

“GOD OF THE SPARROW”

Psalm 145:10-11, 15-16; Psalm 148, Matthew 5:43-47

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As hymns go, “God of the Sparrow” is relatively young, written in 1983. It was commissioned by a Lutheran congregation in celebration of a church anniversary. Jaroslav Vajda (*vaheeda*), the Lutheran pastor/poet/hymn writer who wrote the words was given the commission “to compose a hymn text that would provide answers... as to why and how God’s creatures (and children) are to serve him.”

Vajda did not, strictly speaking, fulfil that commission. But he did something much better: he wove images and questions, word and wonder into a hymn that invites rather than directs, evokes rather than defines. This hymn doesn’t provide *answers* to any questions either of theology or practical Christian living. In fact, it poses several open-ended *questions*, without making any attempt to provide answers or resolution or advice. At least, they *might* be questions, but notice when we sing it: the words of this hymn are unusual in that they have neither punctuation nor rhyme.

And yet, married to the tune which Carl Schlack wrote specifically for this text, it is beautifully singable, stirring, and memorable. It draws us in, and we instinctively know that the faith this hymn summons us to is not about head knowledge or rule following or piling up credit for good deeds. It is about our hearts. It’s about our response to our Creator. It’s about our connection to all the diverse creatures in this creation we are part of, all of whom are made and meant to respond to the Creator.

We tend to think of this as a nature-y hymn. And the images in it do dazzle us with the beauty and diversity of the creation, but above all this hymn is centered on the Creator; It mentions God 18 times in six verses. It’s the furthest thing from a “Jesus-and-me” hymn. In fact, each verse begins by leading our attention outward, beyond ourselves, reminding us that the God we worship is very much bigger than just “*our* God.”

God is also the God of sparrows, whales, stars ... and of course many, many other creatures from lightning bugs to kangaroos to mountains to fruit trees - *everything* God created, small, humble and vulnerable creatures, as well as big, powerful, majestic creatures, and even seemingly limitless galaxies of stars belong to God, are beloved of God, depend on God. Somehow their very existence is both testimony and praise.

But we quickly notice that the imagery here is not all about nature’s beauty and diversity: earthquake, storm, trumpet blast ... even the unpredictable, untamable forces of nature, even the things that threaten the world with destruction are ultimately subject to the rule and power of the Creator.

The rainbow, cross, and empty grave are images of divine restoration, of hope, of the triumph of God’s goodness.

But in the meantime, we cannot forget that God is the God of the hungry, the sick, those who have lost their way.

It's not so hard to see God in someone we consider our neighbor, but the gospel (and the writer of this hymn) will not let us stop with what is easy: even the person or people I see as "enemy" belong to the God whose prophets urge us to turn weapons into tools for growing food.

God transcends time and space, but is as near as a prayer, beside us in every need and hurt, knowing our hopes, sharing our joys. Every loving heart, all bonds of family and friendship and human community have their source in God's own loving heart.

You can't sing this song and retain a small or parochial notion of God. You can't sing this song and think of faith as merely a tool to get you into heaven or make your life better. You can't sing this hymn and remain self-absorbed. It takes us out of ourselves; It enlarges our vision; it shows us a bigger context for our lives and our faith.

But at the same time, it urges us to look inward and to reflect on what it means and how it is that the whole creation responds to its creator. I can't tell if we are supposed to marvel at rainbows saying "thanks" or enemies saying "love," or if we are meant to try and ponder how they do that. I'm not sure it matters. The hymn invites us into wonder. Walter Brueggemann says it is "one long question" with a simple theological assumption behind it: that the creatures speak to their creator. The agenda of the conversation is awe, praise, woe, salvation, grace, thanks, care, life, love, peace, joy, and home. "We are not told and we do not know" he says, "how an earthquake can cry 'save,' or how a pruning hook says 'peace,'" but we know that these are the appropriate responses to the holiness and grace, the mystery and majesty, the creative power and faithful love of God.

The real open-endedness of this hymn, though, is that (without actually coming right out and saying this) it challenges us to consider *our* response to the amazingness of the God who made us.

This hymn asks us to pause, look around us, see the evidence of God's power and presence... and consider what we need to say to God today. Not what we need to ask for. Not what sins we need to confess. Not what we are going to *do* in order to obey or serve. But how will we, as children of God, respond from the depth of our being to the One who made us, and the stars, and the sparrows.

How do *you* say "Awe"? How do you give the sorrow you carry to God? How does the care you feel for the hurting people around you resonate with the compassion of God for the vulnerable? How will you say "thanks" for the beauty and the bounty? How does joy come to the surface in your life? How do you find your way home to your Maker? "Let them praise the name of the Lord," the psalm says. Fire and snow, hills and trees, people young and old... all of us. Let's sing.

GOD OF THE SPARROW

1. God of the sparrow
God of the whale
God of the swirling stars
How does the creature say Awe
How does the creature say Praise
2. God of the earthquake
God of the storm
God of the trumpet blast
How does the creature cry Woe
How does the creature cry Save
3. God of the rainbow
God of the cross
God of the empty grave
How does the creature say Grace
How does the creature say Thanks
4. God of the hungry
God of the sick
God of the prodigal
How does the creature say Care
How does the creature say Life
5. God of the neighbor
God of the foe
God of the pruning hook
How does the creature say Love
How does the creature say Peace
6. God of the ages
God near at hand
God of the loving heart
How do your children say Joy
How do your children say Home

Resources:

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

C. Michael Hawn, "History of Hymns: God of the Sparrow," umcdiscipleship.org

Robin Knowles Wallace, "God of the Sparrow, God of the Whale" in *The Hymn: Journal of Congregational Song*, vol 48, No.3, July 1997.