Sunday, June 18, 1972
GOD IS THE AUDIENCE!
Psalm 96:1-9, 150

What is the place of “hymn-singing” in worship? Why do we sing hymns? And what makes a song, a “hymn?” This morning we are going to look at “hymn-singing” and do a lot of it by singing your favorite hymns. But first, let’s set the context.

Pick up your hymnbooks and turn with me to the preface and follow along as I read the first several paragraphs.

“The hymnbook has a central place in the worship of the church. The psalmist invites us to “sing to the Lord a new song.” St. Paul urges the churches to praise God in Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.” The Reformation began in a burst of congregational singing. In our worship the people have always taken an active and significant part, and a zeal for corporate worship has featured every period of renewal within Protestantism. Our hymnbook, therefore, bears testimony to our concern that worship should be first and foremost an act of prayer and praise to God, understood and entered into by the whole company of the faithful.

“This is especially true for those of us who stand within the Protestant tradition. By our hymns we mark the changing yet recurring accents of the Christian year; we balance and deepen our devotional life; we convey to members of each congregation the meanings of the gospel and voice the corporate claims and loyalties of our faith.”

Hymn-singing is as old as our faith. For more than 19 centuries Christians have sung hymns. In the upper room, in prisons, in the catacombs, in monastery chapels, vast cathedrals, camp meetings, revivals, conference auditoriums, village churches, city churches and in other places, hymns of prayer and praise have been sung.

Sometimes it’s difficult to define a hymn. Here’s one definition: “A Christian hymn is a lyric poem; reverently and devotionally conceived, which is designed to be sung and which expresses the worshipper’s attitude toward God, or God’s purposes in human life. It should be simple and metrical in for111, genuinely emotional, poetic and literary in style, spiritual in quality and in its ideas so direct and so immediately apparent as to unify a congregation while singing it.” 2.

God is the audience in the singing of our hymns.

What are some of your favorite hymns and why? Let’s sing some of them now.

(sing requests from the congregation)

Many times, when we sing hymns, we pay very little attention to the words. Quite frequently I have used, as a prayer following the sermon, the verse--

I ask no dream, no prophet ecstasies.
No sudden rending of the veil of clay;
No angel visitant, no opening skies;
But take the dimness of my soul away.

Many people have asked where they could find that piece of poetry. They had sung the hymn No. 232, “Spirit of God descend upon my heart,” a hundred times but had paid so little heed to the words that they could not recognize one stanza when divorced from the music.

Or look at hymn No. 356, “Make Me A Captive Lord,” the second verse. Many people mispronounce the word at the end of the second line in the second verse.

On the other hand, some people have sung “Wise up o men of God, instead of, Rise up.

As you sing a hymn, ask what the words are saying about God, His creation, the image of Jesus, the world, human beings.

(sing more requests from the Congregation)

Have you ever noticed how the hymnbook is organized? Look for a moment at the table of contents. Have you ever wondered how the minister chooses the hymns for a service? It’s a difficult task. Hymn No. 362, “Awake my soul, stretch every nerve” is usually not chosen to be sung right after the sermon. People might get the wrong idea.

Neither should one sing, “Rise up o men of God,” while remaining seated, or “Stand Up, Stand Up, for Jesus” while sitting.

Hymns are chosen carefully to try to fit the mood and theme of the service. A chart is carefully kept so that many different kinds of hymns are sung.

Some of my favorites are:

Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise No. 7
God Moves in a Mysterious Way 87,88
Be Thou My Vision 391
Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life 423
God of Grace and God of Glory 366

(sing more requests)