

## ***“Leaning on the Everlasting Arms”***

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship on September 27, 2020

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

Text: Matthew 7:7-14

What I am learning as I research this sermon series on our most favorite hymns is that the stories behind them are more interesting than I ever would have dreamed. Then again, this shouldn't be surprising as the stories behind so many things – hymns, works of art and drama, even people we thought we knew – are so much richer than we ever stop to consider. I think this is because anything truly memorable has to be built on something substantial even if what that reality is remains hidden, just out of sight. For example, hymns are, at their most basic, an expression of the deep relationship that already existed between the composers and God. Sometimes that relationship emphasizes the relationship with God – like *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*. Sometimes it emphasizes the activity of the Holy Spirit in our lives – like *Spirit of the Living God*. Sometimes the emphasis is on the entire concept of the Trinity, our God who is somehow mysteriously “three in one.” I'm recalling the hymn *Holy, Holy, Holy* as an example of this theological concept which has confounded many a Confirmand, not to mention candidates for ordination. Then, of course, there are the many, many hymns which put all the emphasis on our relationship with Jesus. *Leaning on the Everlasting Arms* is one such “Jesus hymn” although, in all candor, I had to scrutinize the lyrics before I recognized this was the case.

That's because the verses of this delightful hymn describe in joyful and invitational language what it means to have a relationship with the divine that carries one through each day. Which aspect of the divine only becomes clear in the refrain. Actually, it becomes clear in the alternative refrain visible in the words our choir sings descant style as the rest of us sing the regular refrain. This secondary refrain is “Leaning on Jesus” repeated five times throughout the refrain itself. There is also a reference to “my Lord” in verse three but even this can be ambiguous in its meaning since “Lord” can refer to either God or Jesus, depending on the context. Welcome to the complicated world of trinitarian theology as expressed in word and song! This is one reason why learning about how this hymn came

to be composed is so very interesting, not to mention clarifying as to why the words are written as they are.

In the blog, *Hymn Sing* ([hymnswelove.blogspot.com/2012](http://hymnswelove.blogspot.com/2012)) we can read the short but fascinating story of how *Leaning on the Everlasting Arms* came in to being. Anthony Showalter was a teacher at a singing school at a church in Alabama in 1887 (this was a thing at this time) when he received two separate letters from two former students who were writing to inform their beloved teacher of the deaths of their wives. Showalter wrote back, wanting to offer comfort to the grief-stricken young men. He felt he needed to include a Bible verse at the conclusion of each letter and settled on Deuteronomy 33:27 which reads in the King James Bible: “The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms...” . As he wrote this verse at the conclusion of the two letters, the words we know as the hymn refrain, “Leaning, leaning, safe and secure from all alarms; leaning, leaning on the everlasting arms” came to him and he wrote them down. He continued to think about this phrase and recognized in it a possible refrain for a hymn. So, he wrote to his friend, Elisha Hoffman, explaining that he thought he had a refrain for a hymn based on the Deuteronomy text, but no verses. Hoffman soon wrote back with the verses and another refrain, the “leaning on Jesus” phrase I mentioned earlier. So, Showalter’s refrain now had verses to go with it and even a fancy harmonization option with the second refrain. But, no music. Someone obviously quick on his feet, Showalter gave his nephew Sam Duncan, a student in the singing school, the assignment of writing the music for the hymn. Duncan completed the assignment and the hymn was born. Apparently, Showalter felt justified in taking credit for the tune as the teacher for whom it was completed as a class assignment because he is listed as the composer of the tune to this day. In fact, the tune has been given the name SHOWALTER even though it was written by a young man named Duncan. Historical accounts reveal Showalter made no secret of the fact that his nephew wrote the music because Duncan’s name often appears in background information on the hymn, but not in credit given for the music. A curious arrangement, to say the least!

So, once again, I had to identify a scripture text as a way of considering how this beloved hymn informs and deepens our relationship

with God, how it helps to form our faith. Obviously, the Deuteronomy text is where the words for the refrain came from but there is something curious about this choice. The phraseology “The eternal God is thy refuge and underneath are the everlasting arms” is directly from the King James Bible, the dominant biblical translation in use at the time. Important to understand is that the field of biblical languages and theological interpretation based on the same, augmented by biblical archaeology in Palestine, was on the verge of questioning the wording which appears in much of the King James Bible. This particular verse is an excellent example of how great the differences between biblical translations can be. The *New Revised Standard Bible*, the one we use as our pew bible and therefore the one in which I ground my work in sermon preparation, has a completely different translation of this same verse: “He subdues the ancient gods, shatters the forces of old.” Huh? How does “the eternal God is thy refuge and underneath are the everlasting arms” become “he subdues the ancient gods, shatters the forces of old”? Those two translations seem pretty radically different, don’t they? Well, that’s where the concept of “context” comes into the work of translation, especially when working with ancient languages. Let me explain. The verse in question actually has a second part. In the King James, that part of the verse reads: “and he shall thrust out the enemy from before thee; and shall say, destroy them.” In the NRSV it reads: “he drove out the enemy before you and said, “Destroy!” Okay, those two seem pretty similar. So, what’s with the difference in the first part of the same verse? Well, I am no expert like Dav is, but it seems to me that translator bias probably had at least something to do with it. The translators creating the King James didn’t want to go anywhere near even hinting that there could possibly be any gods but THE GOD, as the NRSV translation does, so they opted to emphasize instead the eternal nature of God’s abiding love and protection for God’s people they found in the original language.

Needless to say, I did not find this particular text from Deuteronomy to be especially inspiring for our task at hand this morning. So, I opted to look for a text that I thought captured the intent of the hymn which I see as the need to trust in God completely, whatever is going on in your life. We all know from personal experience that this is a very challenging thing to do.

Thus I considered what biblical text, what story, tells us how we might work to develop that trust in God we need in order to feel those “everlasting arms” on which we can lean “safe and secure from all alarms.” That led me back to basics, as it were, which for me comes round to Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew 5-7. There it is, plain as day, in Matthew 7, verses 7-14: “Ask and it will be given you; search and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you.” How do we live out the trust this hymn invites us to claim when we’re not even sure what that is or how to begin to do it? Simple, Jesus says. Ask. Search. Knock. Ask God for what you need and it will be provided. Search for God’s truth and you will find it. Knock on the door that separates you from God in those sad and scary moments of life, and God will open it.

You can do this, Jesus goes on to say. I know it’s difficult but you can do this, he assures us. He explains, you already know how to care for your children and you are God’s child. You can do this! And once you have accepted the truth of God’s abiding and unfailing love for you, you will sense those everlasting arms holding you up no matter what. You will know how to handle every situation you encounter – by treating others as you would like to be treated. Yes, you can do this, Jesus says – if you work at it. If you accept God’s love and strength as the foundation of your life. But, Jesus says, this is not easy. In fact, Jesus tell us this is quite difficult. It is so difficult that it is like committing to following a road that leads to a gate so narrow you have to squeeze through it when the roads we prefer to travel are easy to follow and lead to a wide open gate that takes no effort to pass through. “The road is hard that leads to life,” Jesus says, “and there are few who find it.”

Ask and it will be given to you. Search and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened for you. Ask. Search. Knock. Words to live by in these increasingly anxious times when rhetoric on all sides is heating to the boiling point as the days for what will clearly be a momentous election tick past on the calendar. Ask. Search. Knock. Sounds like a campaign strategy, doesn’t it? Well, Diana Butler Bass, a theologian and author who writes about the future of the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century advocates a similar strategy for getting through these next 40 or so days until the election and she suggests we do it by becoming active instead of staying on the sidelines

out of the fray. In her column which appears on her blog *The Cottage* several times a week, she offered a suggestion this past Thursday. She encouraged us to think of these last weeks before the election as a season similar to the liturgical season of Lent. She makes this comparison because she sees this as a time when people of faith need to commit to “prayer and practice,” like we do in Lent. And she offers specific suggestions:

- 1) *Pray daily for a specific issue or candidate.* Pray asking God for help if you feel angry, afraid or despairing. Pray with an attitude of gratitude for each and every blessing of your life, especially those moments that fill you with wonder and remind you of God’s presence.
- 2) *Take some sort of positive action each day.* Confirm you are registered to vote. Donate money. Make phone calls, not just to campaign but even more importantly to check in with people. Volunteer to work at the polls. Make sure the information you are relying on is truthful and reliable so that you don’t assist in spreading misinformation or slip into gossip or name calling of others who disagree with your stand on candidates and issues. Invite others to join you in daily prayer.
- 3) *Dare to inspire others through your prayers and your actions,* always with Jesus’ instructions to treat others as you desire to be treated.

Dear ones, we live in anxious, troubled times. We need to trust that God loves us and always will; that indeed come what may we live always in the palm of God’s hands. Dare to feel those everlasting arms holding you up. Dare to trust that God will keep you and those you love safe and secure from all alarms. Dare to claim the blessed peace God provides to all who are strong enough, diligent enough, trusting enough to ask for what you need, search for God’s truth and knock at the door that leads to God’s abiding presence in your life each day. Easy? Not really. The road is narrow after all. But, we already have the roadmap Jesus provides us every day. And, we always have each other to lean on. What have we to dread? What have we to fear? Only that we lose our way... Amen.