

Three Songs About Water
Matthew 14:22-33; Isaiah 66; Psalms 42, 46, & 69
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Ridge Road Baptist Church, Raleigh
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Our worship service today is a little bit different from what we normally do. Last September, we experimented with a service built on the language of music, through notes that express something about faith in ways that words alone cannot. We called that service “Three Songs About Faith,” and it went well enough for us to try it again. Today we focus on Three Songs About Water, songs that run the gamut from hymn to show tune 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. While all sermons are best heard, today’s message weaves music in among the spoken words, and I especially encourage you to listen [here](#).

Sit Down, You’re Rockin’ The Boat (from *Guys & Dolls*, 1951)
Frank Loesser

["Sit Down, You’re Rockin’ the Boat"] is the song where everything is coming to a head...there’s a lot at stake in this song. Even though it’s a bit of a frivolous song, there’s something at stake. This is a song that actually tells a narrative....there’s a journey that the characters in the song take from the beginning to the end of the song. And things change because of this song.

- Lindsay Price & Craig Mason, *Theatrefolk*¹

The Power of the Wave

In the grand tradition of Broadway, there is something known as an “11:00 number.” These songs are the show-stopping features near the end of the second act “that audiences eagerly await.”² In the 1950 classic *Guys & Dolls*, the 11:00 number is “Sit Down, You’re Rockin’ The Boat.”

Within the play, the song works because it saves a poorly attended mission and (probably more importantly) saves the rocky romance of degenerate gambler Sky Masterson and pious missionary Sister Sarah Brown. Sung by fellow degenerate gambler Nicely-Nicely Johnson as a testimony, the song tells the story of a dream where Nicely-Nicely realizes his gambling and drinking are dragging him under and, at least within the context of the dream, repents of his sins. Sister Sarah’s boss is duly impressed, and after a couple more songs put a bow on things, everyone lives happily ever after.

Beyond the context of the play, the song still works as an 11:00 number because it contains within it a rapid change of tempos that creates a push-pull effect. In the music, the only cues for this change come in the tempo direction at the top of the piece, which suggests playing the verses “freely” and the chorus “with a beat.” In most productions, that means the chorus moves at least twice as quickly as the verse. The verse line “I dreamed last night I got on the boat to

¹ <https://www.theatrefolk.com/podcast/sit-down-youre-rocking-the-boat-episode-8-tfp-the-theatrefolk-podcast/>

² Kathryn Harris, “‘Sit Down, You’re Rockin’ The Boat:’ An Unusual 11 o’clock Number,” *Music Theatre International*. March 24, 2010. Accessed May 24, 2022. <https://www.mtishows.com/news/sit-down-youre-rockin-the-boat-an-unusual-11-oclock-number>

heaven” takes twice as long to sing as the chorus line “For the people all said ‘sit down, sit down you’re rockin’ the boat.”

There is another shift between verse and chorus within the song, a shift from predominantly minor chords to major chords. The chord at the top of the verse is a bizarre augmented-7th-flat-9th. It is an immediately off-putting sound, one that instantly creates suspense and tension, appropriate for a dream about one’s potential afterlife experience. The verses are then punctuated with Am and Em chords, creating a haunting effect as Nicely-Nicely sings about grappling with sin. The chorus is built on a steady progression of major chords, from C-to-C7-to-F-and-back-to-C again. The major setting guides the chorus, which lyrically consists of others encouraging Nicely to toe the line. Between the tempo and the tonality, there is a tug-of-war going on within the song, between Nicely-Nicely’s vices and the admonition of the others bound for heaven.

Especially because the setting for the dream is a boat, the push and pull creates the effect of a wave. In the verse, the notes metaphorically draw water up into a crest that will soon break. In the chorus, that’s exactly what happens, the water rushing forward with urgency and power. And, like waves, this pattern keeps repeating steadily, drawing listeners in and then spitting them back out again.

It is appropriate that this is a song about faith, because that is also how our faiths work. There are moments that build in mystery and tension, causing us to beg for resolution, and there are moments that surge forth with upbeat certainty. Some faith experiences are gradual and smooth. Others are sudden and rocky. Those moments all ebb and flow—it’s not like we only experience one buildup or one rush forward.

A wave is a powerful thing. It alters coastlines and transmits energy. A single wave can carry dozens of people at once. “Sit Down, You’re Rockin’ The Boat” conveys this power as well, although you might not be able to appreciate the movement of dozens of people as much from a solo performance. But in the musical, while Nicely-Nicely carries the song, there are many other gamblers seated around him throughout the number, and they eventually chime in as well.

When this number is staged, the cast is generally packed into a tiny room. The actors are sitting shoulder to shoulder, or occasionally piled up on each other, and there is a great sense of them being...well, in the same boat. But when Nicely begins singing, he stands alone while the others are grumbling and reluctant. Then, “through the progress of the song, the gamblers get more and more involved in the story and more and more involved in helping Nicely-Nicely along.”³ This happens not only through the staging but also as the other gamblers begin singing along with Nicely.

This is not a round of “Row, Row, Row Your Boat,” where everyone is singing the same thing but at a different time. This is one voice that pulls others in until they’re all united, passionately, in their expression of a mysterious, dreamlike, intimidating faith.

Like most 11:00 numbers, the song ends on a high note, a final culminating chord that all of the singers can join in on together. Most pop songs don’t end on a note like this, choosing to fade out instead, but hymns and musicals do. You could almost hear them tagging onto the end a sung “Amen.”

³ Craig Mason, “Sit Down, You’re Rockin’ The Boat,” *The Theatrefolk Fireside Podcast*. Accessed May 24, 2022. <https://www.theatrefolk.com/podcast/sit-down-youre-rocking-the-boat-episode-8-tfp-the-theatrefolk-podcast/>

That is the power of the wave of faith. It jolts us sometimes, asks us to wait apprehensively sometimes, yanks and pulls and tugs at us sometimes, pushes us forward sometimes, mystifies us sometimes, and moves us toward insistent urgency sometimes...but in the end, it eventually moves us toward the stability of the shore. And it does this to us as a group, even if we are primarily aware of its effects as individuals.

It Is Well With My Soul (1876)

Horatio Spafford (words) & Philip Bliss (music)

These are my criteria for what is my favorite group [of hymns]: the mingling of sorrow and joy, brokenness and hope, divine tenderness and sovereign majesty, exalted focus and intimate personal expression, beautiful poetry, a tune that fits all those things in both seriousness of emotion and exaltation of hope. I would put into that category “It Is Well With My Soul.”

- John Piper, American pastor & professor⁴

Water, Water Everywhere

We chose the songs for today a couple of weeks ago. Given how things have unfolded in our country since we last gathered here, it feels somewhat providential that today we are contemplating both “It Is Well With My Soul” and “Bridge Over Troubled Water.” We turn to music for comfort when words alone are insufficient. We turn to music to soothe our souls.

The story behind the words of “It Is Well” is one you have probably heard. The poet, Horatio Spafford, had lost a child and watched as his business went up in the flames of the great Chicago fire. Needing a respite, he put his wife and four daughters on a ship to England for a vacation, and he planned to join them later. A freighter pierced the ship and sent it in pieces into the sea. Spafford’s wife survived the wreck, but all four of his daughters did not.

His response was to write, “It Is Well With My Soul,” a poem that would later have music added. It became a hymn that provided comfort for thousands—now millions—of people, particularly during times of loss. It is frequently sung at funerals, and it is a hymn that has been cited numerous times this week as our nation—like Spafford—grieves the loss of children.

I think part of its broad appeal comes because it is a remarkably easy hymn to sing, keeping its range within an octave.⁵ Despite this, it manages to use leaps in the melody to invoke fervent emotion. Each line includes a jump spanning four notes, and each of these jumps indicates a literal high point of the lyric: “When *sorrows* like sea billows roll,” “*whatever* my lot, thou hast *taught* me to say, it is *well*, it is well with my soul.” Through the upswing of the melody on those notes, the composer Philip Bliss really accentuates the depth of the “sorrows,” the totality of “whatever,” the divinity of being “taught,” and the truth about how “well” his soul is.

The upswing is absent from the first line, “when peace, like a river, attendeth my way.” In fact, that first line has even more of a limited range than the rest of the song will have. The result is a soothing, comforting line that flows easily and calmly, a fitting melody for words about peace attending. The sorrows that come next, then, are also sung to a fitting melody—one more pointed, perhaps even just a little bit turbulent. As a result, the lyric and the melody both

⁴ <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/john-pipers-favorite-hymn>

⁵ Cody Norris & Stephen Folden, “Devastated but not Destroyed: ‘It Is Well’ Song Analysis,” *Faithlife*. April 28, 2018. Accessed May 24, 2022. <https://blog.faithlife.com/the-gospel-for-sufferers-it-is-well-song-analysis/>

suggest that this is a hymn to be sung whether we are peaceful or sorrowful, whether we are flowing or churning inside.

Our encounters with water are equally varied. Water is perhaps the most universal image on Earth, covering $\frac{3}{4}$ of our planet, the most basic liquid we know. Because it is so ubiquitous, its forms are myriad, which this hymn capitalizes on in its first line. Sometimes rivers are peaceful, and sometimes they are rumbling and rolling, and whichever they are, we seek to trust in God.

I always loved that this first line stated “thou hast *taught* me to say ‘It is well with my soul.’” That is a different line from saying it actually *is* well with my soul. That is someone who yearns to trust God whether times are good or bad...but who may be struggling to get there.

The song contains but one eighth note in its entire melody, right at the end of the verse and repeated at the end of the chorus. In both places, the eighth note is sung in the middle of the title, “It Is Well With My Soul.” There are a couple of different effects for the solitary eighth note on the word “my.” The first effect is that it disrupts the steadiness of the song up to this point. While the words may claim that “It Is Well With My Soul,” there is a bit of a stutter in the rhythm, just a slight hesitation that undercuts the certainty of that assertion.

The second effect, likewise, is that the melody seems unsure about claiming personally the wellness of the song. The line rushes through the word “my,” leaving little room for a singer to accentuate that word. Again...we want to sing assuredly that we espouse the hope of this song, but the brokenness remains, and we can’t quite slip it.

Despite that brokenness, it is not a sad song. The entire piece is in a major key, and the progression through the verses keeps stretching higher and higher: the first line peaks—in our hymnal—on a G; the second reaches for a B-flat; the third hits a C. The melody of the final line hangs on that nearly highest note, the B-flat, as if the singer has risen up over the course of four lines and refuses to drop back down.

This is not a song that makes everything okay again. It is not a song of easy faith, of unbridled, unthinking hope that arrives automatically during times of distress...but it is a song that pursues hope.

It is my favorite hymn. I fell in love with it working at Ridgecrest. At the end of our staff meetings, we all stood and put our arms around each other. A capella, we then sang the first verse of “It Is Well With My Soul.” My first summer, I didn’t know the words...but by the end of the summer, I knew them so well I’d never forget them.

When I became a youth minister, I brought the song from camp with me, and we began closing sessions on retreats by singing the first verse. (I’m telling you, you haven’t really heard this song until you’ve heard it sung a cappella by normally timid teenage voices.) For my youth, I think it soon came to mean what it meant to me: a statement of faith that encompassed all life settings, regardless of someone’s peace or sorrow. It was also a uniting hymn to sing together: because it was multifaceted, the people in our group could sing it passionately whether they were rejoicing or tearful, afraid or calm.

We seek images—in word and in music—that convey the expanse of God to us, and we sing the songs we sing to find God no matter what we feel. Besides, we are nearly always in need of God’s comfort.

Bridge Over Troubled Water (1970) Paul Simon

Everywhere I went led me to where I didn't want to be. So I was stuck.

- Paul Simon, songwriter⁶

That song had two writers: Paul Simon and God.

- Allen Touissant, New Orleans musician⁶

How Does It Happen?

There is a great interview from *The Dick Cavett Show* where Cavett asks Paul Simon, "There's always a mystery of 'how does it happen?' I mean, there was a moment in time when 'Bridge Over Troubled Water' didn't exist at all, and then there was another moment when it did, when it started to. Where does it come from?"⁷ And, remarkably, Simon find his guitar and answers the question.

He said the song started with the first line, the line we now know as "When you're weary, feeling small." Just the notes. Simon doesn't explain where those notes came from, calling them only "a song I was working on." He then moves to the next line, which we know as "when tears are in your eyes." He says that he got *those* notes from "a Bach chorale."

My guess is that many of you recognize that Bach chorale as "O Sacred Head, Now Wounded." Simon loves this melody so much that he'd outright steal it for his 1973 song "American Tune," but he traces part of "Troubled Water" to it as well. Simon takes the final line of "O Sacred Head," "which once was bright as morn," adjusts the rhythm slightly to end up with a longer fourth note, then swaps out the minor chords for major chords. When people say that "Bridge Over Troubled Water" has a gospel feel, there's a really good reason for that.

"O Sacred Head, Now Wounded" is, of course, one of the saddest selections from our hymnal. Simon was humming such a dour melody, I think, largely because of what was going on in America in the late 1960s when he wrote the song.

My nomination for the worst year in the second half of the twentieth century is 1968 (my apologies to any of you who claim that as a birth year).⁸ In 1968, we had the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy. Particularly in the wake of the King murder, debates over racial issues took another nasty turn. Vietnam was cresting with a tumultuous peak, both in the country itself where the Tet Offensive took place and at home where protests grew more violent and enraged. Cities found themselves consumed with rioting. And on top of everything else, somehow the song of the spring, spending *five consecutive weeks* at the top of the charts, was Bobby Goldsboro's "Honey."

So...1968, not a great year. Simon, like most young people in America at the time, responds to these terrible events personally. He knows people who are protesting or getting drafted; he is experiencing the trauma firsthand. Trying to write a song that would respond to all of these things, he has "O Sacred Head" running through his brain. This is also a song that speaks to

⁶ <https://www.openculture.com/2021/02/paul-simon-tells-the-story-of-how-he-wrote-bridge-over-troubled-water-1970.html>

⁷ Much of this reflection comes from this interview. Dick Cavett, *The Dick Cavett Show*, aired April 9, 1970. Posted on YouTube January 27, 2020. Accessed May 25, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qFt0cP-klQI>

⁸ This is hardly a controversial take, an argument I've made for years and have seen made many places, but here's an article summarizing it: <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/05/1968-and-2020-lessons-from-americas-worst-year-so-far/612415/>.

grand-scale tragedy from a point of personal reflection. This is why Paul Simon writes “Bridge Over Troubled Water,” a personal reflection about laying down one’s life so that someone else can pass through turmoil safely.

This is what our faith is supposed to do. It is supposed to carry us through even the most discouraging, frightening, horrifying events. It is supposed to buoy us when we are sinking or, even better, keep us out of the water altogether. It is supposed to do this for us personally, individually, even if at times we are all foundering collectively and all in need of the same bridge to get over the same troubled water. This is what we expect of our faith, even if it isn’t something that happens automatically or easily.

It did not come easy for Simon. After he wrote the verse, he says he got stuck and couldn’t figure out where to go. Completely blocked, he went home and put on the same record he’d been listening to for weeks, the gospel song “Oh Mary Don’t You Weep” by a group called the Swan Silvertones. Eventually, listening to “Oh Mary Don’t You Weep” led him to what Simon calls “gospel chords.”

Near the end of the Swan Silvertones record, lead singer Claude Jeter improvises the line “I’ll be your bridge over deep water if you trust in my name.” Captivated by the line, Simon became unstuck and had his song title...and the rest, as they say, is history.

Music critic Josh Jones writes, “It takes a certain amount of hubris to write a song like ‘Bridge Over Troubled Water’—to write, that is, a secular hymn, a non-religious gospel hit for burned-out sixties’ folkies.”⁹ He’s right, and yet Paul Simon is one of the most unassuming characters to emerge from the 1960s. Garfunkel always seems like the one to embrace hubris.

Actually, it may be that hubris isn’t quite the right word. As soon as Simon wrote this song, he recognized that it would be his masterpiece—he wondered where it came from, because it was—in his own words—“so much better than” what he usually wrote. But he also recognized that it should be sung by Garfunkel, even as the duo was splitting up. If you listen to this record, you’ll barely hear Paul Simon’s voice, just singing backup on the last verse.

It was difficult for Simon to let go of his masterpiece, but he knew that allowing Garfunkel to sing it was better for the song, better for his audience. Paul was, in a way, laying himself down. He was creating his best and immediately gifting it to someone else.

This is the pride that Paul speaks of in 2nd Corinthians, not the pride an individual has in himself but rather the pride—the trust—that we root in our faith. The belief that there is something out there that can bridge us across troubled water, and the belief that we can be part of that bridge if we are also willing to lay ourselves down...that is the kind of pride that this song conveys. In the end, it’s not really hubris. It’s faith.

⁹ Josh Jones, “Paul Simon Tells the Story of How He Wrote ‘Bridge Over Troubled Water’ (1970),” *Open Culture*. February 16, 2021. Accessed May 25, 2022. <https://www.openculture.com/2021/02/paul-simon-tells-the-story-of-how-he-wrote-bridge-over-troubled-water-1970.html>