HYMN INTERPRETATION

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WHEN SUDDEN TERROR TEARS APART

1. When sudden terror tears apart
the world we thought was ours,
we find how fragile strength can be,
how limited our powers.

2. As tower and fortress fall, we watch
with disbelieving stare
and numbly hear the anguished cries
that pierce the ash-filled air.

3. Yet most of all we are aware
of emptiness and void:
of lives cut short, of structures razed,
of confidence destroyed.

4. From this abyss of doubt and fear
we grope for words to pray,
and hear our stammering tongues embrace
a timeless Kyrie.

5. Have mercy, Lord, give strength and peace,
and make our courage great;
restrain our urge to seek revenge,
to turn our hurt to hate.

6. Help us to know your steadfast love,
your presence near as breath;
rekindle in our hearts the hope
of life that conquers death.

—CARL P. DAW, JR.

Erik Routley writes that a hymn has done its work when it "beckons to the worshiper at his or her best and causes that worshiper to feel or say: 'That is what I wanted to say, but I am grateful to whoever put the words in my mouth.'"[2] Many occasions in our personal and community lives leave us wanting for words, but among them Tuesday, September 11, 2001, in the life of our world stands out with a unique starkness. Even as the date recedes into history, images of that autumn morning in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania remain forever etched in our memories.

Carl P. Daw, Jr., like several other members of The Hymn Society, created a hymn text shortly after the tragic event. "When Sudden Terror Tears Apart" was widely circulated by e-mail, and came accompanied by this message from Daw: "It has been hard to concentrate on office work this week. One of the ways I have dealt with the situation is to write [this hymn]."[3]

The hymn text has affinities with the tradition of poetic lament in the Book of Psalms.[4]

In the main section of lament psalms, complainants join in recounting their affliction before God: danger and death seem near at hand, hostile forces are on every side. In this hymn text, the distress of the community emerges in the first three stanzas, which Daw wrote with a consciousness of the circle of human relationship. In his words, "the best hymnwriting is always done in the context of a real or imagined community. In this case the community consisted of such farflung components as Joy Patterson, with whom I had spoken about the relevance of her text 'When aimless violence takes those we love' to the September 11 events; an account by an Anglican monk who had been at Trinity Church, Wall Street, during the attack; concern for various friends in Manhattan, both for their safety and for the ordeal ahead of them; and the experience of being in a quiet, meditative service at the monastery chapel in Cambridge on the afternoon of that day."

Throughout the opening of the hymn, Daw chooses to suggest rather than delineate, as he explains: "I begin with references to the events that we all know only too well. Because they are so well known, they don't need to be narrated, simply alluded to. Not describing the events in detail is also a means of allowing the readers/singers of the text to fill out the sketch with their own knowledge of events, which engages them in a shared task of remembering."

Stanzas one and two convey the onlookers' amazement at the collapse of what seemed invincible strength, and at the growing awareness of the unthinkable loss of human life. Collectively, we become as the figure in the Book of Lamentations, bystanders helpless among the ruins, with this our word of mourning: "how lonely she sits, the city once thronged with people" (Lam. 1:1). There is disbelief at the sudden stripping away of symbols of wealth and power, at the crumbling of human self-assurance. Will another thought from the same chapter of Lamentations come to resonate in our spirits, gradually challenging us? Have we thought ourselves above reproach, thought ourselves invulnerable?

Stanza three expresses how, in the midst of life and death played out before our eyes, we comprehend in an instant the biblical message that so often reminds us of the brevity of our days. How illusory our daily small securities suddenly seem, for each of us is "like grass, sprouting and flowering in the morning, withered and dry before dusk" (Psalm 90: 5–6).

Daw points out that "the deliverance that the psalmist seeks is often one of protection or extrication from the current dilemma, but sometimes it is simply an appeal for the restoration of hope in the midst of overwhelming adversity (as in Psalm 130). So the final third of the text is a communal prayer in response to the devastation sketched in the first part of the hymn."[5] In stanza four, the community joins in a cry that resonates across the ages: *Kyrie!* The Greek phrase, *Kyrie eleison*—"Lord, have mercy"—was used liturgically in the early church and has been retained in liturgies over the centuries to this day, spoken, chanted, sung chorally. The *Kyrie* signals a critical moment in this hymn. Here, as in the psalms of lament, those who have called out in grief turn explicitly to the God of salvation.

The invocation for mercy leads into stanza five. Daw writes that he was "deeply concerned to express our profound human need for God's guidance in ways that would not perpetuate the cycle of violence. In other words, what could I offer people to sing as a message of comfort and hope in such a situation?" As a people of faith, the community prays to be able to reach spiritually beyond the terror witnessed and into a broad and deep compassion. The repeated refrain of the Christian gospel, not repeated media images, summon us to transcend the impulse toward vengeance. Indeed, hearing the gospel attunes us to a radical new call, the saying of Jesus that is found so hard to carry out: "pray for those who treat you badly" (Luke 6:28). This will be the ultimate prophetic word of our prayer.

The closing lines of the hymn are replete with a sense of confidence in divine presence, another feature typical of biblical psalms of lament. In the sixth stanza, the subtlety of Trinitarian references shows once again the depth of Daw's fluency in the language and imagery of scripture. The first address is to God of the covenant, source of steadfast love, *hesed*, the God whose "love endures forever" (Psalm 136). The second line recalls the opening of the Book of Genesis, where the spirit, the breath of God, hovers over the waters. That divine *ruach* becomes a regenerating principle summoning order and life out of endless darkness (Gen. 1:2). The final two lines of stanza six refer to Jesus Christ and the good news of resurrection, life triumphant over death.

Commenting on the overall structure of his hymn text, Daw notes that "the first three stanzas are the 'when,' the fourth the implicit 'then,' and the final two the emergent prayer . . [yet] the logical and theological underpinnings do not need to be recognized in order for the text to be effective; in fact, it is highly preferable for them to be implicit rather than explicit. But it is [useful] to comprehend that craft is an essential consideration when seeking to convey one's commitments and convictions effectively."

Written in Common Meter, with the rhyme scheme A B C B, this text would work with a number of well-known melodies. Daw offers specific suggestions: "while writing the hymn, I had heard the tune BANGOR supporting the words, but I realized that not every congregation knows that tune, so I also suggested DETROIT (partly because many congregations know it with the text 'Forgive our sins as we forgive,' which I thought would be a very appropriate subtext). Since then, others have found additional CM tunes in minor keys, and I do think of a minor key as an important part of the experience reflected in the text. I also expected that some congregations would prefer to sing three stanzas of CMD rather than six of CM, so I suggested the very haunting THIRD MODE MELODY by Tallis. The primary consideration here is that the tune not be facile or trite, because such a tune diminishes the gravity of the situation." Daw's original designation, BANGOR, is both musically fitting and practical; however, THIRD MODE MELODY (also called THE THIRD TUNE in some hymn books) has a distinct lamentation quality[6] and, as Common Meter Double, allows for an extended and flowing musical-textual line.

Routley observes that "hymnody introduces into the life of the church a creative tension between the passing and the timeless, between the spatially universal and the local,"[7] and goes on to say that the church disregards these opposing poles to its everlasting detriment. In the newest addition to his large oeuvre of fine hymn texts, Daw has masterfully woven together the most contemporary moment with one of the most ancient prayers, the voice of the heart in time of trouble.[8] His powerful and evocative hymn gives us words to utter our profound need and to sing hope for the world which we as a blessed and yet very imperfect human family inhabit together.

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Notes

[1]For permission to use and/or reproduce this text in any manner, contact the copyright division of Hope Publishing Company (1-800-323-1049).

[2]Erik Routley, *Christian Hymns Observed* (Princeton: Prestige Publications, 1982), 107.

[3]I am greatly indebted to Carl Daw for generously and promptly providing information for this column. To preserve the immediacy of the hymnwriter's voice, I have retained many of his comments as received.