

**The Faith We Sing**  
**Psalm 149:1-3**  
**A Sermon about the Hymns We Sing**  
Ypsilanti First United Methodist Church  
September 7, 2008

Rev. Melanie Lee Carey

**First Hymn: "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing"**

Our first hymn today was written by Charles Wesley, brother to John Wesley, who is considered to be the Father of Methodism. This hymn actually has eighteen verses, but don't worry. Today we will sing just the first four. Charles Wesley wrote this hymn on the first anniversary of his conversion. The opening lines came as a result of a conversation between Charles and his friend Peter Böhler, a Moravian believer. On the subject of praising Christ, Böhler had said, "Had I a thousand tongues I would praise Him with them all." Based on that remark, Wesley wrote, "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing, My great Redeemer's praise, the glories of my God and King the triumphs of His Grace!"

Since 1780, this hymn has been the opening hymn in Methodist Hymnals throughout the world. The Spanish Language United Methodist Hymnal that we use in our 11 a.m. is called Mil Voces para Celebrar which is in English "**O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing.**" Let us now stand and sing verses 1-4 of this hymn.<sup>1</sup>

**Sermon:**

As United Methodists, we come from a singing tradition. Our ancestors in the faith were people who sang about what they believed, about God and about Jesus.

Every year in May, the United Methodists from the Eastern half of Michigan and the Upper Peninsula gather at Adrian College for our annual meeting, called Annual Conference. Opening worship always starts the same way, with singing. And it is something to behold, hearing hundreds of voices singing out the words of our faith. I confess that the singing is one of my favorite parts of annual conference.

As United Methodists the faith we sing is an important part of who we are. And so today, I want to look at a few of our hymns as we think about the faith we sing. I also want to point out, that we have taken

seriously John Wesley's adage "The World is my Parish," as the faith that we sing comes from all parts of the world and many different cultures and traditions and languages.

Hymn number 521 "***I want Jesus to Walk with Me***" was arranged by singer and composer Edward Boatner. Boatner was born in New Orleans in 1898 and during his lifetime was the one of the leading authorities on the African-American Spirituals. Spirituals, also known as Negro Spirituals, Slave songs, Plantation songs or Jubilee songs, are a genre of music known by its origin and tone of victory over adversity. These songs were birthed into being during the time of slavery in our country and they speak to finding hope in the midst of grave despair. "***I want Jesus to Walk with Me,***" uses a rhythmic pattern that musically evokes footsteps on the long journey of life, through trials, sorrows, and troubles. Originally composed and sung by slaves, Edward Boatner, a professor of music at Wiley College in Marshall Texas, arranged this song for concerts and church music. The words in this hymn gave encouragement to those enslaved, that while the trials on earth were bitter, they were not alone, Jesus walks with them. Knowing that Jesus, who had already passed through the fiery trials and come out triumphant on the other side, was walking beside them gave them courage to go on. <sup>ii</sup> With this history in mind, Let us Sing No. 521, "***I want Jesus to Walk with Me.***"

Another Spiritual is No. 375, "***There's a Balm in Gilead.***" Gilead, located on the Eastern shore of the Jordan River, was a lush and fragrant area, abounding with wildflowers, and beautiful forests and glens. This district was widely known for its precious healing balm--a soothing, healing ointment—which had great medicinal value. The Bible mentions King David running to Gilead when he fled from his traitorous son, Absalom, who was trying to take over the throne. And the prophet Jeremiah asked the question "Is there no balm in Gilead?" when he grieved over the Israelites who had turned their back on God and refused to repent. Enslaved African Americans believed that the balm in Gilead was Jesus Christ. The knowledge of Christ brought healing and deliverance. The text of this still-popular song captures this soothing, timeless message. It says to the Christian: If you're discouraged, at your wits end, you can testify to the love of Jesus for all people. <sup>iii</sup> Sing 375 "***There's a balm in Gilead***"

Hymn Number 344, "***Lord, You Have Come to the Lakeshore,***" was composed and written in 1979 by the Spanish Priest, Cesáreo Gabaraín. Gabaraín, the Monsignor in Madrid and the Spanish chaplain to Pope Paul VI, claiming that this hymn was one of the

Pope's favorites, was able beautifully to craft the words and music to communicate God's desire for an intimate relationship with every human being, a willingness to meet us where we are and a sincere invitation for us to follow. <sup>iv</sup> Sing 344, "**Lord, You Have Come to the Lakeshore.**"

As we continue to add more songs to the faith we sing, we continue to develop more hymnals and song books. In The Faith We Sing, I invite you to turn to # 2273 "**Jesu Tawa Pano**" or "**Jesus We are Here.**" This song from Zimbabwe was arranged by Dr. Patrick Matsikenyiri. Dr. Matsikenyiri was a key player in the founding of Africa University, a Methodist University in Zimbabwe. Dr. Matsikenyiri served as a professor of music and the choir director at the university for several years. Some of you may remember a few years ago when Dr. Matsikenyiri stood here with us, teaching us the songs of Africa including this one<sup>v</sup>—"**Jesu Tawa Pano.**" ("**Sing Jesu Tawa Pano**") Hymn Sing

### **Closing Hymn – "What a Friend we have in Jesus." No. 526**

Joseph Scriven, the author of the hymn What a Friend we have in Jesus, faced much heartache in his life. First in 1842 when he was 23 and living in his native Ireland, his fiancé tragically drowned, the night before their wedding. Following her death, Scriven moved to Port Hope, on the north shore of Lake Ontario in Canada. After working for many years as a tutor, he fell in love again, and this time his fiancé died of Tuberculosis before they could marry. With his broken heart, Scriven wrote a poem to his mother in Ireland. <sup>vi</sup> The poem's title was "Pray without Ceasing" and the words were:

"What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear. What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer. O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear. All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer." Sing "**What a friend we have in Jesus.**" No. 526

<sup>i</sup> Stories of the Christian Hymns, Revised Edition by Helen Salem Rizk. Abingdon Press, 1989 p. 29 and from The United Methodist Hymnal 1989 p. 56

<sup>ii</sup> Sims Warren, Gwendolin Ev'ry Time I Feel the Spirit: 101 of the Best-Loved Psalm, Gospel Hymns and Spiritual Songs of the African-American Church Henry Holt and Company Publishers. New York, 1997 pp 58-59

<sup>iii</sup> IBID pp 93-95

<sup>iv</sup> Google Search: Cesareo Gabaraín

<sup>v</sup> Africa Praise I. Book, available from Cokesbury. Com,

<sup>vi</sup> Sims Warren, Gwendolin Ev'ry Time I Feel the Spirit: 101 of the Best-Loved Psalm, Gospel Hymns and Spiritual Songs of the African-American Church Henry Holt and Company Publishers. New York, 1997 pp 265-266 and

Emurian, Ernest K. Living Stories of Famous Hymns. Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan. 1955 pp. 138-140