

Plymouth Unitarian Church

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A Mighty Fortress

Opening video/music

HAUSER – Amazing Grace – 3.33 minutes - YOUTUBE

Welcome + Introduction

Welcome to everyone, both here in church and joining us online.

The theme of today's service is hymns, and its title is taken from the famous hymn - A Mighty Fortress is Our God - by Martin Luther, leader of the Protestant Reformation.

Luther wrote both the words and the tune between 1527 and 1529.

We will hear this hymn in its original German at the end of the service.

Today's service was written by Steve, who, as many of you know, prefers writing services to leading them.

The reflections will therefore be shared by members of the congregation.

The service is presented in three parts and includes readings, hymns, music, and several short video clips.

But first, as always, we begin with the lighting of our chalice, a symbol of our free religious faith.

Chalice is light

Our opening music was the wonderful hymn Amazing Grace, one of the most popular and best-loved hymns in the English-speaking world.

Written in 1779 by John Newton, a former slave ship captain who later became an evangelical Anglican cleric and a campaigner against slavery- it has endured for generations.

A hymn of redemption, forgiveness, and transformation, Amazing Grace is arguably the most famous Christian hymn ever written.

We will hear more about John Newton and the story behind Amazing Grace in the final part of our service.

Opening words

We have three sets of opening words. The first is from the Hebrew Bible, or what we used to call the Old Testament.

Psalm 46 - which inspired the hymn by Martin Luther – A Mighty Fortress is Our God.

We will hear the first few lines from the Good News Bible version.

God is our shelter and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble.
So we will not be afraid, even if the earth is shaken and mountains
fall into the ocean depths;

Even if the seas roar and rage, and the hills are shaken by the violence.

Our second opening words were written by pastor Robert L Evans.

In the midst of the storm, your lifeboat appears.

A psalm, a hymn, a word – calming the fiercest winds of the soul.

Our final opening words are by James Ellis – a 19th century author.

The rustling of the leaves is like a low hymn to nature

Hymn ONE

Our first hymn is number 280 from the Green Hymn Book – Morning has Broken.

The hymn was first published in 1931, with lyrics written by the English author Eleanor Farjeon.

Born in 1881 and living until 1965, Farjeon was a celebrated writer of children's stories, plays, and poetry.

The words of Morning has Broken were inspired by the East Sussex village of Alfriston and were later set to the traditional Scottish Gaelic tune BUNESSAN.

This beautiful folk melody was originally associated with the 1888 hymn Child in the Manger and takes its name from the village of BUNESSAN on the Isle of Mull.

The hymn reached a much wider audience when folk singer Cat Stevens now known as Yusuf Islam recorded it for his 1971 album Teaser and the Fire-cat.

Since then, many other artists have recorded their own versions, making it a much-loved classic across a variety of musical genres.

This is Steve's second-favourite hymn, and it is has featured in at least three – possibly four – of the services he has written.

His absolute favourite is the Christmas hymn People Look East, though that can really only be sung once a year, and certainly not in July!

Interestingly, Eleanor Farjeon also wrote the lyrics for People Look East, and this was a connection that Steve only discovered while researching this service.

Part A

The first part of our service is titled the voice as an instrument of praise to God

Hymns are not a major aspect of the Unitarian style of worship.

In our services, we usually sing three hymns – occasionally four, if we feel the service needs a little extra padding - but most of the time, three is the norm.

If you have ever attended a service in another Protestant denomination, and most of us probably have at some point in our lives – you will know that hymns play a much more central role in worship.

Many Protestant churches include four or more hymns in a single service.

The word hymn comes from the Greek word HYMNOS, meaning a song of praise.

Originally, hymns were songs written in honour of the gods of the Greek pantheon.

We heard an example of this in Steve's June service, Finishing the Race, which explored the relationship between sport and religion.

The piece was called CANTO OLYMPICO, an ode to Zeus, the chief god in Greek mythology.

The title means Olympic song or Olympic chant, and it was a celebratory hymn associated with Mount Olympus, the legendary home of the Greek gods.

There are also examples of hymns of praise in the Hebrew Bible.

One of the earliest is found in Exodus chapter 15: The Song of Moses and Miriam.

This song was sung after the Israelites crossed the Red Sea and were delivered from Pharaoh and the advancing Egyptian army.

It is a song of thanksgiving, celebration, and praise for their liberation.

Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord: I will sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted.

Both horse and driver he has hurled into the sea.

King David, in the Hebrew Bible is closely associated with music.

A former shepherd and harp player, David used music to praise God in times of joy, sorrow, thanksgiving, and repentance.

Many of the Psalms are attributed to him, and several have gone on to inspire well-known Christian hymns.

Take Psalm 23 for example – The Lord is My Shepherd.

This much-loved hymn became familiar to many beyond the church as the theme tune to the BBC comedy The Vicar of Dibley.

There is also Psalm 46, which provided our opening words today, and Psalm 100, which inspired the hymn All People That on Earth Do Dwell.

Then there is Psalm 103 Praise the Lord, my Soul, which inspired the classical hymn Praise My Soul, the King of Heaven and the more modern worship song Bless the Lord, O My Soul.

These examples show how the ancient words of the Psalms have continued to inspire generations of believers, finding new life in the hymns and songs of different ages.

Hymns, like the Church itself, have evolved over the centuries, but they have been part of Christian worship since its earliest days.

One example can be found in the New Testament book of Acts, In chapter 16, verses 16 to 40, the Apostle Paul and Silas sing hymns while imprisoned on charges of disturbing the peace.

Their singing becomes an expression of faith, courage, and hope in the face of adversity.

From around the fourth to fifteenth centuries, the dominant form of Christian church music was Gregorian Chant.

Sung in Latin by monastic choirs, it formed an integral part of Christian worship throughout the medieval period.

The singing of the liturgy was largely the responsibility of trained musicians: clergy, cantors, and choirs.

This sacred music typically consisted of a single, unaccompanied melody sung in unison, creating a style of worship that was both simple and deeply reverential.

It was the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, however, that transformed music in the church and paved the way for congregational hymn singing as we know it today.

Congregational singing became a central feature of Christian worship during the Reformation.

The architect of this revolution, Martin Luther, promoted hymns in the local vernacular rather than the Latin used by the Catholic Church, which most worshippers could not understand.

The invention of the printing press also made it possible to produce hymn books on a large scale, helping congregations participate more fully in worship.

Hymns remain especially important within the Lutheran and Methodist traditions, both of which have rich musical heritages.

The Methodist movement, in particular, emphasised the power of people worshipping together in one voice.

The contributions of John and Charles Wesley were instrumental in shaping this tradition, with Charles Wesley alone writing thousands of hymns that are still sung today.

In the nineteenth century, Black gospel music and hymns emerged from the African American church tradition.

Characterised by intense congregational participation and a distinctive call-and-response style, this music reflected a spirituality forged through slavery, suffering, and the struggle for freedom.

Its influence continues to be felt in Christian worship around the world.

Today, many churches use worship bands to lead congregational singing, continuing the long tradition of uniting believers through music.

A significant influence on contemporary worship was the Jesus Movement of the 1960s and early 1970s.

This Christian revival embraced modern musical styles such as folk, rock, and pop, in place of traditional hymns, making a powerful tool for evangelism and outreach.

Another major development was the rise of the Hillsong movement. Founded in Sydney, Australia, in 1983, Hillsong grew into a global church network renowned for its music ministry.

Its songs and worship style have had a profound impact on churches across the world.

Many modern churches, particularly charismatic and Pentecostal congregations in the United States, now feature worship bands that use contemporary music to express and promote the Christian faith.

Large mega-churches, in particular, often invest heavily in skilled musicians and dedicated worship teams to lead services.

Many of today's biggest pop and soul music stars began their musical journeys in church.

Among them are Aretha Franklin, Whitney Houston, Marvin Gaye, Beyonce, Katy Perry, Justin Timberlake, and Ed Sheeran, all of whom sang in church or church choirs during their early years.

Whitney Houston came from a remarkable gospel heritage. Her mother Cissy was an acclaimed gospel singer, and the church played a central role in Whitney's musical development.

These artists demonstrate how the church has long served as a training ground for some of the world's most gifted vocalists, providing opportunities to develop their voices, musical skills, and confidence.

Ask the average person on the streets of Plymouth, even those who rarely, if ever, attend a church service, they could probably name a hymn they know.

Perhaps it's one they had sung as a child - Jesus Loves Me, Yes, I Know.

This Little Light of Mine, or He's Got the Whole World in His Hands.

Kumbaya My Lord is another well-known one.

Or perhaps it is Jerusalem - less a hymn and more a national anthem in Britain, sung with great enthusiasm at the Proms and other national occasions.

Many of our congregation have come from and subsequently left mainstream Christian traditions.

This can leave us with a sense of nostalgia for the traditional hymns we no longer sing in this church.

And many of course have a favourite hymn, or at least one that we remember from childhood.

Even those who consider themselves atheist or agnostic will choose to include a traditional hymn in their wedding or plan one for their funeral service.

These songs have become woven into the cultural memory of generations, demonstrating the enduring power of music in Christian worship.

One of the BBC's most beloved television programmes is Songs of Praise.

First broadcast in 1961, it is believed to be the world's longest-running series of its genre on television anywhere in the world.

Until 1958 no television programmes were broadcast on Sunday evenings between 6.15 and 7.25 PM.

This was out of respect for the many people in Britain who attended evening church services.

When broadcasting was eventually introduced during that time slot, it was agreed that religious programming would be appropriate, provided it remained free from commercial advertising.

As a result, Songs of Praise was launched. It has become a much-loved institution, bringing hymns, worship, and stories of faith into millions of homes for more than six decades.

Today, it would be almost impossible to imagine a time when television simply went off air on a Sunday evening. How times have changed!!

For Unitarians, the most beloved hymn is undoubtedly SPIRIT OF LIFE.

Written by Carolyn McDade in 1981, it has become a cornerstone of Unitarian and interfaith worship.

It is by far the most widely sung hymn in our tradition and is often regarded as the Unitarian equivalent of Amazing Grace.

This hymn's simple but profound message speaks of inclusivity, reflection, compassion, and spiritual growth – values that lie at the heart of the Unitarian church

We are now going to sing SPIRIT OF LIFE as our second hymn.

Hymn TWO

Spirit of Life – number 148 in the Purple Hymn Book.

Video clip

We now have a short video clip, a hymn by Charles Wesley called O THOU WHO CAMEST FROM ABOVE.

Steve heard this recently in Plymouth Methodist Central Hall which he sometimes goes to in the Sunday evening if he is feeling especially pious.

He really enjoys this hymn, both the lyrics and tune, and wanted to share this version he found on YOUTUBE.

Stay seated for this one whilst it is played but sing along if you want to.

O THOU WHO CAMEST FROM ABOVE – Charles Wesley – 2.48 M (YOUTUBE).

Prayer

We now move into a time of prayer and reflection.

For our prayer, we are going to listen to the words of a hymn we often sing - Number 226 in the Green Hymn Book – The Song of Peace.

The hymn is set to the majestic melody Finlandia by composer Jean Sibelius and is a universal plea for peace, justice, and understanding among all nations.

Although it is sometimes mistakenly referred to as The Finlandia Hymn, its proper title is The Song of Peace.

The words are deeply moving.

Steve has often remarked that from his vantage point at the back of the church, he has seen many members of the congregation moved to tears as they sing this beautiful hymn.

The text was written by Lloyd Stone who lived between 1912 and 1993, an American poet, illustrator, and composer.

This is my song, O God of all the nations
A song of peace, for lands afar and mine
This is my home, the country where my heart is
Here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine
But other hearts in other lands are beating
With hopes and dreams as true and high as mine

My country's skies are bluer than the ocean
And sunlight beams on cloverleaf and pine
But other lands have sunlight, too, and clover
And skies are everywhere as blue as mine
O hear my song, thou God of all the nations
A song of peace for their land and for mine

Amen

Part B

Five famous hymn heroes

In the second part of our service, we are going to hear about five of the most influential and prolific hymn writers in the English-speaking world.

The first is CECIL FRANCES ALEXANDER, a nineteenth-century Anglo-Irish hymn writer and poet.

She is regarded by many as one of the greatest hymn writers in the English language because of the lyrical beauty, simplicity, and enduring appeal of her work.

She wrote the words of ALL THINGS BRIGHT AND BEAUTIFUL, a joyful celebration of God's creation that remains one of the best-loved hymns of all time.

She also wrote THERE IS A GREEN HILL FAR AWAY, and ONCE IN ROYAL DAVID'S CITY, which, when later set to music, became one of the world's most cherished Christmas carols.

During her lifetime, she wrote around 400 hymns and poems, many of them for children.

In 1848 she published HYMNS FOR LITTLE CHILDREN, her most successful work, which went through 69 editions.

Her poetry was admired by many distinguished figures, including Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Mark Twain

Cecil Frances Alexander was married to the Anglican primate of All Ireland, William Alexander.

Alongside her writing, she devoted herself to caring for the sick and the poor and helped establish a school for deaf children.

She died in 1895 and is buried in Derry City Cemetery.

Her hymns continue to inspire Christians around the world and remain a treasured part of the Church's musical heritage.

Next, we come to FANNY CROSBY, who is widely regarded as the most prolific hymn writer in history.

A nineteenth-century American mission worker, poet, lyricist, and composer, she is believed to have written around 8,000 gospel hymns and songs, many of which are still sung throughout the world today.

She lost her sight at just six weeks of age as the result of an eye infection and poor medical treatment.

Despite this, her family were determined that she should receive the best education possible.

Gifted with an extraordinary memory, she learnt entire books by heart, along with many other works of literature.

Crosby was both a student and later a teacher at the New York Institute for the Blind.

She became a passionate advocate for the education of blind children and is believed to have been the first woman to address the United States senate on this important issue.

She possessed an astonishing gift for writing, sometimes composing as many as seven hymns and songs in a single day.

She once said: I feel a hundred hymns in my head. The Lord has given me a purpose in my life.

She later married a blind church organist called Alexander van Alstyne.

They had one daughter who sadly died shortly after birth.

Out of that deep personal sorrow came one of her most best-loved hymns, Safe in the Arms of Jesus.

Another of her most famous hymns, Blessed Assurance, remains a favourite in churches around the world and is often chosen for Christian funeral services.

Known as the Queen of Gospel Song Writers, Fanny Crosby's influence on Christian worship is immeasurable. In 1975 she was posthumously inducted into the Gospel Music Hall of Fame.

Perhaps her most remarkable testimony was her attitude towards her blindness.

She is often quoted as saying she would not exchange her blindness for sight, because the first face she would ever see would be that of Jesus, and his smile would be the first to welcome her into eternity.

Our third hymn hero is Charles Wesley. Together with his brother, John Wesley, he became one of the leading figures of the eighteenth-century Methodist movement.

Through their preaching, organisation, and evangelism, the Wesley brothers helped bring about a remarkable spiritual revival across Britain and beyond.

Charles Wesley is widely regarded as one of the greatest hymn writers in Christian history.

During his lifetime, he wrote more than 6,000 hymns, many of which continue to be sung throughout the world today.

His hymns did far more than provide music for worship. They taught the Christian faith in a clear, memorable, and deeply inspiring way, making profound theological truths accessible to ordinary men and women across all backgrounds, and winning him legions of fans as well as converts.

For this reason, he is considered one of the most influential Christian hymn-writers of all time.

Among his best-known hymns are Hark! The Herald Angels Sing, Christ the Lord is Risen Today, and O, for a Thousand Tongues to Sing.

I suspect that, as soon as you heard those titles, you were already singing the tunes in your head.

Especially O, for a Thousand Tongues to Sing with the elongated Thousand!

Such is the enduring power of Charles Wesley's words and music, that more than 250 years later, they remain an essential part of Christian worship across the world.

You should all have sung Joy to the World - you can probably hear the opening melody already, can't you?

It was written by our fourth hymn hero, English minister, theologian, and hymn writer Isaac Watts, who also penned the much-loved hymn When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.

Watts lived from 1674 to 1748.

He wrote Joy to the World in 1719. It's best known as a Christmas carol but was actually based on Psalm 98 celebrating Christ's reign over the whole world.

It has subsequently become one of our most popular Christmas hymns.

Before his time, the Church primarily sang psalms, but Watts introduced hymns written in simple, poetic language.

Deeply rooted in Scripture, they reflected worship and faith, flowing from his own profound devotion to Christ.

Although Watts wrote a modestly numbered 750 hymns, his influence on Christian worship was immense, earning him the title of the Father of English hymnody.

Our final hymn hero is Haldor LILLENAS who lived from 1885 to 1959, one of the twentieth century's most influential gospel hymn writers and publishers.

Born in Norway, LILLENAS later emigrated to America, where he devoted his life to Christian music.

Remarkably he wrote about 4,000 hymns, many of which continue to inspire worshippers today.

His best-known hymn is the Wonderful Grace of Jesus, a joyful celebration of God's redeeming grace and the transforming power of redemption.

Interlude

We now have a short interlude, where we will hear a harp instrumental version of the hymn – All Things Bright and Beautiful.

All Things Bright and Beautiful played by harpist Anne Crosby Gaudet
YOUTUBE (1.51 minutes)

Hymn THREE

Others call it God – number 233 in the Green Hymn Book.

Steve chose this hymn because he remembers our former minister, Reverend Kate, saying that it was the first hymn she heard at a Unitarian service, which he believes was at Brighton Unitarian Church.

At first Steve thought this was an atheist hymn. However, after researching it further, he discovered that it can be interpreted as both a theist and atheist hymn.

It was written by William Herbert Carruth who lived from 1859 to 1924, a Professor of German and English.

Carruth was also a supporter of several progressive causes, including women's suffrage.

The central message of the hymn can be understood in two different ways – either affirming or questioning the existence of God.

Each verse compares a natural phenomenon with a spiritual counterpart, inviting you to reflect on both perspectives.

Rather than suggesting that one interpretation is superior to the other, Carruth allows each person to find meaning in the words.

The hymn recognises that people use different language to express the same sense of wonder and awe.

In that respect, it is a distinctly Unitarian hymn.

Part C

Amazing Grace

So, in the final part of our service, we come to one of the best-known hymns in the world: Amazing Grace.

Whenever someone describes something as the world's most famous or favourite, there's usually an immediate response from someone: I don't agree, I don't think so. No, it isn't!!!

We have some wonderfully strong characters in this church, and strong characters are never shy about sharing their opinions – whether you ask for them or not!

Amazing Grace is especially popular in the United States, while in Britain many would argue that How Great Thou Art deserves the top spot.

Even so, Amazing Grace is arguably the Christian world's most famous and widely loved hymn. It is sung in churches across the globe, at funerals, remembrance services, and other public occasions.

The hymn was written in 1779 by John Newton, an English Anglican clergyman and later a passionate abolitionist.

Earlier in his life, Newton had been the captain of a slave ship and had invested in the transatlantic slave trade.

During a violent storm at sea, he experienced a profound religious awakening that transformed his life.

In many ways, his conversion echoes that of the Apostle Paul in the New Testament – a complete change of direction.

Newton devoted the rest of his life to seeking redemption and campaigning against the very trade from which he had once profited.

In 1788, he published a powerful pamphlet entitled Thoughts Upon the Slave Trade, exposing the appalling conditions aboard slave ships. He sent a copy to every Member of Parliament, adding his voice to the growing campaign for abolition.

Newton lived long enough to see the British Parliament abolish the African slave trade in 1807, only a few months before his death.

Reflecting on his past, Newton wrote - I thought that surely the Scriptures proved that there never was, nor could be, such a sinner as myself.

The word grace lies at the heart of the hymn. In Christian belief, grace is God's freely given gift of forgiveness and love. It is receiving mercy that cannot be earned and is not deserved.

Amazing Grace expresses the Christian message of hope, mercy, repentance, and forgiveness.

It reminds us that no matter how great our failings, sincere repentance can lead to forgiveness and a new beginning.

Perhaps that is why, nearly 250 years after it was written, this remarkable hymn continues to be loved and sung throughout the world.

Closing words

Our closing words are hymn Number 102 in the Purple hymn book.

May the road rise with you – a traditional blessing.

Stay seated for this one.

Chalice is extinguished

Closing music

Our closing music is A Mighty Fortress Is Our God, sung in German – the original language in which it was written.

We will be listening to a YOUTUBE recording by the singer Lila, but if you want to follow the words, you can find the English translation in the Green Hymn Book – Number 73.

This great hymn is often described as the battle hymn of the Reformation. Its words speak of faith, courage, and unwavering trust in God in the face of adversity.

It has inspired generations of Christians around the world and remains especially loved in Germany, where it continues to hold a special place in both worship and culture.

Thank you, and I hope you enjoy listening.

EIN FESTE BURG IST UNSER GOTT – 3.28 minutes (YOUTUBE)

Notices

Coffee/Tea