

Upper Path Valley Presbyterian Church
November 17, 2019
Tried and True: How Great Thou Art
Gary Rebok, UPVPC Commissioned Lay Pastor

As we come to the conclusion of this sermon series “Tried and True,” we can often find that the foundation of our faith has roots in the generations that have come before us. Some of the hymns we sing have been born out of a tragedy that initiated a longing for God’s presence to comfort a loss or catastrophe. But as said before, these hymns have been tried theologically, bringing important biblical truths to our hearts, minds, and spirits that bring about memories leading to our faith.

Let’s pray: *Heavenly Father, thank you for those who have come before us to bring about the words of faith inspired by and through your Holy Spirit. We ask you, Father, to raise a new generation of Christians who will delight in the Word like King David, effective and fruitful in ministry so that the knowledge of You will spread to the generations we will never know. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts dwell richly in us this day. Amen*

In choosing the hymn “How Great Thou Art,” I look back to my family tradition around the table and how the foundation of my faith has emerged from a previous generation. Shortly after being called into my first ministry position, my mother paid a visit to my office with a package. She said, I brought you something for your office wall, and as I unraveled the paper from it, I uncovered a picture, something for my wall, “she said,” a picture of a guitar and the words to “How Great Thou Art.”

My mother knew a bit about the history behind the song and what a treasure it meant to the family’s spiritual foundation, eventually leading me to follow God’s calling. Each year as our family gathered together on certain Sunday dinner occasions; my grandmother would say, okay, we are going to sing a song before we sit down to eat — and the song “How Great Thou Art” became one of those familiar songs of memory around her witness in the sounds of faith. Just as we have our own stories to tell, there is a story behind the song than just from generational family gatherings.

Numerous contributors, ethnic cultures, and languages represent the input into the story of this hymn. The origins begin with Swedish pastor Carl Bobert around 1886. Bobert was a leading evangelist of his day and the editor of an influential Evangelical Lutheran Church of Sweden periodical “Witness of the Truth.” Bobert was not only a Swedish pastor but an editor and member of the Swedish parliament. The original version was entitled “O Great God,” a nine-verse poem that he published in his newspaper, but it never seemed to catch on as it appeared forgotten.

But in his writing, what Bobert experienced was a thunderstorm during the time of year when everything was very warm. Walking home from church, Bobert had to hurry toward shelter as a storm suddenly arose. With awe-inspiring moments of flashing violence, what followed next, a clear, brilliant sun and calmness with birds singing in nearby trees. The experience led Bobert to fall to his knees in humble adoration of his mighty God. Later, Manfred von Glehn, a German Baptist living in Estonia, translated the song into German, titling it “How Great You Are.” It quickly spread in popularity across the German speaking areas of Europe. Later in 1912, a Russian translation was produced by an evangelical protestant and popular Russian Hymn writer Rev. Ivan S. Prokhanoff.

In 1930, an English missionary to Ukraine, Stuart Hine, heard the song in Russian and translated it into English, tweaking the song by adding more verses – inspired by the beauty of the woods and forest glades of the Carpathian Mountains. The last verse, which begins, “When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation, and take me home,” had inspiration by Eastern European refugees who had fled to England and who asked, “When are we going home?” Hine printed his version of the song in leaflet form, and it was distributed somewhat widely in England, now titled “How Great Thou Art.”

The Scriptures portray how great this song of praise and gratitude truly touches our lives in different ways. Most of all, the words praise the power and might of our Lord and Savior. If we look up to the stars on a clear night, we can see millions of stars and galaxies. In Genesis 1:16, we read that God made two

great lights; the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night: he made the stars also. Verse 1 says; O Lord my God when I in awesome wonder, consider all the worlds, thy hands have made, I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder, thy power throughout the universe displayed.

Have you ever thought about how powerful lightning is? Scientists report that there are over 16 million lightning storms every year. The heating creates a shockwave heard as thunder. It's like sitting in front of speakers at a rock concert capable of creating deafness and can be heard over 10 miles away. "His power throughout the universe displayed." Yet there is the gentle Spirit of peace and tranquility once the storm has passed on by, hearing the birds sing, hearing the brook flowing off in the distance and feeling the gentle breeze. God's creation is awe-inspiring.

Beyond all the amazing things God created here on earth and in the expanse of the universe, of all the things God created, his most treasured possession is humankind, proving that he loves us most of all by sending "His Son not sparing." He sent him to die. The words of the song sing out, in verse four, "I scarce can take it in, that on the cross, my burden gladly bearing He bled and died to take away my sin." How Great Thou Art. As you think over your life and remember all the bad things you have done, the evil lies, and horrible thoughts you have had for another person, Jesus takes away the sin of the world. And of all those things, we should remember that no matter how awful of a person we may have become, we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Yet the symbolic portrayal of God's forgiveness is in Christ, who has taken away our sin. How far away? Psalm 103:12 says, "as far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us. But let's continue with a bit more history of the song.

It wasn't until 1954, at Billy Graham's London crusade, someone gave George Beverly Shea a copy of the leaflet. Accounts of Shea's life report that he had a beautiful bass voice and was one of Graham's featured singers at the crusades for many years. Sticking the leaflet in his pocket, he didn't think much about the song as many people gave him copies of music for his consideration. Sometime later, Shea became inspired by the power of the words, introducing it initially at the Toronto Crusade in 1954, but in 1957 at the New York Crusade, he used it extensively singing it ninety-nine times accompanied by the Crusade Choir made up of 1800 voices.

Over the years, the song became an important part of many families listening to the weekly radio broadcasts as well as Christian recording artists. The first to record the song was Bill Carle in 1958, and from there, the song's popularity gained recognition. Many notable singers have performed covers of the classic song such as artists like Alan Jackson, Martina McBride, Charlie Daniels, Vince Gill, Dolly Parton, Amy Grant, Chris Rice, the Statler Brothers, and many others too numerous to mention.

To date, over 1700 document recordings have praised God, being thankful for every good and beautiful thing we see. But in 1967, Elvis Presley released his version. In Elvis's last concert before his untimely death at age 42 on August 16, 1977, Elvis even forgot the lyrics throughout his performance, yet Elvis' performance help boosts the song to even greater heights. During Elvis' career, he won a Grammy only three times; the first Grammy came after recording "How Great Thou Art" in the category as the best Sacred Inspirational Performance. So, what does this history lesson mean for us here today?

Songs like these and the stories behind them are an inspiration. Our inspiration comes from the lives of those who penned them, how they penned them, and the reasons why help us to build a bond of legacy with those who have gone before us, and those to come behind us. Each time these songs become introduced to a new generation, they cease to be old and boring, becoming suddenly relevant and filled with new life. I remember the first time I heard Chris Tomlin's remix of "How Great is Our God," bridging the song with "How Great Thou Art." In an interview with Tomlin, he says, "How Great Thou Art" has retained such staying power through many generations of the church, and it's so inspiring when you hear those two sung together; they're saying the same thing: God is great!!

Once upon a time, hymns were primarily used to drive home the message that came from the pulpit, but there are new modern hymn writers, such as Kristyn and Keith Getty who have brought back to mind the goal is to write songs that teach the faith, where all ages can sing and remember together what we

believe. "In Christ Alone" is one of those songs, a song we will soon join together in singing as a congregation, a modern-day hymn full of truth that exalts God.

But for us and its application for today, what we should remember from all this is that Jesus sacrificed his life to set us free from our sins, believing that one day, Jesus will be back, and he will take us home with Him. One day we will see the face of God the Father. Just like the narrator of the song, we must humble ourselves upon the Lord. "Then I shall bow in humble adoration and there proclaim, my God, How Great thou art." His power and might are more than we can fathom. His gentle Spirit brings us peace and tranquility. His saving Son brings us life eternal and takes away all our sin, and His acclamation brings us home to an eternity of humble adoration of the great God we worship. To God be the Glory forever and ever, Amen.