

## **“What Are You Singing?”**

*The Rev. S. Shane Nanney ~ March 24, 2024*

*Philippians 2:5-11, Mark 11:1-11*

Have you ever found yourself singing a song, but really, you had no idea what you were singing? A teacher at a high school walked down the hallway one morning and could hear one of her students singing a song. The melody was good, but the words glorified violence and immorality – this song was about as bad as you could get. And so, she asked this student, “Do you know what you are singing?” And she had no idea. The words that were coming out of her mouth - she wasn’t paying attention to them. And after she realized what she was singing, she felt a sense of embarrassment.

I think a similar thing happens in church. People sing hymns. Sometimes they like the melodies. But really, I wonder how many people really know what they are singing. It happened on Palm Sunday, many years ago. People were singing a song as Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. “HOSANNA!” they said. “BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD!” “BLESSED IS THE COMING KINGDOM OF OUR FATHER DAVID!” “HOSANNA IN THE HIGHEST!” These people were shouting and singing at the top of their lungs. But I wonder how many of them understood what they were singing. I wonder how many of them knew this person they were singing to.

The word “Hosanna” means “Lord, save us!” Were these people asking Jesus to save them? Not in a spiritual way. You see, these people thought that Jesus was coming to save them from the Roman government. Finally, someone had arrived, who would lead a rebellion against the Roman regime that is oppressing us! He comes in the name of the Lord! And the kingdom they were looking forward to - that was an earthly kingdom – freedom from the Romans! They wanted Jesus to bring things back to the way they were when David was king. Hosanna in the highest to Jesus!

These people did not understand what they were singing, or whom they were singing to. These words fit Jesus, but not in a political way. Jesus was the Lord, and he had come to save them, and so the word “hosanna” works. He was coming in the name of his Heavenly Father, who had sent him into the world. And he was going to establish a kingdom, but not a physical one. Jesus had come to establish spiritual peace – peace between you and God, peace that comes from having a clear conscience, peace in your heart – that is the kind of peace Jesus had come to

establish. These people had no idea who Jesus really was, or what he was going to do for them.

How do we know that? Look at how these same people treated Jesus just five days later. Just five days later, instead of shouting “HOSANNA,” they shouted, “CRUCIFY HIM.” Instead of welcoming him, they mocked Jesus’ claim to be king, as they watched him hang from a cross. I wonder what Jesus thought as he listened to all these people who were shouting “HOSANNA,” and most of them really did not know him at all. When these people eventually died and met Jesus face to face, I wonder if he asked them, “Why did you sing to me, and then mock me? Why did you sing to me, and then crucify me?”

What about us? Do we know what we are singing, or are we like those people on Palm Sunday?

I would venture to say that there are many who go to church and sing hymns, but, just like those people on Palm Sunday, many have no idea what they are singing. How can we sing to Jesus Christ, “Truly I’d love thee, truly I’d serve thee” and you then go out and do the things that do not show love or service? What does Christ think when he hears us say that we love him and that we want to serve him, but then he sees how selfish we can be? He sees our lust. He sees how we are driven by nothing but money. He sees that we only pray to him when we are in trouble. He sees that we rarely worship him in church, we hardly ever read his Word – in reality, we do not do as we say.

Let me tell you about the man who wrote the hymn “Amazing Grace.” In the United States, there is no hymn more well-known than “Amazing Grace.” It is commonly sung after a tragedy, and I believe that when it is sung, another tragedy takes place – no one knows what they are singing.

John Newton is the writer of this hymn. He is described in his early life as an immoral wretch who mocked Christianity. He was a sailor, and like many sailors, he was very rough around the edges. He was a heavy drinker, and at one point in his life he was forced into Great Britain’s navy. He tried to desert, but he was caught, and flogged as punishment. He used to make up disrespectful songs about the ship’s captain, and he prided himself in his creative use of profanity and his sharp attacks on the Christian belief.

Eventually he left the Royal Navy and became the captain of his own ship, a slave trading ship. He had no interest in religion whatsoever, but deep down, there was something there. His mother had exposed him to some religious instruction when

he was much younger, and she had always prayed that someday he would become a minister.

Then God shook him up. He was steering his ship on the open sea, and he was caught up in the perfect storm. He thought for sure that his ship was going down and that he was going to die. In desperation, he prayed to this God he had been mocking all his life, and he barely survived the storm – amazingly his ship stayed afloat. That moment jolted him into learning more about who Jesus Christ was – this person he had been mocking all his life.

John Newton learned that Jesus really existed. He really was the Son of God. He learned that Jesus had come into this world as a real live person, and that he sacrificed himself for the sins of John Newton. All that profanity, all that mockery, all that immorality, all that drunkenness – all his sins – John Newton was amazed to learn that Jesus had taken them to the cross and had paid for them by shedding his blood.

Newton had discovered the grace of God. That God would forgive me for every sin I have ever committed, even the sin of mocking him - that God would forgive even me because of Jesus Christ – that was amazing grace.

Eventually, John Newton left the slave trading business, and over a period, he became a minister. For the last 43 years of his life, he was a preacher in the Church of England. Right before he died, he said, “My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things, that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior.”

Why don't you turn right now to that famous hymn in your hymnals, Hymn 649. Can you see the life of John Newton there? “Amazing Grace – how sweet the sound – that saved a wretch like me.” That certainly describes John, doesn't it? “I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.’ At one time in his life, he was spiritually lost, spiritually blind. But now, by the grace of God, he was found. He was able to see.

In Verse 2, what did he learn about Grace? “Twas Grace that taught my heart to fear. And grace my fears relieved; How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed!

Look at verse 3: “Through many dangers, toils, and snares I have already come” John Newton had gone through many of those on the open sea, hadn't he? “Tis grace has brought me safe thus far. And grace will lead me home.” God had been gracious to John Newton, protecting him all his life.

Look at what gave John Newton confidence in his life. Verse 4: “The Lord has promised good to me. His Word my hope secures. He will my shield and portion be as long as life endures.” As long as John’s life endured, he relied on the Word of God, the promises of God, to shield him from all the fears and doubts that were coming his way.

And the final verse, “When we’ve been there ten thousand years, Bright shining as the sun, we’ve no less days to sing God’s praise than when we’d first begun.” God would bring him eventually home to his place in heaven.

My friends, I hope you can see yourself in this hymn. You are truly a wretch in the eyes of God, because of your sin. But by the grace of God, you are forgiven, you are cared for, and you have a place waiting for you in heaven. Like John Newton, you also can say, “I am a great sinner. But Christ is a great Savior.”

Let this day be the last day you ever sing a hymn to God and have no idea what you are singing. Let this day be the day that you begin your journey, of getting to know this God, who has shown you amazing grace to you. These people who sang “Hosanna!” to Jesus as he rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday – I wonder what happened to them. I’m sure hardly any of them knew what they were really singing. But I wonder if a few of them, after it was all over, like John Newton, repented, and turned to Christ, and received his amazing grace. I wonder if you and I will be singing “Hosanna” with some of these people in heaven someday. Amen.