

"I SING THE MIGHTY POWER OF GOD"

Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 8; Jeremiah 10:12-16

August 4, 2019

Rev. Jerry Duggins

"I Sing the Mighty Power of God" is an old hymn, though not usually listed among those old-time hymns many profess to love. Written in 1715 by Isaac Watts, it lies well within what historians refer to as the modern era. Kepler and Galileo have challenged "traditional" views of the universe. Newton will begin to put formulas to the workings of the world. Theologians will begin to take a more critical look at the Bible.

It would have been an exciting time to be alive: the flat earth becoming a sphere, the three-tiered universe suddenly infinite in all directions, the earth no longer sitting in the center of creation. Still 160 years before Darwin and over 200 years before the advances in science lead to a movement wanting to dispense with God. But the seed for that movement began in this period where the dependence on "special revelation" is giving way to God revealed in the natural order.

This is a hymn of its time and yet also a hymn for our time. It expresses a faith that attempts to provide stability in an age where the understanding of the world is going through vast changes and offers a faith relevant for our own time.

Ironically it does all this without mentioning Jesus. The hymn affirms in the first three couplets: God's power to bring things into being, God's wisdom in ordering those things, and God's affirmation of the goodness of creation. The hymn is completely positive... and yet... lurking behind the scenes are the changing times that question these basic affirmations.

I think you can see what I mean by looking at this short reading from Jeremiah. After affirming God's power and wisdom in creation, verse 14 abruptly says, "Everyone is stupid and without knowledge; goldsmiths are all put to shame by their idols." Jeremiah is a little unusual among the prophets. Maybe the Hebrew is more refined, though I doubt it. He may lack tact, but the meaning is clear: "you're dumb, folks. God made the world, instilled wisdom into it, stretched out the sky, brought the storms, watered the earth, and made the wind to blow... and you don't see it... stupid!"

It wouldn't be helpful if he stopped there, but he does go on to say why they have trouble seeing it. In short, the idols get in the way. They trusted in these figures made out of wood and iron to bring the rain, to make the harvest plentiful, to treat their diseases.

So Isaac Watts sings about the mighty power of God in raising mountains, spreading out the seas, and building the skies. He speaks of God's wisdom in ordering night and

day. And he rejoices in God's goodness in filling the earth with food and forming the creatures of the world. But not everyone sees it that way. Not everyone sees God at the center of creation. He doesn't mention that in the hymn, but it's part of the context of his times.

The world is getting smarter. God didn't make the apple fall. Gravity did that. God doesn't bring the rain. Water evaporates over here, forms clouds, and as it reaches a saturation point falls in the form of rain over there. The acquisition of knowledge was accelerating in the 18th century, and the more that people had an explanation for, the less they needed God in the equation. It doesn't have to happen this way, but it often does. The less mystery in nature, the less sacred it seems.

Of course, Watts didn't reject the advances of science. It wasn't the knowledge that was the problem. It was the ultimate trust in that knowledge. His hymn is a reminder to never lose the wonder.

If it was true in Watt's day, how much more true today where knowledge is expanding at an exponential rate. We have already removed much of the sacred from creation. Our knowledge has given us a terrifying power over nature. Our actions impact the quality of the soil we use to raise our food. They affect the water we drink, the air we breathe, the climate in which we live.

We are so proud of our knowledge, that it is actually killing us. It should increase our wonder, but because we have made an idol of it, we are doing harm to the very environment on which we depend. Walter Brueggemann writes of this hymn: "This affirmation of God's care for the created world amounts to a profound repudiation of modernist notions that creation is simply a valuable commodity to be exploited and used up at will" (p. 101). Or if you prefer Jeremiah's simpler take: "stupid people!"

The good news: we don't have to be dumb. This hymn is a perfect antidote to the idolatry of our times. We don't have to reject science to see God's hand in the creation of the world, in its wise ordering, and in its intrinsic goodness. To place God back at the center of the universe is to restore the sacred to all things, and to restore the sacred to all things is to learn respect for the earth and for all creatures who dwell on it.

We are mindful of this regard for the sacred as we grieve with the families who have lost loved ones in El Paso and Dayton this morning. This hymn is important not only in the face of our disregard for the earth but also in the midst of other evils and idols that we encounter in life. These senseless acts of violence present a challenge to our faith. This hymn holds us to the path of the sacred.

To see the wonders of God displayed on the "ground we tread" or the sky we "gaze upon," to see "glory" in a plant or flower, and to see the presence of God

“everywhere”: these are things that the hymn calls us to, things just as essential for faith-filled living as they were 300 years ago.

Let’s stand and “sing the mighty power of God.” Amen.

Resources:

Walter Brueggeman, *A Glad Obedience: Why and What We Sing*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2019.

I SING THE MIGHTY POWER OF GOD

Words by Isaac Watts

I sing the mighty pow’r of God,
That made the mountains rise,
That spread the flowing seas abroad,
and built the lofty skies.
I sing the wisdom that ordained
the sun to rule the day;
The moon shines full at His command,
and all the stars obey.

I sing the goodness of the Lord,
who filled the earth with food,
Who formed the creatures through the Word,
and then pronounced them good.
Lord, how Thy wonders are displayed,
where’er I turn my eye,
If I survey the ground I tread,
or gaze upon the sky.

There’s not a plant or flow’r below,
but makes Thy glories known,
And clouds arise, and tempests blow,
by order from Thy throne;
While all that borrows life from Thee
is ever in Thy care;
And everywhere that we can be,
Thou, God, art present there.