

## **REFLECTION: Brent Tucker**

### **Hymn Stories**

This morning we will hear the stories of three hymn writers, each from different eras but every one responding to the voice of God who invited them to share the gift of faith through music. For each writer, we will feature one of their songs.

The first writer is St. Francis of Assisi, born in the early 1100s in Italy and the hymn is *All Creatures of Our God and King*. The version we sing was translated by William Henry Draper and the melody is the 1623 German hymn tune *Lasst uns erfreuen*.

Richard Niell Donovan writes:

His name was Giovanni Bernardone, but he became known as St. Francis of Assisi. The son of a wealthy merchant, he was expected to follow in his father's footsteps but rebelled against the pursuit of money. As a young man, he experienced a vision that persuaded him to renounce wealth so that he might live a life of poverty and service.

St. Francis is famous for many things, including love of animals. Pictures of him usually have birds flying nearby and small animals at his feet. A popular story tells of him stopping to preach a sermon to a flock of birds. He reminded them that God had blessed them with beautiful clothing even though they had never learned to spin or weave—and that God had blessed them with food even though they had never learned to sow or reap. Then he called them to sing their songs as praises to God.

The hymn, "All Creatures of Our God and King," is an outgrowth of that sentiment. It is a call for "All creatures of our God and King" to "lift up (their voices) and with us sing, Alleluia!"

St. Francis wrote this hymn near the end of his life. Sick and suffering bouts of blindness, he was going home to die when he stopped to visit friends at the St. Damien monastery. While there, he felt the inspiration to compose this joyful hymn. It calls all God's creatures—sun and moon—wind and water—fruits and flowers—and all who are of tender heart—to sing, "Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!" to honor our God.

**HYMN** All Creatures of Our God and King (VU #217)

All creatures of our God and King,  
Lift up your voice and with us sing:  
Alleluia! Alleluia!  
O burning sun with golden beam  
Soft shining moon with silver gleam:  
Sing praises, sing praises,  
Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!

O rushing wind and breezes soft,  
O clouds that ride the winds aloft:  
Alleluia! Alleluia!  
O rising morn, in praise rejoice,  
O lights of evening, find a voice.  
Sing praises, sing praises,  
Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!

Let all things their Creator bless,  
And worship God in humbleness,  
Sing Praises! Alleluia!  
Praise God eternal, praise the Son,  
And praise the Spirit, Three in One!  
Sing Praises! Alleluia!  
Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!

With the second featured writer, we jump forward 700 years to learn about Frances Havergal who wrote *Take my Life and Let it Be*. This short biography was also written by Richard Niell Donovan.

Frances Havergal (1836-1879) was an unusual woman. The daughter of a minister, she mastered Greek and Hebrew to read the scriptures in their original languages. Having grown up in England, she traveled in Europe and enjoyed skiing in the Swiss Alps—an unusual recreation in the nineteenth century. She was also an accomplished singer who sometimes sang with the Philharmonic.

Havergal was a Christian all her life, but at age 36 experienced what we might describe as a conversion experience. A little book entitled *All for Jesus* made her

aware of the incompleteness of her own devotion, and she rededicated her life to Christ.

Soon thereafter, she spent five days with a small group of people, some of whom were not Christians, and others of whom were lukewarm. She spent those five days witnessing to them and praying for them, and was delighted to see her prayers answered. By the end of that week, all ten people had devoted themselves to Christ. That night, too excited to sleep, Havergal sat up writing this hymn, "Take My Life and Let It Be."

Her devotion to Christ took many shapes. For one, she quit singing in secular venues and devoted herself to Christian music. For another, she donated her collection of jewelry to a missionary society to raise money for mission endeavors. But those were merely minor notes in the symphony of devotion that was Frances Havergal's life.

**Hymn:** Take my Life and Let It Be (VU #506) – *Note: the words of the second verse are her original words, not the ones in Voices United*

Take my life, and let it be  
Consecrated, all for thee;  
Take my moments and my days,  
Let them flow in ceaseless praise.

Take my voice, and let me sing  
Always, only, for my King;  
Take my lips, and let them be  
Filled with messages from thee.

Take my love; and I will pour  
At Thy feet its treasure-store.  
Take myself, and I will be  
Ever, only, all for thee.

For our final writer we jump ahead another 100 years to our current times and feature a Canadian group called the Common Cup Company. The hymn we will feature is *Draw the Circle Wide*, written by Gordon Light, one of the group's members.

The Common Cup Company is a musical group featuring songwriters Gordon Light & Ian Macdonald, composers of popular hymns *Draw The Circle Wide*, *She Flies On! (She Comes Sailing On The Wind)*, *River Run Deep (River Running In You & Me)*, *Joy Comes With The Dawn* and many other published titles.

Their musical ministry began in 1979 when Light (an Anglican Priest and later Bishop), met Ian Macdonald and Jim Uhrich (both United Church Ministers) while serving neighboring churches in Winnipeg, Canada. Bob Wallace joined the group in 1982, his voice strengthening and enriching the group's sound.

In the following decades this original quartet wrote, performed, & recorded together despite living in different corners the country. Scott McDonald & Richard Betts joined the lineup in 1998, adding Bass & Drums and giving the Common Cup a contemporary sound.

The group suffered a deep loss when founding member Jim Uhrich died in 2009. The addition of respected United Church musician Lloyd Maclean (piano / accordion) brought Common Cup new inspiration.

Ian Macdonald was diagnosed with Lewy Body Dementia in 2012, and faced this illness with courage and grace until he passed away in 2016. We miss him every day.

The Common Cup Company continues to write, record, and tour.

<https://commoncup.com/about/>

### **Hymn:** Draw the Circle Wide (MV #145)

Draw the circle wide, draw it wider still.  
Let this be our song: no one stands alone.  
Standing side by side, draw the circle, draw the circle wide...

God the still-point of the circle  
Round you all creation turns  
Nothing lost but held forever  
in God's gracious arms

Draw the circle wide, draw it wider still.  
Let this be our song: no one stands alone.  
Standing side by side, draw the circle, draw the circle wide...

Let the dreams we dream be larger  
Than we've ever dreamed before  
Let the dream of Christ be in us  
Open every door!

Draw the circle wide, draw it wider still.  
Let this be our song: no one stands alone.

Standing side by side, draw the circle, draw the circle wide...

This ends our musical tour through the ages. Music adds so much to our worship and we are grateful for music that nurtures our souls and expresses our faith. When words are set to music, we hear them in a new way and they evoke an emotional response that opens us to hear the voice of God in a very different way from the spoken word. As St. Augustine says, “He who sings prays twice.” May we pray twice all through this week as the melody of these hymns dance about in our souls.