



One of the many aspects of worship we had to consider as we planned to come back together in the same space was what to do with music, as many of the published studies are showing it may not be the best idea for a group of people to sing together indoors, at the moment. We see this not only affecting the church, but the Cleveland Orchestra, rock concerts and so much more. Even this upcoming weekend, there will not be

nearly as many parades taking over the entire country with sounds of a marching band filling all the city streets with “Stars & Stripes Forever” or “Yankee Doodle.” Nevertheless, even if the music is not played quite as much as before, or sung together the same, we can still connect to the stories behind the songs, that, actually, turn out to be just as powerful as the notes and the lyrics themselves.

One hymn I often encourage to be played this time of year is from our *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* hymnal, “This Is My Song,” which we will sing together shortly. It doesn’t have quite the same across-the-board patriotic heart-strings pull as “America the Beautiful” or “My Country ‘tis of Thee,” but the song has a way of reminding us that, while it is more than okay to have pride in our own nation, it is important to remember the beauty of other lands, too; to know that the God we worship is not tied in with a single national identity, but, instead, with the entire world. Again, it isn’t just the text or the music that makes this hymn so moving in its own way; it is the story of the people behind the lyrics, behind the musical notes.

It began with a man named Jean Sibelius, a composer from Finland, who lived through some of the most pivotal years of the Finnish people’s history. As America dealt with its fair share of issues breaking away from British rule, Finland had to do so with Sweden and Russia in the 19<sup>th</sup> through the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Come 1900, Jean Sibelius put together music to honor his homeland: to not only convey the struggle they were enduring together under recently oppressive Russian control, but to, also, inspire hope for people in desperate search for even a glimpse of it. The name of the tune was *Finlandia*, which still stands to this day whenever we sing “This Is My Song.” However, at that time, the title was seen as a public protest against the Russian rulers, and so Sibelius had to change the name before it would ever be performed in public for the first time. Evidently, music has a way of not just making us feel comfortable for however many minutes in our car through the radio speakers or in our living rooms with a YouTube video. Music has its fair share of inspiring humanity in a way that words alone cannot do quite as effectively.

Fast-forward a few decades after Sibelius put together the music, and about fifteen years after Finland finally declared its independence, comes a man named Lloyd Stone, a teacher in Hawaii. At this time, in American history, there is a sense of peace and hope after the conclusion of World War I, the war that was thought to end all the wars forever. And so Stone wrote out the first two stanzas of the hymn that we now sing from our hymnal. Again, Stone sees plenty of beauty, to say the least, from his home state in Hawaii, but he knows full well there is beauty elsewhere, too. Beauty that could not be erased even after a most catastrophic conflict. And all he could do to give thanks to God for that overwhelming beauty, for that soothing peace at that time, was to use the music composed by another man thousands of miles away who desperately longed for such peace for his homeland, too. Stone would simply, but beautifully, add the words of a prayer to the God of *all* the nations:

*This is my song, O God of all the nations,  
a song of peace for lands afar and mine.  
This is my home, the country where my heart is;  
here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine;  
but other hearts in other lands are beating  
with hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.*

*My country's skies are bluer than the ocean,  
and sunlight beams on cloverleaf and pine.  
But other lands have sunlight too, and clover,  
and skies are ev'rywhere as blue as mine.  
So hear my song, O God of all the nations,  
a song of peace for their land and for mine.*

The 89<sup>th</sup> Psalm we heard this morning begins with, “Your love, O Lord, forever will I sing; from age to age my mouth will proclaim your faithfulness.” From age to age we are meant to proclaim God’s faithfulness to us, to our collective humanity. However, we know full well, some ages are more difficult than others to put together any kind of music, not just because of a pandemic, but because there are, quite simply, the times when we feel as if there is nothing positive in our life to sing about at all. Fear, hatred, anguish, worry, frustration, have a way of silencing us altogether.

So, leave it to the musicians of all genres, not just orchestral or church background, to make us think otherwise; to convince us that there is, still, indeed something worth singing about. Leave it to the musicians to inspire those who feel as if they are not talented enough to participate in this moving artistry with others: to encourage them to boldly let their heart loose and sing out anyway. Leave it to the composers and poets to help us witness the beauty of this world we so often take for granted. Leave it to them to help us see the face of God in each other, including in people not just of our own nation, but in all the nations of the world. Leave it to God to bring out a semblance of Resurrection joy through a song, no matter how dismal the surrounding circumstances may be in our life. This is *our* song to the God of all the nations: a song of peace, hope, and all the joy of an Easter day to last throughout all the ages of this world that God still so loves. And for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!