

From the Director

When Words Surprise

Sometimes a light surprises the Christian while he sings:

It is the Lord, who rises with healing in his wings;

When comforts are declining, he grants the soul again

A season of clear shining to cheer it after rain.

William Cowper, 1779

Mr. Cowper (pronounced “cooper”) was a friend and parishioner of John Newton. Together they produced *The Olney Hymns*, a classic collection of newly composed hymns, in 1779. Cowper struggled with what we would now call depression, much of his adult life. This hymn reflects that—as do many Cowper texts—in a way that highlights God’s gracious work in and through the struggle. He concludes with this from Habakkuk 3:17:

Though vine nor fig-tree neither their wonted fruit should bear,

Though all the fields should wither, nor flocks nor herds be there,

Yet God the same abiding, his praise shall tune my voice,

For while in him confiding I cannot but rejoice.

Sometimes words surprise us: Common words used uncommonly; sentences that end unexpectedly; lyrics that do not spin out as we would predict. Sometimes it is the use of specific words, or their order in a sentence, that surprise us.

But often we are surprised by what the words do to us. We are caught off guard, brought up short, stopped in our tracks by words ... even sentences or paragraphs or chapters that may be very “familiar” to us. In these times perhaps “It is the Lord, who rises with healing in his wings!”

I was struck by this the other day in my morning Bible reading. I am reading again through Jeremiah—always a challenging read, isn’t it? Chapter 45 is God’s message to Jeremiah’s assistant, Baruch, who was apparently (understandably) bemoaning his personal circumstances in Jeremiah’s challenging ministry.

“Thus says the LORD: Behold what I have built I am breaking down, and what I have planted I am plucking up—that is, the whole land. And do you seek great things for yourself? Seek them not, for behold, I am bringing disaster upon all flesh, declares

the LORD. But I will give you your life as a prize of war in all places to which you may go.” Jeremiah 45:4-5

This really struck me. All I was doing was “getting through my daily reading” (I am sorry to say), when I was surprised by this little message to Baruch. Why should this stand out to me? My life and work is so different from his. God’s word to him is particular to him, his place, his time. What could God possibly be saying to me, here, now? Well, OK, so there is something important here about the character and work of God. Got that. And there is a correction to Baruch that maybe I need to hear. Oh, do I get that? Maybe I need to understand this: Judgment is coming on the world, and am *I* concerned about “great things” for *myself*? Am I not, like Baruch, called to faithfulness, through easy times and difficult? What is my “life as a prize of war,” but the final word—“Well done, good and faithful servant?”

As William Cowper observes, “sometimes a light surprises.” This little devotional lesson—unlooked for, if I am to be honest about it—is the Lord rising with healing in his wings, for me.

We do well to remember that these words that surprise often come by way of music, in the course of gathered worship. We catch our breath as a phrase from a hymn jumps off the page and grabs our spirit: “oh!” “amen!” “hallelujah!” “forgive me, Lord!” Or we simply enter the silence that comes when the words drive from us the ability to continue singing, and we can only let the congregation’s voice wash over us “in holy contemplation” (from verse 2 of the Cowper hymn). I am often struck dumb as the congregation sings, surprised by God’s presence in our song. There are times when the words of a choir anthem—long rehearsed, labored over, finessed beyond the choir’s patience—cut my spirit like a sword, and I can barely stand, much less direct, and I cannot look at the choir as the Lord communicates through them so surprisingly. Or an instrumental piece on a familiar tune evokes surprisingly and powerfully the sacred text, and the ministry of the Word is evident as the Lord rises with healing in his wings.

Let us continue to be open to surprise as we

Sing on!

Chuck

Calendar Corner:

Sunday, September 23—morning services: Jubilation Bells, Chancel Choir

Sunday, October 14—Missions Sunday; evening service, “Missionary Christmas” with the children’s choirs

Sunday, October 21—Concert Series (3pm) featuring H. E. Singley, organist; reception follows

Sunday, October 28—Alleluia Choir (girls grade 4-6) sings in the morning services

THE PRAYER COLUMN
LEE HOFFNER, CHOIR CHAPLAIN

*The LORD reigns forever;
he has established his throne for judgment.
He will judge the world in righteousness;
he will govern the peoples with justice.
The LORD is a refuge for the oppressed,
a stronghold in times of trouble.
Those who know your name will trust in you,
for you, LORD, have never forsaken those who seek you.*
Psalm 9:7-10 (NIV)

Because God reigns, there is hope. When we believe that God is king, we believe also that his rule is different from those who rule countries: God's rule is righteous.

The psalmist promises that the Lord is a refuge for "the oppressed" and those "in times of trouble". Why would the Lord's righteousness be a sign of hope for anyone? That is the central question. The psalmist writes this promise for the godly (v10).

Ask yourself this question: is God's righteousness something that inspires hope for me? If you feel lukewarm or uncertain about the importance of the righteousness of God, the answer lies in drawing nearer. The nations' rulers rule without righteousness because they forget God. But, the refuge and stronghold of the oppressed expects his children to take refuge in him. Those who depend upon the fortress know its ramparts well!

To include your new prayer requests, contact Chuck King (668-0878 x122; cdking@college-church.org).

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Chancel Choir Rehearsal Music:

Open Enrollment in the Chancel Choir through the month of September.

Voice-Building

Jesus the Christ Says
Praise the Lord, All You Nations
Rejoice in God

Music for this Sunday, September 23
O for a Closer Walk

Magnificat/Nunc dimittis
O Let Your Soul Now Be Filled

Choir Calendar

Sunday, Oct. 28—choir does not sing
Long/late rehearsal on Thursday, Nov. 15
Wednesday, Nov. 21—Thanksgiving service
Long/late rehearsal on Thursday, Dec. 6
Sun., Dec. 9—*Service of Lessons & Carols*

Jubilation Bells Rehearsal

Wednesday 6:45 PM in the Choir Room
Bells play in services on
Sunday, September 23

Brass Ensemble Rehearsal
Ad hoc for the Fall season

String Ensemble Rehearsal
Organizing rehearsal Saturday, October 13, 10AM in the sanctuary

Concert Series
College Church Sanctuary

October 21, 3:00 pm
Reception following the concert

H. E. Singley, III
College Church Organist

Works by:
Bach, Vierne, Reger, Bruhns, Distler