

Tuned for Your Sake

Hymns
1987–2007

Richard Leach



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Printed on recycled and acid-free paper

Tuned for Your Sake: Hymns 1987–2007

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*This book is dedicated to my beloved wife, Beverly,
who is my own harp of thousand strings;
and to our sons, Nicholas and Alexander,
who are “like arrows in the hand of a warrior” (Psalm 127:4-5).*

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Note

This book includes both previously published and unpublished pieces, but not every hymn I have written is here. Most of my psalm paraphrases and psalm-based hymns will appear in a separate volume; their inclusion would have made this one too long. Some published pieces that in hindsight seemed redundant, or in some way not singable enough, have been omitted. A few texts have been revised in small ways. The notes below the texts are by no means exhaustive; please see the endnotes for more information on settings and publications. The notes on the text pages vary somewhat from the indexes, to make the text pages more readable and the index pages more comprehensive. The hymns on the Lord's Prayer and the Beatitudes have the scripture verses they are related to printed above them, as they were first published in their respective collections.

To indicate on a text's page whether it has ever been set to music, the page notes may include a choral setting or an unpublished tune. If a text has both a hymn tune and a choral setting, the choral setting is listed in the end notes. The goal was making the page notes as helpful as possible, without making them unwieldy.

Introduction

This book collects my hymn texts, to mark twenty years of writing them. I began writing hymns when I was a United Church of Christ pastor in Connecticut. In the spring of 1987 I sat in on a Yale Divinity School course on worship taught by Jeffrey Rowthorn. New hymn writing was the topic one week. The words of poets Thomas Troeger and Brian Wren were so vivid and energized compared to what I was leading the congregation in every Sunday morning, that my first reaction was “Wow!” And then I thought, “I wonder if I could do that?” And then, “I *want* to do that.” So I began to try.

As a pastor in a non-liturgical church, I was already doing a lot of writing to be spoken aloud, by me alone or by the whole congregation—sermons, pastoral prayers, congregational prayers. Writing words to be sung was a leap, but not too great a leap. Before the brief encounter in Rowthorn’s class, I was only vaguely aware that new hymn texts were being written and sung, and did not know they could be so strong. The Yale Divinity School library also had copies of *The Hymn*, the journal of The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada, which I had not seen before. I joined the Society, and found the world to which Troeger and Wren belonged—poets and composers, church musicians, pastors and singers committed to congregational song as a lively contemporary art. My Hymn Society membership has been invaluable to my work. It has been personally enriching as well, a source of close friendships.

So from 1987 till now I have been writing hymn texts. I think I am like most writers of any kind; I write for my own satisfaction, and for others to read and use, in a mix that shifts yet is never all one or the other.

As a sacred poet, I want my hymn texts to be biblically and theologically accurate and sound. I want them to be well thought out and well crafted. I haven’t wanted to repeat what has been said before. My goal has been texts that sound new, even surprising, yet at the same time are wholly at home in the liturgy, alongside scripture reading and formal prayer, in the mouths of whomever has come to worship that day. One composer, if I remember correctly, said my words had “a bite”; another wrote that they could “sting like bees.” Both comments were meant as compliments! I would say that I have been trying to write words that enliven, rather than deaden or numb.

I believe that the better the hymn poem, the greater the possibility of satisfaction and delight for the worshiper, and the more likely we are

to be giving worthwhile praise to God. I recoil from worship in which we have to ignore any of the words, spoken or sung, because they are silly or wrong or simply pointless. And, practically speaking, better words elicit better tunes from composers.

My work from 1987 to 1999 was often related to weekly reading and reflection on the scripture passages of the revised common lectionary, the basis of my preaching. In 1999 I left the UCC ministry to become a Lutheran layperson. My hymns since then have been occasioned by various commissions, requests, contests, many book projects, and still now and again the lectionary.

Hymn poems have independence and integrity, but they could not be sung without the work of my friends and colleagues, the composers who have written tunes and settings for my words. My warm thanks to all who have set my texts, whose names are in the individual hymn notes and the end notes. Amanda Husberg and David Ashley White are collaborators and friends of especially long standing.

There are other debts of thanks due here, some greater than can be paid by what will be a passing mention. My twenty years of hymn writing draws upon much that preceded its beginning in 1987. My thanks, then: to my late parents, H. Paul and Pauline Elizabeth Dole Leach; to Bowdoin College professors William Geoghegan and Burke O. Long; Princeton Theological Seminary professors George Stroup (now at Columbia Theological Seminary) and the late James Loder; to Old Testament scholar and seminary professor Walter Brueggemann, whom I do not know personally but whose work has been of immense value to me; to many faithful parishioners when I was a pastor, and all who have been my pastors, before and after I was one myself; to David Schaap, president of Selah Publishing Company.

Praising God & Hearing Scripture

A Harp of Thousand Strings (Let Others Boast)

Let others boast how strong they be,
nor death nor danger fear;
O Lord, you know, and we can see
what fragile things we are.

Like flowers, Lord, our bodies stand,
their beauty well displayed;
yet frost can sweep across the land,
and make the flower fade.

Our life contains a thousand springs,
and dies if one be gone;
strange that a harp of thousand strings
should keep in tune so long!

But you, O Lord, love what you make,
and give us length of days;
that every string, tuned for your sake,
may vibrate with your praise.

In Eden, God, You Gave Us Work

In Eden, God, you gave us work:
the world was new, and work was good,
the garden grew just as it should,
and we were yours, and work was ours,
in Eden long ago.

Since Eden ended, we have found
that work can be a source of grief;
can steal the day, a cruel thief,
for thorns and thistles fill the ground,
in this world that we know.

Yet Eden is not wholly gone,
for work can bless and satisfy;
enlarge, and not consume the day,
our work becoming one with play.
May all our work be so!

O God of Eden, praising you
is work that we are glad to do.
Deliver us from stolen days;
make all our work more like our praise,
let praises grow and grow.

God, Your Glory Fills the Earth

God, your glory fills the earth,
with a shining like the sun;
brighter than the eye can bear,
known by what it shows to us.
Sin has no gleam in your light;
faith and hope and love are bright.

God, your glory filled the life—
spirit, flesh and blood and bone—
of our Savior, Jesus Christ,
and in him was fully known:
more than sin and death could bear,
glory we are called to share.

God whose glory fills the earth,
may the church that you have made
patch and mend, with threads of gold,
fabrics that are dull and frayed.
Gold has no light of its own;
so we shine, by you alone.

Let Us Use the Gift to Bless the Gift

Let us use the gift to bless the gift,
praising God for music with a song.
Bless the choir begun when time began—
stars were singing like the birds of dawn!

Bless the music made on human scale—
as we sing with breath God gave and gives,
as we fashion instruments and play,
heart and mind unite and music lives.

Bless the music given to the church:
mustard seed of song become a tree;
branching out in every style and form,
room and home for all; oh, hear and see!

Music blesses us who are the church,
when we come to listen, praise and pray.
Music holds our memories and hopes,
offers all we are to God today.

Bless the music we will hear one day
in the city lit without a sun.
We will sing of Moses and the Lamb;
here and now the music has begun!

Wordless Song Within the Waters

Wordless song within the waters,
whales draw breath and dive and sing.
Hymns no human tongue can offer
set the ocean echoing.
Wordless singers wake our wonder;
what can human voices bring?
We will offer words for praising
God the Maker of all things.

Wordless song in early morning,
songbirds sing as day draws near.
Carols calling out their presence
please the waking human ear.
Wordless singers claim their places,
with a flag of song unfurled.
We will sing the name of Jesus,
word of joy that claims the world.

Wordless song within the forest,
wolves are howling in the night:
haunting psalms outside the circle
cast for us by campfire light.
Wordless singers, like the Spirit,
on whose pleading we rely.
Let us dare to name the yearning
in the Spirit's wordless cry.

On Ships That Sail upon the Sea

On ships that sail upon the sea
or ships between the stars,
we never sail beyond your love,
O God, for we are yours.
Whatever seas we sail upon
we find it still is true:
our hearts are restless, O Lord God,
until they rest in you.

Are there new challenges to face
in this or any year?
New powers that will bind or free,
new wonders or new fear?
The call of Christ, to love our God
with heart and soul and mind,
and love our neighbors as ourselves,
is clear in every time.

If ships that sail between the stars
were commonplace at last,
our faith in God would still be new,
and not bound to the past.
For you make all things new, O God,
and your own hand will dry
the tiny seas of tears we weep,
and wipe them from each eye.

Creator of the seas and stars,
we sing our praise to you.
O Christ, we praise you, and we hear
the love you call us to.
O Holy Spirit, year by year,
renew our praise again.
To you, O Holy Trinity,
alleluia, amen!

A Harp Too Great for Hands

A harp too great for hands to play,
each human life a string—
the Spirit sweeps across the world,
that every one may sing.

Living string, hold fast
to the cross of Jesus Christ,
and you will sing in tune,
as the Spirit touches you.

A harp that howls with hurt and hope,
a harp that sweetly sings—
the Spirit frees the songs that stir
in all the human strings.

Living string, hold fast
to the cross of Jesus Christ,
and you will sing in tune,
as the Spirit touches you.

A harp whose complex chords of praise
will rise in tidal waves,
when all the strings unite to sing
the God who frees and saves.

Living string, hold fast
to the cross of Jesus Christ,
and you will sing in tune,
as the Spirit touches you.

Ah, the Freedom in the Garden

Ah, the freedom in the garden
for the woman and the man;
all creation like a garment
given them by God's own hand.
Told of better, godlike clothing
in the words a serpent said,
they set out to dress in splendor,
donning nakedness instead.

Oh, the clothing made by curses—
thorns and thistles, dust to dust—
handed on from Eve and Adam,
given to each one of us.
Like a garment we can loosen,
but can never strip away,
we can feel it, roughly fitting,
catching at us every day.

Ah, the grace of Christ our Savior,
come to share all that we know,
even those ill-fitting garments
made in Eden long ago.
And we find surprising freedom
when we answer Jesus' call,
promise of a day arriving
when we wear no curse at all.

And the Lord Said

And the Lord said, “Serpent, you are cursed, you are cursed;
you will eat the dust, you will crawl.
Yet the child of the woman will strike your head,
and raise them again from this fall.”

And the Lord said, “Woman, life is touched by a curse,
in the pain you feel giving birth;
in the way that a man who would play your lord
is able to lessen your worth.”

And the Lord said, “Adam, earth is cursed, earth is cursed;
once you raised a hand and were fed.
Now the thorns and thistles will mock at you,
a worker who toils for his bread.”

And the world is harrowed by the curse, by the curse,
yet the seeds of blessing are sown;
and we hope in the Lord and we bless the word:
the end will be blessing alone.

In the Darkness, Countless Stars

In the darkness, countless stars,
one for each descendent born
to the childless Abraham—
stars of promise in the night.
Countless stars, would Abraham
laugh to hear how long their light
travels till it reaches him?—
ancient starlight in the night.

In the darkness, countless stars—
in their midst is one whose light
travels for a hundred years
to shine down on Abraham:
Star of Isaac, how his birth
makes his parents laugh out loud.
God says, “Abraham, look up”—
laughing starlight in the night.

In the darkness, countless stars,
one for each descendent born
to the childless Abraham—
stars of promise in the night.
Countless stars and in their midst
is the empty dark that waits
for one new star to arise—
waiting darkness in the night.

Old Abraham Fell Down and Laughed

Old Abraham fell down and laughed
to hear that he would have a son,
and Sarah laughed to hear the news
that motherhood was soon to come.

Though Abraham and Sarah laughed,
is anything too hard for God?
“He laughs” is what they name the child,
born in the spring, as God had said.

Come, Lord of laughter, make us laugh,
with promises we can’t believe,
the new life we were longing for
and knew that we could not conceive.

Come, Lord of laughter, make us laugh,
at certainties you make untrue,
with promises so wild and free;
come laugh with us, we’ll laugh with you.