

Hymns of the Faith: “All Creatures of Our God and King”

Psalm 148

By [Dr. Bill Wymond](#)

*A Presentation of First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Mississippi,
with
Dr. Ligon Duncan, Dr. Derek Thomas, and Dr. Bill Wymond*

Dr. Wymond: Good morning! This is “Hymns of the Faith” brought to you by Jackson's First Presbyterian Church; and the minister of the First Presbyterian Church is Dr. Ligon Duncan. Stay tuned for “Hymns of the Faith.” And now, with “Hymns of the Faith” is Dr. Ligon Duncan.

Dr. Duncan: Thank you, Bill Wymond. This is Ligon Duncan, and I'm delighted to be with you and with Derek Thomas this morning, talking about hymns of the faith, the great songs of the Christian tradition we've grown to know and love, and some that perhaps will be new to you today.

We're going to be looking at one of the favorite hymns of our congregation today, *All Creatures of Our God and King*. It's a big hymn; it has a wonderful German tune that we sing it to. We sing a couple of different songs to this tune, but the text is a text that is based upon a poem, loosely, that was written by Francis of Assisi.

Dr. Duncan: It's good to be with you today, and good to be with Bill, talking about hymns of the faith. Let's talk a little bit about *All Creatures of Our God and King*. Derek, it might be helpful to just introduce the listening audience to Francis of Assisi — this interesting, interesting character from the high Middle Ages.

Dr. Thomas: Yes, that's one word for him! [*Laughter*] Thirteenth century, of course, so we're going back eight hundred years. I just think Francis of Assisi brings out the good and the worst in religion. He brings out all the crazies; one thinks of Francis and his love for animals, so you think of all those crazy animal services...and I love animals, now, so don't misunderstand me! But you have these cats and dogs that come to services, and they always have something to do with Francis of Assisi. And the writing of this hymn, written in a sort of dialect, I think — something between Italian and Latin... that's early Renaissance, if that's accurate

Dr. Duncan: Right, it's even called it "transitional language."

Dr. Thomas: ...At the high point, I suppose, of the period of literary work in Italy with Dante. And Francis, the monkish monastic figure that he was, given to a kind of mysticism, I suppose, even though the writing of this hymn...one of his biographers speaks of his mystical...Oh, what did I read about him?...and Clara, Sister Clara, in the nunnery, who had taken vows of poverty, and that there was between Sister Clara and St. Francis "a deep mystic love," whatever that means. And he's having lunch. He's on his way back. He's about to die, apparently, and he's on his way back, having lunch at this nunnery and then goes into this trance-like state, and then announces that he had composed this hymn which speaks of all of the elements — fire, water, earth, sun. (And in the original giving each one a gender, as I understand.) And then in verse 4 (at least in the original) to "Mother, dear Mother earth."

Dr. Duncan: Yeah...let me just share the text. Matthew Arnold gives a literal translation, the introduction of which starts:

"O most high, Almighty, good Lord God,
To thee belong praise, glory, honor, and all blessings."

So far, so good! Orthodox Christian theology. Then,

Praised be my Lord God, with all His creatures,
And specially our brother the Sun,
Who brings us the day and who brings us the light;
Fair is he and shines with a very great splendor;
O Lord, he signifies to us Thee.

Praised be my Lord for our sister, the moon,
And for the stars, the which He has set
Clear and lovely in heaven.

Praised be my Lord for our brother, the wind,
And for air and cloud, calms and all weather
By which Thou holdest life in all creatures.

"Praised be my Lord for our sister, water,
Who is very serviceable unto us,
And humble and precious and clean.

Praised be my Lord for our brother, fire,
Through whom thou givest us light in the darkness;
And he is bright and pleasant,
And very mighty and strong.

Praised be my Lord for our mother, the earth,
The which doth sustain us and keep us,
And bringeth forth diverse fruit
And flowers of many colors, and grass.

Praised be my Lord for all those who pardon one another
For His love's sake,
And who endure weakness and tribulation.
Blessed are they who peaceably shall endure,
For Thou, O Most Highest, shalt give them a crown.

Praise ye and bless the Lord! And give thanks unto Him
And serve Him with great humility.

Now, all of that can be taken in a totally orthodox way, and the language of it is simply the language of a mystic speaking in very, very, effusive, flowery, evocative, suggestive language. But put that in the hands of some sort of a modern sort of earth worshiper, and you can get all sorts of goofy stuff out of it. So I would like to think that St. Francis is not giving his blessing and *imprimatur* on some of the goofy things that are done with him today by people! You can see the kind of language that's being used there; when you start pressing the brother and mother and father and sister stuff, you get crazy stuff. But by and large, it's a relatively tame poem.

Dr. Thomas: And Psalm 148, I think, lies somewhere in the background. But praise God for William Henry Draper who translated this into a more orthodox expression, perhaps!

Dr. Duncan: Give them some of the lines from the Draper translation. That is the most commonly used translation, I would think (I think I'm right about that) of this particular poem, at least in the English-speaking world.

Dr. Thomas: Oh, they are so familiar!

All creatures of our God and King,
Lift up your voice and with us sing
Alleluia, alleluia!
Thou burning sun with golden beam,
Thou silver moon with softer gleam,
O praise Him, O praise Him,
Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!

Dr. Duncan: Now, Draper does this poem at the beginning of the twentieth century, so it's published by 1925, 1926, somewhere in there. And almost immediately it's a popular song in lots of different hymnals.

Dr. Thomas: Interestingly...I mean, Draper was a vicar in Leeds in the north of England, but he translated this for a children's Whitsuntide service. Interesting that this would be regarded originally as a children's hymn, although I don't think we think of it that way now. Perhaps the associations with Francis and animals may be, but the text itself has nothing to do with animals. We would see it as a hymn-like expression of some of those closing Psalms in the Psalter.

Dr. Duncan: The text continues to speak of the wind and the water, just as you had heard in Francis' original poetry, and then you also hear the echo of his comment about forgiving one another:

“And all ye men of tender heart,
Forgiving others, take your part,
O sing ye, alleluia!”

This is probably my favorite line of the whole song:

“Ye who long pain and sorrow bear,
Praise God and on Him cast your care...”

That's a very effective line for those who are bearing up under trouble and sorrow, and calling on them to trust in God even in the midst of those troubles and sorrows.

Dr. Thomas: Verging a little on the highly poetic...I mean there's a fine line between a hymn and poetry. I remember — oh, 25 years ago — going through a copy of a friend of mine's hymnbook. He was a minister...was actually the Baptist hymnbook. But I remember going through it, and he had crossed several of them out (you know, big red cross over it), saying “too poetic.” Namely that the metaphors were so poetic that, in singing them, most people didn't understand what they were singing. And some of these lines need a tad of an explanation because they're verging on poetry. But once you've got it, that phrase, “Ye who long pain and sorrow bear...” — and it's not the way we speak, for sure, but when you think about it — and all these hymns that we're talking about should be thought about and not just sung by rote.

Dr. Duncan: Sure. But you can see why, and Bill's going to tell us why. It's a majestic tune that this is set to. You can see why with this tune and the more vague text that folks who are even non-religious end up liking this hymn when it's sung in public services and things of that nature. And it does remind us, doesn't it, about our responsibility to know what it is that we're singing to God as we sing along, and to prepare ourselves for that.

Which is one reason, by the way, that we spend time writing descriptions of the hymns in our worship guide and trying to give people some guidance as to what to look for, what the biblical themes are that we're going to be singing back to

God, so that we're singing knowledgeably.

The hymn tune, Bill, is a beautiful, big, majestic tune. It bears up well with brass and timpani and other kinds of accompaniment. It gets used in sort of festive services here and there by folks. Tell us a little bit about LASST UNS ERFREUEN.

Dr. Wymond: Well, this tune dates to 1623, and it comes from one of the German hymnals in Cologne. And that's sort of an interesting phenomenon in itself to me, that most of the larger cities in Germany had their own hymnals. There wasn't a Baptist or Presbyterian, Methodist, publishing house. Each church in the larger cities (like in this instance this is from Cologne...Leipzig and Lohmar and various other cities) published their own hymnals for use in the churches in those cities, and I think that's a good practice. So you got a lot of variation between them in original tunes in each one of the hymnals. And this is a hymn that dates about a hundred years after the Reformation, and that is when this publishing phenomenon was the strongest — about a hundred years after the Reformation.

And I think that it's interesting that this hymn was done for a children's service in the 1920's in England. There was a similar effort done in the United States to publish children's hymnals. In our own Presbyterian background there were children's hymnals that were published, but these hymnals were more like adult hymnals now. The hymns were far more sophisticated, and what was given and expected of children was on a higher level musically than we would do today. They weren't just little simple children's hymns. They span a pretty large range.

On this particular tune, you have a refrain at the end of each verse, and that was something that came out of the earlier liturgy of the church where you would sing a stanza, and then you would have a refrain at the end of each stanza. And it would be oftentimes "Alleluia." "Praise to the Lord" was the commonest, I think. But anyway, you have this common refrain that comes at the end of each one of these stanzas.

And by the way — I just have to say it! When we're talking about the various stanzas of a hymn, a lot of people will say "sing verse so-and-so" but actually, a *verse* is a *refrain*; it's not a *stanza*. So when we're talking about the various "verses" of hymns, we really ought to be talking about the stanzas of the hymns. And this one has five.

The tune itself is a really strong tune. It seems to me there are a couple of classes of tunes that come out of this period of time. One of them is the very direct and straight-forward kind of tune, such as *A Mighty Fortress* that is a didactic kind of hymn, and so there is not much flowery-ness about the tune.

Then you have these tunes, which are in a different classification in my mind.

They are more flowery, more elaborate, more artistic in a sense; and oftentimes they will come in a time, which I think reflects a folk dance background to them. So you get a lot of joy in a tune like this one, and I'm going to play this tune for us now and just see if we can pick that up. [Plays tune on piano.]

That is a great tune, and it is strong. I imagine that it's not easy for a congregation the first few times around to sing the tune, but it's one of those that is well worth teaching to the congregation because it has such strength and beauty, creativity, to it. And it certainly matches the text well. It's a sweeping kind of tune that reflects both the majesty and the splendor of the text, and the joy that I think is there, too.

Dr. Duncan: I think that's a great description of it — sweeping. I was thinking you're just sort of flinging your arms and hands wide open in terms of the praise direction of it. As you said, whereas *A Mighty Fortress* is more of a teaching kind of declaration, this is more doxology. It's much more exuberant, celebration and praise, and the music does reflect that. I think that's one reason I like to use this as an opening hymn when we use it, because of the exuberance of it.

Dr. Wymond: And I think this is one of those tunes that is timeless; that you don't have a feeling that you're singing something very old. You do have a feeling that you're doing a church kind of tune, you know; it has that kind of feel to it, but it doesn't come off "strange" to people in this time. And so it transcends the age.

Dr. Thomas: I like the way it ascends. In a simplistic sort of way, it's sort of worshipful. When it's an opening hymn, people are standing up, they're ascending in their praise to God. And the tune is going up.

Dr. Wymond: Um-hmm, and it just builds. It keeps going on up the scale, and so you have this sense of increasing intensity, devotion. And when you get to the chorus itself, you've reached a climax, I think, of the tune in terms of some of the highest notes, and also the accumulation of fervor.

Dr. Thomas: And there's something about the English word *Alleluia* or *Hallelujah* that musically must be wonderful to try and put music to, because the way the notes go from "allelu-ia" I just think that's a beautiful word to try and put music to.

Dr. Wymond: All the way through. Of course, isn't it a translation of a Hebrew word into Latin? So everybody knows what *Alleluia* means, so they don't have to put it into English — "Praise the Lord" — and so they can actually sing it. And a lot of times when you hear some of our more outspoken congregations, when the minister is speaking, they'll say "Hallelujah," or the minister himself will say "Hallelujah," interjected in between phrases of whatever he's teaching, and so on like that.

Dr. Duncan: Derek, I grew up singing this hymn in the old Southern Presbyterian

hymnal, and it's been a part of every hymnal, I think, that I've used in a church in the United States. I don't remember necessarily singing this while I was in Church of Scotland congregations in Scotland, and I don't know....I could check very quickly and see whether it's in *The Scottish Psalter and Church Hymnary*. I suspect it is. But I wonder — is this a song that was sung in Ireland amongst Presbyterians and other evangelicals?

Dr. Thomas: Well....some Presbyterians....

Dr. Duncan: With the monastic connections of...?

Dr. Thomas:Francis of Assisi, you know, is on the borderline for some, but Draper has marvelously rescued the piece.

Dr. Duncan: Yes, I was looking at Moffat and Patrick, who of course are writing out of the Scottish tradition, and here's what they say:

It's a thrilling improvisation upon the theme of Psalm 145...and Draper's rhymed version or free paraphrase of the famous “sun song” or “song of the creatures” of Assisi was written in Italian during the fierce heat of the summer of 1225. He lay prostrate and depressed by blindness, unable to endure any light on his weak eyes. And, incidentally...” [I thought this was interesting] “..plagued by a swarm of field mice who probably had their home in the straw walls of his hut, and who even probably eventually ran over his face so that he had no peace by day or night. And yet it was precisely in this wretched sickness that he composed this wonderful masterpiece.

So that's the description of Draper borrowing from Assisi's meditation on Psalm 145.

Dr. Wymond: OK, Derek, just a very naive, basic question: Today everybody talks about “Mother Earth.” Why do we get nervous when people are addressing “Mother Earth”?

Dr. Thomas: Well, because it's borderline...you know, when one thinks in our own time of some current beliefs...

Dr. Duncan: You're trying to figure out how to say *pantheism* in a way everybody in the audience will understand what you're talking about!

Dr. Thomas: Yes! And recent worship services, so-called worship services, where worship has been offered to Mother Earth. And I think in the sort of Buddhist/semi-Buddhist culture that we live in these days, that has some connotations that I would prefer to avoid.

Dr. Wymond: And what are those connotations? What are your concerns?

Dr. Thomas: Well, of maintaining the Creator-creature distinction.

Dr. Wymond: What do you mean by that?

Dr. Thomas: That God is God, and that we are creatures. We are made by God. And that there is an absolute distinction between God and the creature, and not a line of continuity.

Dr. Duncan: And let's say forcefully, Francis of Assisi believed that wholeheartedly. There is no evidence whatsoever that he is encouraging some kind of a pantheism or a panentheism in his kind of language, whereas in Native American religion you sort of have God in the streams and God in the trees, and God in the stars. That is not what Francis is talking about. He clearly views these as creatures of his God, and as an opportunity to praise his God.

But it is true, by the same token, that because of the same poetic nature of his language, and this goes back to the very concern that you were speaking about earlier that your friend had, that people have been able to read sort of this kind of earth-worshiping theology into the words of Francis, whereas that's not a fair deduction.

Dr. Thomas: Right! And I think when Star Wars was at vogue in the '70's and '80's — you know, “May the force be with you” — I mean, that's part of the sub-culture for which this kind of hymn, at least in its original would be popular. You know (bless his cotton socks!), Draper has a strong Trinitarian statement to close it:

“Praise, praise the Father, praise the Son,
And praise the Spirit, Three in One.”

And one imagines, given what was going on in Anglicanism in the late nineteenth century, the Arianism and the Oxford movement, and so on, it is more than likely that that is a firm statement of Trinitarianism.

Dr. Wymond: And in a word — “Arianism” ... “Oxfordism”??? [*Laughter*]

Dr. Thomas: A denial that Jesus is God; that He's maybe semi-God, but not true God.

Dr. Duncan: There's no better quick way to affirm that you are talking about the God of the Bible than to affirm the praising of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as one eternal God in the course of the hymn, as opposed to making some sort of vague God-in-nature kind of thing.

I do think that the question that you press on, Bill, does bring us back to the fact that so often in the kind of earth-language in spirituality we have people wanting to affirm that the world was somehow “birthed” into being, as opposed to spoken into being by the one true God. It's interesting that even in the Old Testament that the religions around Israel had creation stories where the world was sort of birthed into being, whereas Moses makes it very clear that God speaks the world into being, and so the world is distinct from them. This song actually affirms that great truth, so let's listen to this hymn, *All Creatures of Our God and King*.

Dr. Wymond: Singing *All Creatures of Our God and King* this morning is Victor Smith.

All creatures of our God and King,
Lift up your voice and with us sing
Alleluia, alleluia!
Thou burning sun with golden beam,
Thou silver moon with softer gleam,
O praise Him, O praise Him,
Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!

Thou rushing wind that art so strong,
Ye clouds that sail in heav'n along,
O praise him, alleluia!
Thou rising morn in praise rejoice,
Ye lights of evening, find a voice,
O praise Him, O praise Him,
Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!

Thou flowing water, pure and clear,
Make music for thy Lord to hear,
Alleluia, alleluia!
Thou fire so masterful and bright,
That givest man both warmth and light,
O praise Him, O praise Him,
Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!

And all ye men of tender heart,
Forgiving others, take you part,
O sing ye, alleluia!
Ye who long pain and sorrow bear,
Praise God and on Him cast your care.
O praise Him, O praise Him,
Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!

Let all things their Creator bless,
And worship Him in humbleness,

O praise Him, alleluia!
Praise, praise the Father, praise the Son,
And praise the Spirit, three in one.
O praise Him, O praise Him,
Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!

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