

HYMN INTERPRETATION

“Nature with open volume stands” and “How shallow former shadows seem”

JAMES HART BRUMM

Since we looked ahead (like good worship planners) to Advent and Christmas with the July “Hymn Interpretation,” I want to peer into Holy Week with this entry. Also I am stretching the rules of the column, just a little bit, and will consider two Passiontide hymns, side by side, both of which deserve more attention than they receive. “Nature with open volume stands” was penned by Isaac Watts in 1707, part of the third book of his *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*. “How shallow former shadows seem” was written by our own Carl P. Daw, Jr., and made its first appearance in *A Year of Grace* (Hope Publishing Company, 1990). Both hymns reflect upon the horror and the scandal of the crucifixion, Watts approaching it from a more universal vantage point, as if all creation is witness, and Daw taking a more personal perspective, as a transaction between God and the worshipping congregation who sings the hymn.

Watts’ hymn begins by telling us that all of creation is a proclamation of who God is—a statement with which we may be less comfortable after two world wars and a cold war, while facing the challenges of AIDS, SARS, terrorism, and global warming. But he quickly moves, in the second stanza, to point out that the greatest example of God’s glory is in the crucifixion: in fact, Watts’ title for this hymn in his 1707 volume was “Christ Crucify’d [sic]: the Wisdom and Power of God.” The hymn firmly embraces the paradox of the crucifixion, that God’s power, wisdom, and love are proclaimed in Christ’s death, and that we draw life from it. The hymn appears in these contemporary North American hymnals—the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, the [Episcopal] *Hymnal 1982*, *Rejoice in the Lord*, *A New Hymnal for Colleges and Schools*, *The Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary*—and only the last includes the third stanza. Here Watts speaks of God joining “Grace and Vengeance” in this act, displaying for the world God’s conflicted “inmost heart,” which both demanded humanity’s death for sin and also wanted to save us and make us children. Laid open for the world is the self-contradiction the world cannot understand, what Paul calls “a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks . . . the power of God and the wisdom of

God” (I Corinthians 1:23–24, New Revised Standard Version). We are called to behold this terrible wonder of Calvary and then go forth to proclaim it to the world.

Daw sets the scene as found in Scripture and relates it to the primordial stories of Jewish and Christian faith. Darkness swallows up light and the safe, firm earth shakes, undoing the work of Creation in Genesis 1. The veil in the Temple is torn from top to bottom, undoing the relationship between God and God’s people that has been in place since Israel encamped at Mount Sinai (Exodus 20:18–21). The second stanza draws on classic lines from two of the greatest writers in English, with allusions to Shakespeare’s *Othello* in line four and John Donne’s poem “Good Friday, 1613, Riding Westward” in line 5.¹ All through the hymn, Daw speaks of the crucifixion in artistic terms—light and shadow, “etched in iron, blood and wood”—and the reference to other literary artists reminds us that the work of Calvary surpassed all art (which is, after all, creative work) before or since. The allusion to John 1 is most obvious in the seventh line of stanza two, but it’s also present in the second line of stanza one and the first of stanza three, setting up a strange foreshadowing of Sunday: the darkness has not fully comprehended the Light, for the Light will live! The stage is set for a new creation, a new testament, or covenant, to replace the old covenant of the Passover lamb. While Watts ends by sending us from the scene out into the world, Daw challenges the worshiper to go deeper, beyond the image to the Love which is at its very center, to the Love which we can dare to call “good,” and to the Love which makes Easter—and every Christian’s triumph over every tragedy—possible.

Both hymns touch upon a subject matter which is none too popular in our hymnody: the crucifixion as, paradoxically, an act of unfathomable horror and unspeakable beauty, an act that was for our sake and yet was about something bigger than we. While the triumph of the cross is implied, it is never explicit. Most hymns about the cross are less graphic in their descriptions of what is happening—we tend to avoid the “His dying crimson” stanza of “When I survey the wondrous cross”—or focus more unambiguously on how this benefits us, the singers, in particular. These are hymns that confront the death, despair, and loss, and then, as Daw writes in his final line “dare to call it good.”

But we do not like to confront death—and especially not the crucifixion—quite so directly; we prefer highs to lows, in witness whereof compare the attendance at Maundy Thursday and Good Friday worship

to that of Palm Sunday and Easter. We prefer the more superficial joys of the parade into Jerusalem and the empty tomb to the full depth of the love and commitment God shows us in between. Even though the cross makes the victory of resurrection richer and more complete, we are more comfortable observing these realities at a discreet distance rather than engaging them more intimately.

Yet these hymns are all about an intimate engagement with the horror and the wonder of Golgotha, and the tunes that express them best reflect that engagement and that struggle. ELTHAM, the tune from Nathaniel Gawthorne's *Harmonia Perfecta* of 1730, harmonized by Samuel Sebastian Wesley in 1872, is a tune worshipers must struggle with, even as they struggle with the knowledge that the greatest creative act of our world's Maker is the supreme act of destruction (indeed, self-destruction). *Rejoice in the Lord and Hymnal 1982* both use this tune, although *Rejoice* compromises and allows GERMANY (William Gardiner's *Sacred Melodies*, 1815) while the *Lutheran Book of Worship* sets the text to ANGELUS. Only ELTHAM grabs the stark reality of the situation and forces the singers to stretch to meet it, much as we must stretch to accept what God did on the Friday. Daw suggests THE CHURCH'S DESOLATION and TALLIS' THIRD TUNE for his text, and these do quite nicely, as does David Ashley White's MARYVILLE COLLEGE, but only William Rowan's tune CARDINAL, to my thinking, offers the gut wrenching impact that Daw paints with his text.

It's hard to imagine that any congregation is going to like ELTHAM or CARDINAL. Both are too angular, too modal, too foreign to the sounds most modern ears know as music. But these are not hymns about what we want, nor about what God wants; they are hymns about what became necessary for our salvation, a reality which we must confront on Good Friday so that we can fully celebrate the grace that comes with Easter. Believers must move through this reality, not only intellectually, but also emotionally, in order to be able to truly mean it when we sing "The strife is o'er, the battle done." I am not arguing that we make any of this more congregationally accessible, but that we push our congregations to confront it all, and to confront these hymns. It's hard to imagine that any modern congregation is going to like either of these hymns, but, if they are presented and performed with integrity, congregations will take these hymns to heart.

Notes

¹I am indebted, as we all are, to Carl himself for pointing this out on page 70 of *A Year of Grace*.

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Nature with open volume stands
to spread her Maker's praise abroad;
and every labour of his hands
shows something worthy of a God.

But in the grace that rescu'd Man
his brightest form of glory shines;
here on the Cross 'tis fairest drawn
in precious Blood and crimson Lines.

Here his whole Name appears complete,
nor Wit can guess nor Reason prove
which of the Letters best is writ,
the Power, the Wisdom, or the Love.

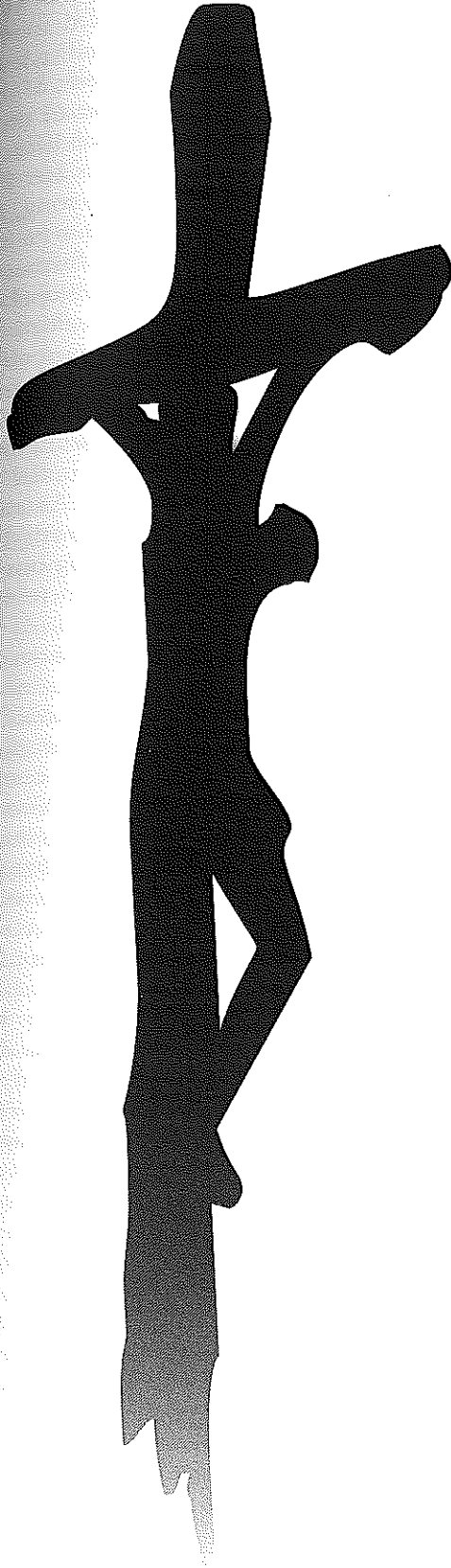
Here I behold his inmost Heart,
where Grace and Vengeance strangely join,
piercing his Son with strangest Smart
to make the purchas'd Pleasures mine.

O the sweet Wonders of the Cross,
where God the Saviour loved and dy'd!
Her noblest Life my Spirit draws
from his dear Wounds, and bleeding Side.

I would for ever speak his Name
in sounds to mortal Ears unknown,
with Angels join to praise the Lamb,
and worship at his Father's throne.

Isaac Watts, 1707

As it appeared in his Hymns and Spiritual Songs



How shallow former shadows seem
beside this great reverse
as darkness swallows up the Light
of all the universe:
creation shivers at the shock,
the Temple rends its veil,
a pallid stillness stifles time,
and nature's motions fail.

This is no midday fantasy,
no flight of fevered brain.
With vengeance awful, grim, and real,
chaos is come again:
the hands that formed us from the soil
are nailed upon the cross;
the Word that gave us life and breath
expires in utter loss.

Yet deep within this darkness lives
a Love so fierce and free
that arcs all voids and—risk supreme!—
embraces agony.
Its perfect testament is etched
in iron, blood, and wood;
with awe we glimpse its true import
and dare to call it good.

Carl P. Daw, Jr., 1990

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