

## THE CENTRAL HYMN

From time to time throughout my ministry, I have been asked how I go about the process of creating a sermon. Typically, the question goes something like this. “How do you choose the topics for your message?” The answer to that question is simple- I don’t. Perhaps ,that sounds a little surprising to you, but let me explain further. My usual process has been to choose a text, not a topic. I look at the lectionary, which is nothing more than a big list of suggested texts for each Sunday. Each week the list gives me an Old Testament text, a Psalm, a Gospel passage, and a wider New Testament passage. I choose a text from among the suggestions, read that text, and build the sermon from what I’m reading. I don’t choose so much a topic as a text.

I’ve done this more or less throughout my career. I feel that I have reached the point where some of my preaching has become stale, and in the near future, I may be changing my approach. However, heretofore my sermon creation process has been more or less as I just described it with only a few minor exceptions.

I have always been drawn to narrative stories. I find those much easier to preach. That was particularly true early in my career. Stories are relatively easy to preach because stories have a pattern and flow to them. I guess I just like playing the part of a storyteller. The downside of that is that the Bible is composed of multiple types of literature, so if you stick to stories only, you only get a part of this book. There are letters, Hymns, poems, Philosophical arguments, genealogies (I’m not quite sure how to preach those), apocalyptic texts, miracle stories, proverbs and prophetic literature all contained in this one book, and they each bring their own challenges to preaching.

While doing research on this text in front of us today, I discovered that many scholars believe this passage, John 1:1-18, contains the characteristics of a Greco-Roman hymn. In particular, they talk about this passage containing what they call a “staircase parallelism”. That means that an idea in the first sentence or first phrase is repeated and reinforced in the next sentence or phrase. For example, in verse one, the passage says, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” This was followed in verse two with the phrase, “The Word became Flesh and dwelt among us.” So, we’re moving from one image of the Word to the next- staircase parallelism.

Now, I want to submit to you that this is a hymn, but it’s not just a hymn because of its structure but because of its purpose in the scripture. Not only that, but it’s the most central hymn of our faith.

Now, I bet you never thought about hymns serving a purpose in our faith, but I want to stick with this idea for a moment, I want to pose some questions for you. What is a Hymn? What does a hymn do? What is the purpose of a hymn?

When I was in seminary, I was required to take a course on worship and preaching in my first year. One class period was devoted to Barry Davies, who was the music professor and choir director at Columbia Theological Seminary. The subject matter was the importance of music worship. One statement he made has stuck with me through all these years. He picked up a hymnbook and said, "This is the greatest theology textbook ever written." He wasn't pointing to this hymnal, he was pointing to the Presbyterian Hymnal, but you get the point.

I must confess that I had never thought of the hymnbook like that. My guess is that none of you think of it that way either. You probably never thought of the hymnbook as a theology text. I rarely hear a discussion about hymns in the church, but when I do, most of the time I hear two reasons above all others. The first is that we sing hymns because it is a way to get everyone present involved in the service. It's a way for people to participate. That's true. The second reason I hear is that the beauty of the music adds to our enjoyment of the service, especially if they're hymns that we already know and love. That's true as well. However, I never really spent much time thinking about the theological implications of what I was singing, and I bet you haven't either.

But I want to propose to you that we should. I have noticed that there are some people in church who won't sing. I'm actually okay with that. I think it's as important that we listen to what is being sung, as it is for us to sing. Now, let me say this about liking hymns. Music entered the church for the same reason artwork did- as a teaching tool. Hymns were meant to teach, not to entertain. They are in fact statements and confessions set to music. Music is a memory device- it helps us to remember the words that teach us the concepts of the faith.

Let me give you an example. ("How Great Thou Art").

In just those four lines we hear four confessions- four concepts that are central to our faith. We hear that we have a soul- that's one. We hear that our soul sings out for God- that's number two. We hear that God is a savior- that's number three. We hear that God is great- that's number four. Yes, it's pretty, but far more important in the scheme of things, is what we learn from the song about the nature of God.

All of us know that song. You can make a theological confession anytime you want to do so. You have a ready tool to teach the faith anytime that you want it, and you don't have to attend seminary to do it. All you have to do is sing the words of that song. If you can't sing, recite them! That's ready-made of you to share your faith with others. All hymns are designed to work like that- as a teaching tool. The hymns we know and love work like that. So do the hymns we don't know and don't love they work like that too.

Now, when I was in seminary, I was taught that hymns for worship should really be chosen to reinforce the preached words; the theology of the hymn should match the message the preacher is trying to deliver. I try to keep that in mind when I'm preaching, though I have to say that in every church I have served I have gotten some pushback on that idea. Some people

cling to the idea that the best hymn is the one that I know and like, not the one that teaches me the most. Sorry, but I had to get that off my chest. That's one of my pet peeves as a pastor.

Now, I'm going through an extended discussion because there are hymns in this book, too. Just look at the theological statements that are contained in this hymn that I read to you a little while ago. God was the Word. God was in the beginning. The word became flesh and dwelt among us. The Word was the true light. John came to testify to the light. John was not the light, but came to testify to the light. In the light was life and truth and grace and glory. All of that is contained in this one song!

Years ago, when I was still in seminary, I took a year off to do an internship at Government Street Presbyterian Church In Mobile, Al. Occasionally, I would lead worship while I was there. My parents were also members of the church at that time, and one of the other members told my mom, "When your son prays the Lord's Prayer, he prays it like he really means it." I don't know about that, but I do try to think about what I'm saying as I say it. If I do that, it's not flat or stale anymore. The same is true of the Apostle's Creed.

I'm suggesting the same thing about hymns in general and this passage in particular. I'm asking you to think about what it means when you read the scripture. Think about what it means when you sing a song. Think about what it means when you give a confession in church. If you do that, I won't have to tell you about the good news of the gospel. It will be laid out right there in front of you. It will be there for you to see and feel and experience.

Jesus Christ is the light of the world. He brings us grace and truth and love and glory and life. Because God became flesh and dwelt among us, we get to enjoy eternal life. Now, that's something to sing about- it's a reason to glorify God. It's our central hymn.