

Singing the Fine Print

Psalm 47

Clap your hands, all you peoples; shout to God with loud songs of joy. For the Lord, the Most High, is awesome, a great king over all the earth. He subdued peoples under us, and nations under our feet. He chose our heritage for us, the pride of Jacob whom he loves. God has gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a trumpet. Sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises to our King, sing praises. For God is the king of all the earth; sing praises with a psalm. God is king over the nations; God sits on his holy throne. The princes of the peoples gather as the people of the God of Abraham. For the shields of the earth belong to God; he is highly exalted.

We're starting our sermon this morning with a test to see how observant you are. What have you noticed about our hymns this morning? (Pause for guesses) How many of you noticed that the tune, the melody, was the same for both hymns? Even if you don't read music at all, there's a way you can know that the melody is the same.

Open your hymnals back up to page 88. If you look down at the bottom of the page, below the actual music, you'll notice that there is some fine print. Raise your hand if you know what all of those things mean. Most of us don't really know how to interpret all the information that's right there for us in our hymnal. But the hymnal is a pretty important source of our faith. This book gives us much of the soundtrack for our faith. And did you hear what Psalm 47:6 commanded us this morning? It said, "Sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises to our King, sing praises." Any time you can fit the same command into one sentence four times, we should probably be paying attention.

So this morning, we're going to learn how to read and understand the fine print in our hymnals. The fine print is probably not going to bring you closer to God. But understanding where our hymns come from, and how they are connected, will help you to better grasp how we sing our faith.

So let's start by realizing there are four bits of information here: top and bottom, left and right. On the top left, we have WORDS. That's pretty self explanatory. This is who wrote the words. In the case of Hymn 88, that's our dear friend Charles Wesley, one of the founders of the Methodist movement. And what do you think that four-digit number next to his name is? (guesses) Yes, it's a year, but is the year of Wesley's birth? or death? or the year he wrote the hymn? We can actually answer that question without leaving the hymnal.

Located in the back of your hymnal, there's not just one index, but six indices. The first index is on page 914. Keep one finger on p. 88, but let's turn to page 914. This index gives us composers, arrangers, authors, translators, and sources. If you turn with me to Charles Wesley on page 922, you'll see he lived from 1707-1788. The year we had back on page 88 was smack in the middle of that: 1747. So that's the year he actually wrote the words, as best as we know.

Okay; back to page 88. Underneath WORDS, we have the MUSIC. It's actually really common for one person to write the music for a hymn and another person to write the words. If you look over at page 87, Jane Marshall did both for that hymn. But more often, it's two different people. Now take a look at the year the music for *Maker In Whom We Live* was composed. 1868. That was 80 years after Charles Wesley died! So what we can figure out from this is that when Charles was singing this song, he did not sing it to this tune.

That actually makes sense. When John and Charles Wesley were starting up the Methodist movement in England, they were reaching out to people the church ignored. In their day, that was often the laborers. Coal miners, farmers, etc. In order to help them hear and understand God's message, Charles would take a popular song (often a drinking song), and change the lyrics. He was sort of a Christian 'Weird Al Yankovich.' The point was to get people interested with a tune they knew, then teach them the Christian faith through new lyrics. But 100

years later, someone clearly suggested that these words were good enough to sing to a tune that wasn't associated with alcohol and partying.

But that's not the only reason to change the music to a song. Sometimes, even today, there's a hymn with really good words – but the tune is just hard to sing. Or no one in your congregation knows it. Or it sounds terrible on organ, or piano, or whatever instrument you have. But the fine print in the hymnal makes it pretty easy to mix-and-match the words and music. Look at the lower right hand corner. You see the letters SMD. You can be as creative as you want, but I'll bet you'd never guess what that really stands for. Let me help you out. It stands for Short Meter Doubled, and it refers to how many syllables there are in each line.

Look again over to page 87. That song is listed as 11.11.11.11. Four lines, each with 11 syllables. (show fingers) What-gift-can-we-bring-what-pre=sent-what-to=ken? Eleven syllables per line is not terribly common, but it's pretty easy to count syllables. There are three meters, however, that are very common. So they are called: common meter, short meter, and long meter. Common Meter is 8-6-8-6. Long Meter is close but not quite, at 8-8-8-8. Short Meter is close in the other direction, at 6-6-8-6.

Here with hymn 88, we have Short Meter Doubled, which means each verse just goes through that pattern twice. So it's 6-6-8-6 and then 6-6-8-6 again. Go ahead; count the syllables out on your fingers. Ma=ker-in-whom-we-live(6), In-whom-we-are-and-move(6), the-glo=ry-power-and-praise-re=ceive(8), for-thy-cre=a=ting-love(6).

If that was too complicated for you to follow, don't worry. You don't actually need to understand it to mix-and-match your hymns. All you have to do is find another hymn that has that same marking. Whether it's SMD or 11-11-11-11. As long as they match, you can swap the lyrics and words and it will still work out fine. How would you know where to find those

hymns? One of your six indices gives you all the hymns by meter. That's on page 926. Let's head there now.

If you scan down to where it says SMD, you'll see there are three listings. If these names don't sound familiar to you, then you're in good company. Hymn 88, which we've been working with, isn't listed here as *Maker In Whom We Live*. Since the words to these hymns can swap music, over time the title came to refer to just the words. There is a separate title that goes with the tune. That's what's in your fine print in the upper right corner. For hymn 88, it's *DIADEMATA*. There are only two other tunes in our hymnal that have that same meter.

I would suggest that these three tunes, and the hymns they represent, are not familiar enough to us for us to mix-and-match them well this morning. We'd need some practice. But if we pick a hymn that we know the words almost without thinking, we can try to mix things up this morning. So, what do you think is one of the hymns people here can sing without even looking? How about Amazing Grace. Do you all know that one pretty well? Here's how we're going to mix it up.

Amazing Grace is hymn 378. If you turn to that page, you'll see that it's in CM, or common meter. Which is good, because there are lots of other tunes with that meter or rhythm. For example, the Methodist classic hymn, O For A Thousand Tongues to Sing. Turn to hymn 57, and we'll sing the words to Amazing Grace using the tune of O For A Thousand Tongues.

Well, that was kind of fun. But what's the point? You only come to worship once a week, and we've barely talked about God this morning. Why is this so important? How many of you have ever had a song stuck in your head? Or how about when you hear a song on the radio you haven't heard in years – yet somehow you can suddenly remember all the lyrics? Music is

important. And our faith is important. So the music that sings about what we believe is really important. Do you really need to know if a hymn is in Common or Short Meter? Nope. But understanding how the hymnal works helps us to grasp the richness and fullness of what's in here. It's more than just music. It's more than just words. This is the soundtrack of our faith, and it helps us to feel and know God's presence. Amen and amen.