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Sunday, June 25, 2023

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**The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**June 25, 2023**  
**Church Picnic Sunday**

**Sermon**

Introduction – So what is your favorite hymn? I’m pretty sure all of you have a favorite hymn. Some of you might have to think for a minute—I know I would—but some of you would know instantly. Some of the favorites might be old hymns like “A Mighty Fortress” and some might be new hymns like “On Eagles Wings.” Some might be Lutheran hymns like “From Heaven Above to Earth I Come” and some might be Catholic hymns like “Silent Night.” But I’m pretty sure everybody here today could name a favorite hymn. I’m also pretty sure that there would be as many favorites as there are people here today.

In 2001 and again in 2019 the well-known religious journal *Christianity Today* asked several thousand American Christians to name their favorite hymn. I wasn’t surprised that *Amazing Grace* took the prize. I was a little surprised at the runner-up: *How Great Thou Art*. For one thing it’s not an American hymn or even an English hymn; it comes from Sweden. It was written in Swedish and its tune is a Swedish tune. It hasn’t been around for that long. The version we know goes back to 1949. But I shouldn’t have been surprised it’s so well-known and so popular. With George Beverly Shea belting it out with his gorgeous baritone voice, it became the signature song of the Billy Graham crusades in the 1950s. Millions of people heard it on their radios and brand-new televisions. Elvis Presley won a grammy award for his rendition in 1967 and Carrie Underwood’s version gained the top spot in iTunes’ 2011 Top Gospel Songs. I don’t know where *How Great Thou Art* stands on your list of favorite hymns, but I’m not surprised it has become one of the most popular hymns in the world.

I’ll be honest and admit that I never cared much for this hymn; I think a lot of other Lutherans feel the same; maybe some of you. It doesn’t have the biblical weight Lutheran hymns have and the melody is a little soapy. It seems to arouse emotions more than it feeds faith. But I’ve learned over the years that there is something about the simple truths and the touching tune of this hymn that makes it worth learning and singing. Church picnic Sunday is a little more casual and today seems to be a good day for it. *How Great Thou Art* can lead us all to say and to sing:

**How Great God Is!**

Carl Boberg was a Lutheran but he wasn’t a very good Lutheran. He was more into feelings than he was into faith; he’d rather worship in the woods than in any Swedish Lutheran church. One day he was walking home from one of those outdoor services—well, let him tell the story: “It was that time of year when everything seemed to be in its richest coloring; the birds were singing in trees and everywhere. It was very warm; a thunderstorm appeared on the horizon and soon there was thunder and lightning. We had to hurry to shelter. But the storm was soon over and the clear sky appeared. When I came home, I wrote the song, *O Store Gud*”—O great God. The year was 1886.

O Lord my God when I in awesome wonder  
Consider all the works thy hand hath made,  
I see the stars, I hear the mighty thunder,  
Thy power throughout the universe displayed.

When through the woods and forest glades I wander,  
And hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees;  
When I look down from lofty mountain grandeur  
And hear the brook and feel the gentle breeze.

He wrote nine stanzas and added a refrain to each stanza:

Then sings my soul, my Savior-God, to thee,  
"How great thou art! How great thou art!"

So, Carl Boberg's hymn is a song about God's creation. Let's be honest: Good Lutherans spend a lot more time on God's redemption and God's sanctification than they do on God's creation. Of course, that's good. Redemption is about the saving work of Christ and sanctification is about the Spirit working faith in our hearts. Maybe, just maybe we need to balance things out a little. I purposely chose the long reading from Psalm 104 so we could remember how much of our world comes from God. You name it, God made it. In the Nicene Creed we confess that "We believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen." From the corn we see to the photosynthesis we can't see, from the sun that warms us to the skin that feels the warmth, from the comet that streaks across the sky to the toddler's first halting step, God makes it all. Too often we don't think about creation; too often we take it for granted. And too often we see creation polluted. I don't understand the politics of global warming, but I don't have to take sides to know that humanity has poisoned so much of creation. And we've contributed plenty to the mess, all of us. I wonder if this hymn, for as simple as it is, doesn't help us in a small way to remember the value of God's good earth. God is so great to give it to us. Singing about it may help us be better stewards of it in our own way.

Boberg's hymn became popular real fast and was translated into dozens of languages. A British missionary named Stuart Hine heard some Ukrainian Christians sing it in Russian in 1931. A young woman was reading from the Gospel of John about Jesus' crucifixion and the people in the house were confessing their sins and singing about how great God was to forgive them. He sat down and wrote this stanza:

And when I think that God, his Son not sparing,  
Sent him to die, I scarce can take it in,  
That on the cross my burden gladly bearing  
He bled and died to take away my sin.

Stuart Hine wasn't a Lutheran, but in this stanza he wrote about redemption and sanctification, just what we Lutherans love to sing about! Hine actually echoed what St. Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth: **God made Jesus who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.** There is a truth that actually feeds my faith but it is also a truth that touches my heart! Despite all the sins that you and I have piled up in our lives, despite way too much half-hearted loyalty, despite the hell we all deserve, **God did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all.** Makes your heart skip a beat, don't you think? Puts a tear in your eye, makes your skin tingle. God loves the world and God loves me! **See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!** Wow! We scarce can take it in!

Stuart Hine had to leave Ukraine when World War II began and he landed in England. He met a Russian man who had been separated from his Christian wife during the war. He told Hines that he didn't think he would ever see

his wife on earth again but that he longing for the day when they would meet in heaven and share life with God forever.

We understand what this Russian man was experiencing. We all like it here. We love our families and enjoy our friends. We enjoy the challenge of work and the change of pace in retirement. We love to watch the sun rise with a hot cup of coffee and see the sun set with a cold refreshing drink. But all of us have witnessed enough sadness and sorrow and felt enough aches and pains and experienced enough disappointment and discouragement to long for something more. Jesus said, **At that time, they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.**"

The greatest Lutheran hymns proclaim this magnificent truth in grand style:

Lord, let at last thine angels come; to Abram's bosom bear me home that I may die unfearing.  
And in its narrow chamber keep my body safe in peaceful sleep until thy reappearing.  
And then from death awaken me that mine own eyes with joy may see,  
O Son of God, thy glorious face, my Savior and my Fount of grace.  
Lord Jesus Christ, my prayer attend, my prayer attend, and I will praise you without end.  
Sometimes the simplest songs express the most incredible truths.

But sometimes simple hymns do the same.

When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation  
And take me home, what joy shall fill my heart!  
Then I shall bow in humble adoration  
And there proclaim: "My God, how great thou art!"

Then sings my soul, my Savior-God, to thee,  
"How great thou art! How great thou art!"  
Then sings my soul, my Savior-God, to thee,  
"How great thou art! How great thou art!"