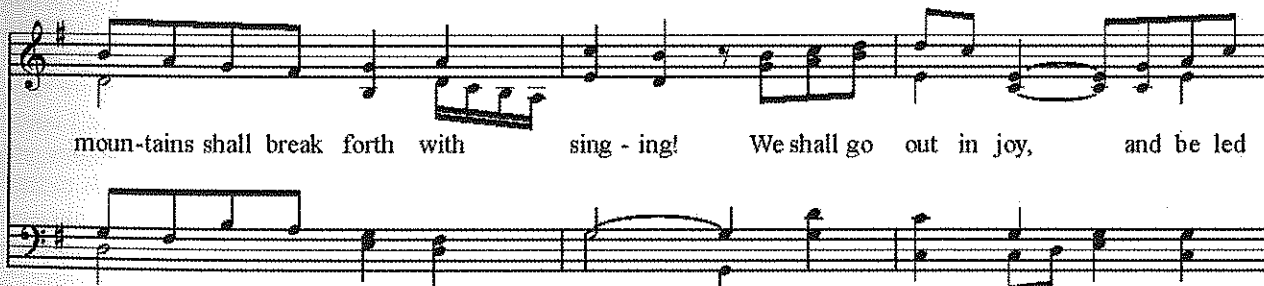


Light dawns on a wear - y world: The prom - ised day of jus - tice comes.
Love grows in a wear - y world: The prom - ised feast of plen - ty comes.
Hope blooms in a wear - y world: The prom - ised green of E - den comes.

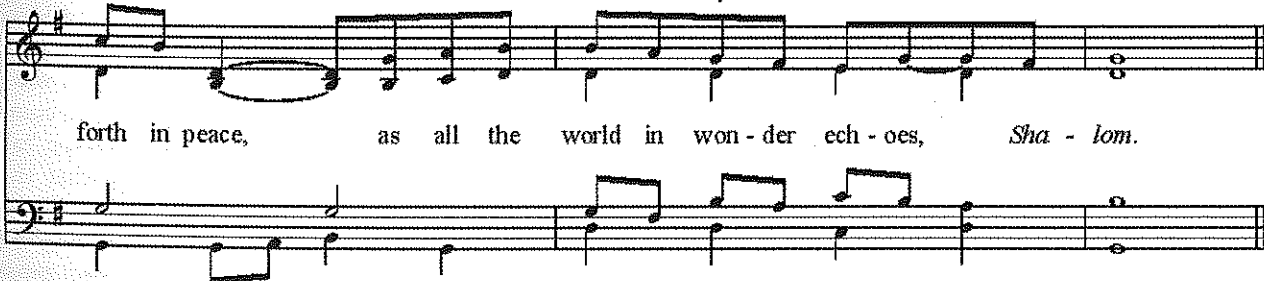
REFRAIN



The trees shall clap their hands; the dry lands, gush with springs; the hills and



moun - tains shall break forth with sing - ing! We shall go out in joy, and be led



forth in peace, as all the world in won - der ech - oes, Sha - lom.

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Light Dawns on a Weary World

TEMPLE OF PEACE 7.6.6.7.8 with refrain

Light dawns on a weary world
when eyes begin to see
all people's dignity.

Light dawns on a weary world:
the promised day of justice comes.

REFRAIN:

The trees shall clap their hands;
the dry lands, gush with springs;
the hills and mountains shall break
forth with singing!

We shall go out in joy,
and be led forth in peace.
as all the world in wonder echoes,
Shalom.

Love grows in a weary world
when hungry hearts find bread
and children's dreams are fed.

Love grows in a weary world:
the promised feast of plenty comes.

REFRAIN

Hope blooms in a weary world
when creatures, once forlorn,
find wilderness reborn.

Hopes blooms in a weary world:
the promised green of Eden comes.

REFRAIN

Mary Louise Bringle
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building a world of *shalom/salaam*—remarks which proved their foresightedness early in the fall following the conference, when people in the United States and around the world reeled from the events of September 11. As I was drafting my hymn text, I found myself reflecting on Kaan's remarks in light of Isaiah's vision of a truly just community—one in which harmonious relationships are restored not only among human beings but also between humans and the natural world. The idea of closing the hymn by having the entire creation call out "*Shalom*" appealed to me; further, the mimicking melodic figures of the refrain's tune suggested the image of "echoing." Finally, in the absence of any rhyme in the text of the refrain, I felt as if other devices needed to be used for poetic effect. I chose a repetition of vowel sounds: all those nice, round O's in "world," "wonder," "echo," "shalom."

When I turned from writing the refrain to constructing stanzas, those same repeated O vowels helped to structure openings for the second and third: "love grows"; "hope blooms." Stanza 1, on the other hand, took its inspiration from Isaiah 55:8, a few verses before the "watered garden" passage: "Then shall your light break forth like the dawn." All three of these stanza openings assumed a simple pattern of a one-syllable noun followed by a one-syllable verb, which seemed to my ear an apt way of treating the opening half note, on an accented beat one, following by quarter note, also on an accented beat three. In prosody (the study of the metrical structures of verse), this is known as a *spondee*, a metric foot consisting of two long or stressed syllables.


The remaining text of the stanzas is highly patterned as well. "In a weary world" repeats in all three stanzas, as does the phrase: "the promised [day of justice, feast of plenty, green of Eden] comes." A careful check will reveal that each stanza, in fact, contains only ten to thirteen words in phrases unique to it. The more time I spend on the craft of hymnwriting, the more I come to realize the value of such simplicity. Singers are thereby disentangled from the thicket of words to find their way more clearly through a few short phrases, dense with meaning: "eyes begin to see all people's dignity," "hungry hearts find bread and children's dreams are fed"; "creatures, once forlorn, find wilderness reborn."

All these phrases deliberately reflect aspects of what the book of Isaiah holds up as a vision of beloved community, blessed with life in all its fullness. To see "all people's dignity" re-interprets for our day what the prophet proclaimed in the late 6th century BCE to those who were going about the task of rebuilding the temple: even eunuchs and foreigners, those most despised by the cultural purists, were to be welcomed into "a house of prayer for *all* peoples" (Is 56:3–8). To nurture the dreams of children harkens to the ending of chapter 65 where the messianic vision of the wolf and lamb that feed together is set before "the offspring

of the blessed of the Lord, and their children with them." To give bread to the hungry speaks to the many places where Isaiah calls for social justice, and "the promised feast of plenty" recalls the prophet's enticing "feast of fat things, a feast of wine on the lees, of fat things full of marrow" (Is 25:6). To restore the green and fecund habitation of all creatures bears witness to the early ecological promise: Yahweh "will comfort Zion," making "her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord" (Is 51:3). In a rendering appropriate for the twenty-first century, however, the word "wilderness" assumes a more favorable interpretation, since we now know that the health of our planet demands the restoration of wilderness rather than its taming.

Because the stanzas and refrain of "Light Dawns" draw upon so many texts from Isaiah, the hymn is appropriate for multiple Sundays in the liturgical year; I have counted more than a dozen possible occasions in the three-year cycle of *The Revised Common Lectionary*. While I did not originally envision the text as a hymn for either Advent or Lent, I have learned—as is so often the case—from the liturgical sensitivity of music directors around the country. After the fourth or fifth of these had written to me, mentioning use of the hymn during the seasons leading up to Christmas and Easter, I came to understand possibilities that I had not initially envisioned.

After all, in their own ways both Advent and Lent are seasons in which we wait for the brilliance of new hope to dispel the shadows into which our lives have fallen. If during either of these seasons we spend more time reflecting as individuals or communities on what we need to do to discern all people's dignity, to feed the dreams of children and the physical hungers of all the world's people, and to restore the natural environment as a more fitting home for earth's varied crea-

tures, then surely our time of waiting will bear fruit . . . and by the grace of God, light will dawn on a weary world. 

Mary Louise Bringle holds a Ph.D. in Theological Studies from Emory University. She is Professor of Philosophy and Religion at Brevard College in Brevard, NC. In 2002, she was named "emerging textwriter" by The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada and is President-Elect of the Society.

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