

“But, My Dear, What if You Fly?!”
B, Pentecost 10; Psalm 91
August 12, 2018; 10:00 am
Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO
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Assurance of God’s Protection

- ¹ You who live in the shelter of the Most High,
 who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,^[a]
² will say to the Lord, “My refuge and my fortress;
 my God, in whom I trust.”
³ For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler
 and from the deadly pestilence;
⁴ he will cover you with his pinions,
 and under his wings you will find refuge;
 his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.
⁵ You will not fear the terror of the night,
 or the arrow that flies by day,
⁶ or the pestilence that stalks in darkness,
 or the destruction that wastes at noonday.
⁷ A thousand may fall at your side,
 ten thousand at your right hand,
 but it will not come near you.
⁸ You will only look with your eyes
 and see the punishment of the wicked.

- ⁹ Because you have made the Lord your refuge,^[b]
 the Most High your dwelling place,
¹⁰ no evil shall befall you,
 no scourge come near your tent.
¹¹ For he will command his angels concerning you
 to guard you in all your ways.
¹² On their hands they will bear you up,
 so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.
¹³ You will tread on the lion and the adder,
 the young lion and the serpent you will trample under
foot.
¹⁴ Those who love me, I will deliver;
 I will protect those who know my name.
¹⁵ When they call to me, I will answer them;
 I will be with them in trouble,
 I will rescue them and honor them.
¹⁶ With long life I will satisfy them,
 and show them my salvation.

OPENING OF WORSHIP

All summer long, we have been “getting behind the music.”
Exploring songs and hymns, poems and quotes that have
rained down upon us as a gift from the Spirit to be sung,
shared, lived out.

We have asked: “What is on the heart of a composer when they
sit down to write, or type or scribble on a napkin the words to a

poem, song, or hymn? What are they trying to say, to share from the heart and their life experience? What is their faith wanting to express? Where is faith meeting life for that individual in that moment?

As we sing and reflect today, go behind the words and the melody. Wonder a moment or two about the composer – of the scriptures *and* the song. What was their life experience? What brought them to this place and expression?

Why did *that* particular metaphor, image or verse strike a chord with them? Being raised up on eagle's wings; God's strength being "my all in all", my "strength when I am weak?" Why is grace amazing, saving a "wretch like me?" How was God still speaking in these writers, and how is the Holy One still writing *our* story of faith meeting life, as we sing, dance and play out our souls?

I. ON EAGLE'S WINGS

One day a man named Jan Michael and his friend Doug went out to dinner. When they returned, they learned that Doug's father had died suddenly from a heart attack.

Father Jan Michael Joncas was a composer, and he wanted to write a song to console his friend, who was grief-stricken and in shock. Over the next few days he scribbled out the words, sketched a melody and jotted down some accompanying chords, basing the song on Psalm 91. Something about being lifted up on eagle's wings when our own wings and strength are struggling to keep aloft.

"I knew this was a hard, hard experience in anybody's life, [and I] just wanted to create something that would be both prayerful and then comforting," Father Joncas said of this effort.

The now-famous hymn debuted at the wake for his friend's dad. Years went by. Father Joncas kept the song under wraps because he was wary of the whole publishing business after an earlier bad experience. Finally, after a few years, "On Eagle's Wings" was published with other catholic songs and led to an album deal.

Joncas didn't pay much attention to the hymn after that, but then one day realized it was gaining quite the popularity outside Catholic circles. Other denominations sought permission to reproduce the song, and I think if you look at just about any modern day hymnal, you will find it there.

Father Joncas quipped, "Wow, this was way beyond even denominational stuff. This is becoming part of the culture."

It's been played at the memorial service for the Oklahoma City bombing, sung on national television, and requested for countless weddings, funerals and worship services of many kinds. Even Pavarotti's funeral, as it had been translated into Italian by then! (I first encountered the song outside of a church service when a young groom who was a musician sang it to his bride in the wedding ceremony I was officiating.)

Joncas did not set out to write a world-famous hymn.

"I think I've written deeper and better pieces, but this one, for whatever reason, touched people's hearts, and I'm not gonna yell about that," he said at one point.

He was living his life, walking the journey with a friend, and the moment presented itself to give wings to words from the ancient scriptures that took flight, soared aloft, and flew. An effort to console a close friend became a jet stream to comfort and touch hearts and lives literally the world over.

What if one day's unexpected tragic events lead to something taking flight? It happened for Fr. Joncas; it could happen to us!

II. WHAT IF YOU FLY?

There is freedom waiting for you,
On the breezes of the sky,
And you ask, "What if I fall?"
Oh, but my darling,
What if you fly? - by **Erin Hanson**

“What if you fly?!” What if a song or poem you wrote for a friend in their moment of grief and shock takes wings and flies around the world, bringing comfort and a reassurance of God's presence in countless places? Not just a “popular piece”—sung at famous weddings or funerals, but that it touched lives? Changed the world and transformed grief into comfort and hope?

What if *you* fly?
What keeps you from flying? Soaring? Trusting the divine wings to hold you up, propel you aloft, hold on even when you're soaring, so, like Peter walking toward Jesus on the water, you don't look down and start to sink?

What or who are the naysayers that you need to challenge before you can fly? The “yes buts” and fears you need to resist? To challenge? Those saying “Oh, you'll never fly. You can't do that? You haven't got what it takes?” Might the naysaying voices be inside your own head?

The “snare of the fowler” threatens us when we even *think* about flying free, soaring on the breath of dawn. How do we “just.say.no” to that snare? To those endless negative voices that threaten to entrap?

What in our past or present keeps us tethered to the ground? What guilt and regret or fear of something we've done has too much power over us, keeping our wings tight against our body, not launched or even spread wide? What is the mantra that keeps playing in our heads that needs to be cast aside— that: “we've tried that before and it didn't work!” refrain that keeps us all tangled up?

~ **Amazing Grace** --

(background provided by Moira Finley)

One day, a boy was born. In 1725 in London. Times were hard in that place and those times, and when John Henry Newton was just seven years old, his mother died from tuberculosis.

By the time he was eleven he was started sailing with his father, a ship's master in the Mediterranean.

At the age of eighteen he was pressed into service with the Royal Navy and eventually ended up on a slave ship traveling to West Africa. A source of trouble for the captain, he was left in West Africa where he was **enslaved** until finally rescued nearly five years later. Travelling back to England, his ship was caught up in a storm and nearly sank and it was that experience he would later refer to as the beginning of his conversion to Christianity. Between 1748 and 1754, Newton captained several slave ships between Africa and the Indies.

After a stroke, he retired from sailing and worked as a surveyor while attempting to enter the ministry. It took seven years for him to be accepted and he was finally ordained as an Anglican priest in June 1764 at the age of 39. He served two churches in his life.

Unlike many pastors of his time, Newton freely admitted his struggles, his temptations and sins and his unfailing trust in the love of God that could overcome any human failings.

It was not until 1787, at the age of 60 that he began to speak against the slave trade. He lived with the memory and regret of his participation in the trafficking of human beings and the horrible conditions they endured on the ships crossing the Atlantic Ocean. He later became instrumental in the abolition of slavery in the British Empire.

There are more than 3000 recordings of “Amazing Grace” catalogued in the Library of Congress and it’s been used in everything from the “Simpsons” to “Alice’s Restaurant” to the funeral music for Spock in the second Star Trek movie.

Newton clearly struggled with his past, and he struggled with his darkness openly, sharing what he had done and who he had been with his congregations in sermons and letters.

Despite having lived as a virtual slave for several years in West Africa, experiencing beatings and starvation and knowing what

it was like to be forcibly separated from his family, he still later participated in the slave trade, captaining ships that carried more than 20,000 people from their homes in Africa to slavery in the Indies.

But it wasn’t simply his participation in the slave trade that he struggled with. Newton struggled with the early loss of his mother, his father’s remarriage and absences, the rough life at sea, and his friend’s deep depression for most of his life that Newton struggled with not knowing how to help.

Yet, he didn’t let his struggles and agony about the past stop him from reaching out. Didn’t let it keep him tethered to the ground, wings pulled in with remorse. It didn’t prevent him from letting the amazing grace he experienced in the unconditional love of God overrule that self-doubt and criticism. “It saved a wretch like me.” It wasn’t that he was in denial. No way shape or form.

Incidentally, individuals and churches over the years have tried to “soften” this language in this hymn—seeing it as archaic or awfully guilt-imposing. “I’m not a wretch!” people cry. Why do I have to sing that in church?! So, some hymnals even changed it to “save a one like” or something similar.

I wonder if John Newton rolled over in his grave when that happened?! I’m all for updating language in hymns *if* it’s too exclusive or limiting the understanding of one another and of the Holy. But, I gotta say that wretch needs to stay right where it is. Not because we need to feel bad about ourselves when we’re singing a nice hymn, but because grace is not *amazing* if it can’t pull us out of the deepest depths, out of whatever wretchedness we find ourselves in or believe ourselves to be.

I may not have been a slave trader (and don’t plan to become one!), but I want to know that whatever I’ve done or all the

things I've beat myself up about are not *too much* for God. *And*, I want to honor John Newton's story and life experience and penning of this wonderful testimony as.it.is.

III. WINGS FOR EACH OTHER

But, my dear, what if you *fly*? And better yet, what if *we* fly? Not alone, but in a flock? For we can be wings for each other. We talk of being the "hands and feet of Christ," that "God has no hands other than yours," but what about being another body part for each other?! What about being uplifting wings for our fellow human beings?

Where we work, hand-in-hand (or wing-in-wing) with the Holy Spirit to loose the chains, untether the rope that holds us down, untangle the snare that our neighbor – whether friends or stranger – has gotten enmeshed in – so that they may fly free, lifted up on eagle's wings, soaring the breath of dawn?

"Surround yourself with the dreamers and the doers, the believers and thinkers, but most of all, surround yourself with those who see the greatness within you, even when you don't see it yourself." -- Edmund Lee

This week – look for the ones who need an uplift. Look for the places and situations where you can be the wings of God, the hands and feet of Christ, to lift another – out of the fear and terror of the night, away from the arrow, wafting them towards refuge. We can help one another to raise up, to shine like the sun, to find that we are held in the palm of God's hand.

We can help one another loose the chains that bind. Get past our fear of failing and fly instead.

This past week, our family was lifted up and helped to fly countless times by prayers, loving words, gifts and cards to nurture our spirits; offers of help; practical support for our remaining horse. We were ensnared in grief, but loving hands untangled us and helped us find our wings again, and even

better – flew alongside us in countless ways – far beyond the one sorrow of the lost horse child.

Take These Wings

Take these wings and learn to fly
To the highest mountain in the sky
Take these eyes and learn to see
All the things so dear to me.

Take this song and learn to sing
Fill your hearts with all the joy of spring
Take this heart and set it free
Let it fly beyond the sea.

IV. THIS IS THE MOMENT TO FLY

A friend told me that when she sings these songs, it brings tears to her eyes and not just of hope and inspiration, but of pain and regret as well. It reminds her of failures she has made and all the years of not fully realizing there was a power there – a Spirit of unconditional love and support that could have helped immensely, if she had just reached out and let those wings waft her up and helped her to fly.

But amazing grace says, "It's never too late." Whatever stage of life we are in when we sing these songs – is the stage we need to be in and to claim our wings. This is the moment.

Grace can swoop down, sink in and lift up at any time. We can let go of those chains, and allow ourselves to be carried aloft, to the heights.

"But what if I fail? What if I failed in the past? What if I led a wretched life? What if I missed the invitation and turned my back on God?"

No matter how many times we give God rebuttal, "God's answer is, "But Darling, what if you fly?"
Amen.

