

Hymn of Promise: In the bulb there is a flower

Robin Knowles Wallace

I write this column as hurricanes have ripped into central Florida, California struggles with storms from El Niño, a tentative peace agreement exists with Ireland and at times the swirl around my own life seems overwhelming. By the time readers see this column, new confusions will have entered our lives, and those inside and outside the church will be searching for something that is secure. In the midst of all these and other mysteries of life, there is something we can count on: God's promise to always be with us.

Natalie Sleeth (1930-1992) had a gift for setting theological and biblical truths with singable melodies in joyful meters. Wife of a homiletics professor, she took advantage of some space in her life to "stretch [her] mind" and take a class in choral arranging with Lloyd Pfausch at Southern Methodist University in 1968. Thus began a new and creative time, as she discovered her gifts of writing both texts and music for church and school.

"In the bulb there is a flower" was written in 1985 as Natalie pondered "ideas of life and death, spring and winter, Good Friday and Easter." A dinner guest shared a work by T.S. Eliot that contained the phrase "In our end is our beginning," which proved to be the catalyst for this composition ("East Coker 5" of *The Four Quartets*). It premiered at a choral festival that March at Pasadena Community Church in St. Petersburg, Florida, as an anthem for unison voices, descant, and piano, and was published soon thereafter. Natalie chose "Hymn of Promise" as its publication title.

In *Adventures for the Soul: 36 Inspirational Poems and the Stories Behind Them*, published in 1987 by Hope Publishing (from which the quotations in this article come), Natalie says "hymn suggests that perhaps a congregation could sing it." That suggestion was picked up by a member

of the United Methodist Hymnal Committee, and "Hymn of Promise" made its debut as a congregational hymn in that hymnal. An early survey of hymns in use by United Methodist churches from their 1989 hymnal found that "Hymn of Promise" was quickly becoming a favorite in many congregations. Other hymnals followed suit and the list accompanying this article shows where this hymn may be found.

Many of Sleeth's compositions have been used by children and children's choirs because of their direct language, singable melodies, and lively accompaniments. So it is natural that this hymn has also been sung by children. Finger plays for the first stanza are almost inevitable: fists opening from a bulb to flower, fingers picking up a tiny seed which blossoms into a huge apple tree, and closed-hand cocoon opening to become a flying butterfly. Rosalie Branigan, a liturgical dancer known across the United States, has published a choreography for this hymn in *The Chorister* (March 1997).¹

If you are new to this text, it may be disconcerting to find that it appears in most hymnals under the section "Death and eternal life." Don't let this discourage you from using this text for many different occasions: springtime or other change of seasons, Easter, Good Friday, times of turmoil and trouble, times of affirmation of faith. Because it can be sung at various times in the midst of life, when we then use it in "A Service of Death and Resurrection," it will be familiar and comforting as well as uplifting.

Though this hymn is understandable on one level by children, it is also a text which grows as we grow in our Christian understanding of faith and the mysteries of incarnation and resurrection. As we grow and begin to know the depths of human joy and sorrow and their intermingling, so our appreciation of this hymn can grow.

Biblical references abound in this hymn. The first stanza's discussion of seeds and flowers draws on the creation stories in

Genesis 1 and on the parables of the sower and of the mustard seed in the Gospels. Songs of Moses and Miriam, David and Hannah, Mary and Simeon mix with waiting in silence for God (Psalm 62:1, 5). Ecclesiastes 3:11 points us to the God who has "put a sense of past and future" into our minds. The mystery of Jesus Christ and of God's involvement in our mere mortal lives echoes Psalm 8 and 1 Timothy 3:16. Stanza three takes its beginning from the last book of the Bible, Revelation 21:6: "I am the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end." Like the father in Mark 9 and Thomas the disciple (John 20), we are called to have belief in the midst of our doubt. United with Christ in death, we are also united with him in the resurrection (Romans 6:5). The Greek term *mysterion*, used in the early church in regard to baptism and Eucharist, suggests some of the meaning of the refrain: that which is now unrevealed, of which we only catch a glimpse, that which "now we see in a mirror dimly." We know that something is there to be understood and grasped, yet the self-revealing of God, known as *mysterion*, happens in God's time, at the right season (Ecclesiastes 3 and 1 Corinthians 13).

"In the bulb there is a flower" may be introduced by solo voice, children's voices, or instrumentally with flute, violin, or oboe. *Hymnal: A Worshipbook* prints this hymn as melody line with guitar chords, which could be very effective with a small group. When using the hymnal accompaniment on the organ, play sustained dotted half-notes in the pedal and sustain the left-hand chordal patterns. Sleeth's anthem arrangement of this hymn, "Hymn of Promise" (Hope A580) can be used as accompaniment for a congregation, adding the descant with the choir or on flute or violin. Note that the anthem does have a coda that the hymn arrangement does not include. John Ferguson has written a nice four-part arrangement of this hymn (Hope A705) and Barbara Thompson has published a handbell ar-

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rangement for three to five octaves (Hope 1519).

The following litany was written with children and non-readers in mind, as the response remains constant. It might be led by one or more persons, depending on how many leaders are available. The litany follows the movement of the hymn text from what is seen to what is felt to what is believed.

Litany to use with "Hymn of Promise"

Response

We can count on God's promise.

God created nature
and all its changes.

We can count on God's promise.

In Jesus Christ,
God frees us from sin.

We can count on God's promise.

God promises to be with us
in hard times.

We can count on God's promise.

God is with us yesterday,
today, and all our tomorrows.

We can count on God's promise.

God sees all of life
and cares for us.

We can count on God's promise.

God promises us life forever
in God's presence.

We can count on God's promise.

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Members may reprint this litany for
use with their congregations.

For more information about The
Hymn Society, contact 1-800-THE-
HYMN.

"In the Bulb There Is a Flower"
appears in the following
hymnals:

The United Methodist Hymnal,
707

Hymnal: A Worshipbook, 614

Chalice Hymnal, 638

The New Century Hymnal, 433

Mil Voces Para Celebrar, 338

Voices United, 703

¹ Note: It is appropriate to include
the choreographer's name in any
bulletin listing, just as you would a
composer or author.

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In the Bulb There Is a Flower

Natalie Sleeth, 1985

Unison

1 In the bulb there is a flow - er; in the seed, an ap - ple tree;
2 There's a song in ev - ery si - lence, seek - ing word and mel - o - dy;
3 In our end is our be - gin - ning; in our time, in - fin - i - ty;

in co - coons, a hid - den prom - ise; but - ter - flies will soon be free!
there's a dawn for ev - ery dark - ness, bring - ing hope to you and me.
in our doubt there is be - liev - ing; in our life, e - ter - ni - ty.

In the cold and snow of win - ter there's a spring that waits to be,
From the past will come the fu - ture; what it holds, a mys - ter - y,
In our death, a res - ur - rec - tion; at the last, a vic - to - ry,

un - re - vealed un - til its sea - son, some - thing God a - lone can see.
un - re - vealed un - til its sea - son, some - thing God a - lone can see.
un - re - vealed un - til its sea - son, some - thing God a - lone can see.

Tune: PROMISE 8.7.8.7.D.
Natalie Sleeth, 1985

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