

**Three Songs About Faith**  
**Psalm 49:1-4; 2<sup>nd</sup> Chronicles 5:11-14; Mark 4:1-20, 26-34; Hebrews 11:1-13**  
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Our worship service today is a little bit different from what we normally do. If words have the ability to speak to our minds, music has the ability to speak the language of our hearts. From the very beginning of our faith story, music has played a critical role in expressing the grandeur of God, the depth of humanity, and the passion of love. With only twelve notes, composers have woven together countless harmonies, expressing sentiments that words alone cannot convey.

Today we focus on Three Songs About Faith, songs that run the gamut from hymn to folk to pop. I invite you to listen to these tunes and to deliberate on the message contained within their melodies, and we'll be doing our best to include some verbal reflections and prayers inspired by each of them as well.

We hope that today will be an authentic expression of worship and that it will also be meaningful for all who are gathered...and if you don't like it, we'll return to our normally scheduled programming next week.

**If I Ever Lose My Faith In You (1993)**

**Sting**

*The song is in two distinct parts. The first part is about the things I've lost faith in. It's quite easy to be precise about the things I've lost faith in – politics, media, science, technology, the things that everybody has, and yet I along with most other people have a great deal of hope, and a feeling that things will and can get better. So what do we place our faith in I can't define that as easily as I can define what I don't believe in anymore.*

- Sting, British songwriter<sup>1</sup>

**Mysterious & Precious**

Sting talks a lot about his music, and the one thing he consistently claims about “If I Ever Lose My Faith In You” is that it is a lot easier to determine the things we no longer have faith in than to specify and articulate the things we still do have faith in. His song precisely names a variety of institutions that he has a hard time trusting, but he is never clear—even in interviews—about who he sings this song to, about where his faith still lies.

Similarly, the Psalms list a number of areas where we have inevitably placed our faith...and where, eventually, we find that we have done so mistakenly: they dismiss belief in military power,<sup>2</sup> in money,<sup>3</sup> and in worldly leaders.<sup>4</sup> Naming the ways and places where we have lost faith is, in the end, perhaps the surest way to know where and in whom our faith remains...but even with this approach, the workings and recipients of our faith stay somewhat mysterious.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.sting.com/discography/album/223/Singles>

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 20:7

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 49:6-7

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 146:3

Faith is tricky like that. Like the other great attributes of our Christian experience, like hope and love, faith cannot be pinned down. It is enigmatic enough to merit expression through music more than words, through the language of our hearts and souls.

Mystery is why, Sting says, this song starts with a flattened fifth chord. Chords like this one are disconcerting, putting us ill at ease.<sup>5</sup> This chord is shadowy and troubling; the medieval church purportedly banned it as “the devil’s chord.” In many ways, it is the right sound for the parts of this song about lost faith.

Still, it is an uneasy, uncomfortable place to be. The chords of the intro progress from that flattened fifth...to an incomplete seventh...a suspended fourth...and an augmented fifth. None of these chords conveys a sense of resolution. While the singer of the song might be able to name with certainty the things that he has lost faith in, the intro suggests that he does not feel good about that certainty.

The verse, in which Sting begins to verbalize about losing faith in science and TV and even himself a little bit, presents a melody over suspended second chords that temporarily resolve before coming undone again (*look at Kerry*). This is a step toward resolution from the intro—the melody alone adds a layer that moves in a more positive direction—but these lines, too, feel like Barcelona’s famous cathedral La Sagrada Familia: beautiful but unfinished, waiting for something more. These lines are not musically joyful or content. They are on the edge, waiting to burst forth with the ultimate showpiece. They are waiting to feel complete, to come true.

That happens as the chorus approaches and the song ascends to a higher register. Those higher notes create a celestial, more uplifting tone...which, again, is fitting, since the chorus asserts that, although the singer has lost faith in some things, he remains hopeful and confident that his faith in the unknown addressee of the song is as solid as bedrock. He is so sure that his faith cannot be shaken that he is at a loss at even the idea of tremors.

When the Israelites gathered under Solomon at their new temple, the musicians who had been spread out in different sanctuaries all came together. They joined together “in praise and thanksgiving to the LORD,” in faith. The result of their music was an overwhelming sense of the presence and power of Yahweh.

The scene of the Israelite musicians in the temple accentuates the mystery of faith, of God. The music is so powerful that a sanctified cloud forms in the temple itself. No one dares to explain how this happens...but everyone seems to feel confident that the faith and the praise and the music has been channeled in the right direction. This is a story that connotes both the enigma and certainty of faith, the idea that we cannot fully understand the places where we choose to set our faith and yet we trust with all our hearts that doing so will lead us to something grand.

Our faith is something precious. We do not put our faith in all things or all people; we reserve our faith for the entities that truly deserve it. Sometimes it can be hard to identify the recipients of our faith, or we may find ourselves shy or reluctant to share that we deeply trust and believe in something specific. It is easier to name the targets of our skepticism...but when we do find something worth trusting—when we do cast our faith upon something worthy—it feels joyful, and reassuring, and complete.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

**Great Is Thy Faithfulness (1923)**  
**Thomas Chisholm (words) & William M. Runyan (music)**

*I would be hard-pressed to describe [Great Is Thy Faithfulness] as an example of great literary or musical achievement. While I am not qualified to make such a pronouncement on the musical achievement, I can say that, as a poem, it is at best competent and occasionally hackneyed. But it makes a case beautifully, in the way that the best sermons and speeches can make wonderful and moving cases. There is an art to this.*

- Kwame Dawes, Ghanaian poet<sup>6</sup>

**A Slow Build**

The words of Kwame Dawes that are printed in the bulletin feel nearly blasphemous to me, but I get what he's saying. There is nothing particularly special about "Great Is Thy Faithfulness." This is not the lyrical poetry of Shakespeare or Frost, and this is not the melody or harmony of Mozart or Beethoven. This is a common hymn, and yet precisely because of this, it has found a life that is phenomenally uncommon.

This is fitting, because this hymn's focus is both common and uncommon. If the Sting song we just contemplated is "Mysterious & Precious," this song is "Mysterious, but Universal." It applies this dichotomy to two qualities, starting with faith itself. The lyrics of this hymn emphasize that faith is for each day, for each season, repeating the word "all" whenever they can. The verses stress that God's compassion is unfailing, that God's mercy is overflowing, and that God's peace endures. God's faithfulness to us is not limited to any one person or situation but rather covers all...and our ability to respond in faith is likewise universal. Faith is not something that is learned, earned or bought. It is something we choose, if we want to.

Like "If I Ever Lose My Faith," the music of this hymn is best described as a slow build. The first note is repeated four times, this monotony repeats in the second half of the first line, and this first line consists of only four consecutive notes. This is roughly the same musical sophistication as "Hot Cross Buns." But the notes...But the notes will stretch higher in the second line, grow more complex throughout the rest of the verses, and conclude with a chorus that spans an entire octave.

Our faiths are often slow builds. They may seem simple and ordinary when we choose them, but if fed and nurtured, they will like this song grow in depth and complexity.

There is a reason that Jesus teaches so frequently through the parables of plants. Planting a seed does not immediately lead to fruit. It takes a long time for the sprouts to break through the earth, to develop into saplings and then mature plants, to grow limbs and leaves, and then eventually to produce. It takes a lot of work during that time, too—planting carefully, tilling the soil, watering, weeding, warding off animals, pruning. It doesn't just happen.

When cultivated, a plant is a remarkable thing. Watching buds give way to flower and then to fruit is one of the most innocent, eye-opening joys of childhood. The growth of a living thing, like our faith, is both universal and remarkable, both common and uncommon. It just takes a significant amount of time—maybe a lifetime?—for our living faiths to culminate.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/poets-on-hymns-great-is-thy-faithfulness/>

Perhaps precisely because our faith is a slow build, we find ourselves aware of the second quality in “Great Is Thy Faithfulness,” its gratitude. Thomas Chisholm, who wrote the lyrics, makes this the focal point of his chorus. He is appreciative for God’s continuing presence and for God’s continuing goodness. It is a simple sentiment that is still challenging to express. Saying “thank you” sincerely requires frank humility.

We say the word “thanks” so often that it has lost most of its punch. Much of the time, we can’t even be bothered to write out the whole word, texting or emailing the letters “T-H-X” instead. Occasionally we’ll pony up for two syllables and utter a “thank you,” but none of this seems worthy for telling our Creator that we are grateful for the blessings that come our way, including faith itself. The music in this hymn conveys that honest gratitude because the words alone could not. An anonymous article published by the Superior Academy of Music puts it this way: “Feelings [such as thankfulness] that cannot be expressed in any other way have to be captured and placed into a body of music with great care so as not to sound insincere or overly sentimental.”<sup>7</sup>

The music of “Great Is Thy Faithfulness” expresses that yearning gratitude through the building notes of its melody, usually four notes at a time. Again, the verses do this at the end of the second line with an upsurge in the melody. As the third line continues, the notes climb even higher. This four step climb will repeat in the chorus as we sing “morning by morning new mercies” and “all I have needed,” culminating in the final “Great Is Thy Faithfulness.”

Four notes at a time, constantly moving upward and then resetting only because the human voice can’t handle going any higher. This is a hymn that repeatedly and gratefully aches for God, notes that steadily stretch and reach for God, a song that articulates its sense of faith as something that will never be taken for granted but rather will always be cherished.

Although music helps us express our thanks effectively, we still struggle to do this consistently and completely. Still, we acknowledge that gratitude is a quality that is constantly running through and critical to our lives. The same is true for our faiths.

The words of this hymn came first, but the music’s reflection of those words is more than intentional. It’s inspired. The composer, William Runyan, was so moved by the words—despite the fact that they are not Shakespeare—that he prayed that he might come up with a tune that was worthy of their sentiment.<sup>8</sup> Fittingly, Runyan’s own life and his efforts to create this hymn were also marked by a simple but earnest faith and a deep appreciation for God.

We give thanks for the faith that God extends toward us and the faith that we find to extend toward God...and we give thanks that this relationship is available to all during all seasons.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://superioracademyofmusic.com/expressing-gratitude-music/>

<sup>8</sup> *Handbook to the Baptist Hymnal*, 132.

## **Have A Little Faith In Me (1987)** **John Hiatt**

*I have no idea how or when or where I first came across John Hiatt's 1987 song "Have a Little Faith In Me," but [in the spring of 2020] it seemed to rise up out of my record collection and govern the days that followed. A raw, piano-led power ballad, there is something quite majestic in its earnestness, in the vault of Hiatt's voice, in his promise to catch you. As the world seemed to gather pace and sorrow and uncertainty, Hiatt's song came to embody not only the importance of belief in better days, but also the necessity of connection and openness and love.*

- Laura Barton, music journalist<sup>9</sup>

### **Pleading for Life**

"Have A Little Faith In Me" is John Hiatt's signature song. Written after a long period of battling addiction and the devastating effects of that addiction on his personal and professional life, this song is Hiatt's entreaty for others not to give up on him. Just as "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" expresses a yearning, Hiatt's words in "Have A Little Faith In Me" demonstrate how our faith includes a fair amount of vulnerable pleading. The words are simple but beautiful, passionate and sincere, straightforward yet poetic. More than anything, they are a desperate covenant. The man who sings these lyrics is willing to promise everything even though he hasn't earned to right to offer anything.

As a result, these lyrics convey one of the most critical dichotomies of faith, a dichotomy articulated famously in Hebrews 11:1. That verse, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen," specifies that faith is intangible, unquantifiable, uncertain, immeasurable...but nevertheless adamant and steadfast. Like the pleas in "Have A Little Faith In Me," these qualities of faith suggest something that should not be trusted...and yet, as both Hiatt and Hebrews assert, moments of faith beg for (and demand) assurance, conviction, and trust.

If the first song we covered this morning expresses the mystery and treasure of faith, and the second song addresses the commonality and gratitude of faith, this song is about the desperation and susceptibility of faith. And like both of those songs, it conveys its message through not only its words but also its music.

The song begins with a single chord repeated 64 times. That is a *lot* of steady repetition. Each chord is like a brick being laid on the foundation—by themselves, the bricks are easily movable and not particularly important; fixed together, they become solid and immovable, strong and reliable. The chords are the backdrop for Hiatt's sung petitions. They have to be steady, fixed, and balanced...because they will support the weight of a desperate proposal that cannot be taken at face value.

Our faiths do not make sense—they do not adhere to logic—they cannot be taken at face value. They are not concrete. They must, then, rest on something that is solid. Whatever it is we have faith in—in love, in each other, in God—must be as dependable as the chords at the beginning of this song.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/dec/31/all-that-mattered-was-survival-the-songs-that-got-us-through-2020>

That doesn't mean that the chords are static. Hiatt deftly accentuates them on the 1<sup>st</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, and 7<sup>th</sup> beat of each measure, which is both regular and irregular. This creates a driving effect, a sense of urgency and movement. Although the foundation of this faith is stable, it is also going somewhere. The backbeat is like a driving rain: it is constantly present but slightly unpredictable, expected but unexpected. Because he is desperate, there is an urgency to the singer's request for faith. This song focuses entirely on the moment of explosive, captivating faith that comes after the slow build, the bursting forth that we waited for in Sting's song.

Our faiths are simultaneously slow and rapid, solid and malleable, fixed and moving, expected but unexpected.

The song's driving movement of repeated chords of the right hand is contrasted with a downward movement of the notes played by the left hand. It is a decline that repeats in the melody when the song gets to the chorus. Hiatt can't sing "Have a Little Faith in Me" without trailing off, sinking downward. This might be an urgent call for faith, but it is also a weary one.

This singer is a broken, beaten man. He is in the perfect position to express the humility of faith, to articulate that we are particularly willing to have faith in others when we are low...and that also, when we are low, we can do nothing else but ask others to have faith in us, because we cannot persuade through rational defenses.

When we ask someone to believe in us, we are taking on one of the most difficult challenges in our world. We are admitting that we cannot ask that person to put their faith in logic, or in experience, but simply that they have to trust us. We ask it even knowing that we might slip up. It is obviously extremely difficult to have faith, but it is equally challenging and humbling to request faith from others.

The eleventh chapter of Hebrews—the section that follows the well-known description of faith that we read today—is full of biblical heroes who demonstrated faith...and who put themselves on the line by asking for it in return. Their stories did not play out the way they expected; in fact, the final verses of the chapter accentuate that they did not get what they anticipated. But because they reached out and claimed the opportunities for faith that lay in front of them, they grew in wisdom and in compassion, in mind and in spirit. They discovered a part of themselves and of their world that previously remained hidden. They found life.

At the conclusion of each line of the chorus of "Have a Little Faith in Me," the piano recovers, gaining in tempo with notes that climb upward. It's almost like they bounce up, as if the keyboardist has hit rock bottom and rebounds quickly. Asking someone else to have faith in us requires us to take a risk...but even the asking has the power to put us in a more positive place. It is the beauty of initiating covenant. Although we don't know how the singer's requests are received, the song remains inspiring because it insists on climbing back up. When we take steps toward faith, even before we know the outcome, we find a similar energy and purpose. We find life.