

Singing the Story:

SIGHTINGS IN CHRISTIAN MUSIC

By Glen V. Wiberg

Pietisten.

Seattle and Minneapolis

Singing the Story: Sightings in Christian Music

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In the Lord's Courts

The hymn “What Joy There Is” has been in every Covenant hymnal since the first official hymnal in Swedish, *Sions Basun* (“Trumpet of Zion” 1908). J. Irving Erickson in *Sing It Again* says it is perhaps Sweden’s greatest hymn about worship. This became my favorite hymn from the new “brown” hymnal in the 1930s as I grew up in the First Covenant Church of Kansas City. I still believe it was the best hymn in that book. The hymn’s title in the brown hymnal was “In the Lord’s Courts.” That’s the place to which we come each Sunday morning. “Here in his presence glorious it is so good to be.”

At the age of five I didn’t grasp all the poetic images of the hymn, but over many years of singing them, these words have become my personal language of faith. At five, the words sounded friendly. Among its imagery was light, joy, sun, beautiful, lilies, refreshing dew, taste, love, life, strength, blessings, and His care.

Surrounded by a community that knew my name, loved me, and believed that one day I would become a preacher, I felt the friendly images such as “blooming like lilies” become names and faces. There was Grandma Westerdahl, in whose ample lap I would often fall asleep during the evening service. Or Gabriel Warren, a sturdy Norwegian, who always stood at the church door giving me the same welcoming words he gave the grownups. Or old Emil Soderstrom, the tailor, who always had Swedish peppermints, *polkagrisar*, in his pocket for children—though I confess that when I saw him take out his false teeth during the sermon, I had second thoughts about eating more *polkagrisar*.

While still in childhood, learning to read, I sang the lines of the hymn for myself. “How beautiful the union of souls redeemed and free who hold with God communion in faith and purity.” Again the words brought two more beautiful faces to mind. I loved to sit toward the front of the sanctuary beside my Grandpa Wiberg, with his gold-rimmed glasses, the neatly trimmed beard, and the sweet smell of Lucky Tiger Hair Tonic in his sandy hair. As a Swedish immigrant, he silently formed each word of Pastor Larson’s sermon on his lips as if “to taste God’s love sincere.” Often I saw a tear fall down his cheek, and I knew Grandpa was one of “the redeemed and free.”

“Holding with God communion in faith and purity,” I saw the beautiful face of Otto Swanson speaking Bible words in his lovely accent and gentle voice while serving my folks the bread and wine of Holy Communion. Looking up into his face,

I felt that God must look like that. Then, one day when I was nine years old, I heard my folks say that Otto Swanson was very sick. I went upstairs to my bedroom and prayed he would get well, but the next morning he died. I went upstairs again and this time I cried. Now Mr. Swanson was “holding with God communion.”

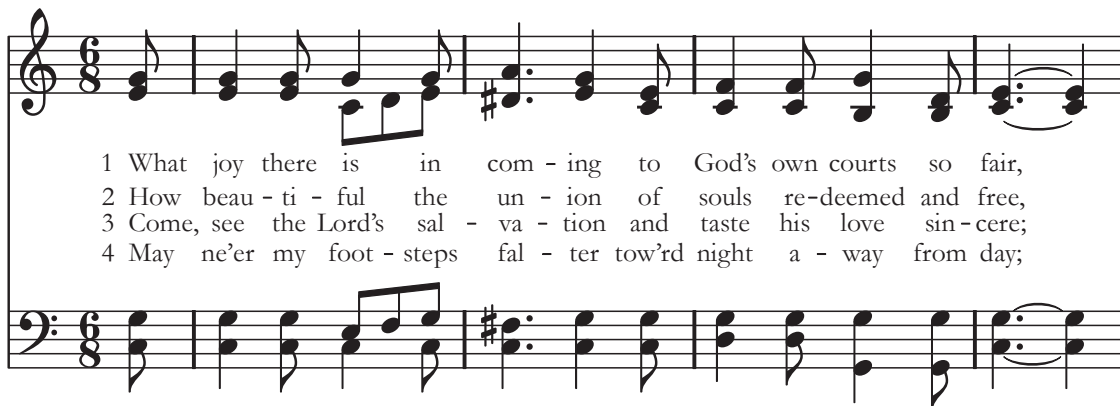
Toward my teens, in singing the hymn two things happened. I heard the gentle wooing of the Spirit in the invitation of the hymn, “Come, see the Lord’s salvation and taste his love sincere...watch with his people here.” Pastor Larson often spoke to us during confirmation about the importance and urgency of answering God’s invitation and casting one’s lot by watching with his people here. To be a Christian, one must choose. “Outside, the world makes merry unhappy ‘mid its toys, but in God’s sanctuary the soul finds heavenly joys.”

I began to understand that being “outside” could be unfriendly and threatening. But “inside,” among these funny little people of the Spirit there is “a circle blest,” a friendly, gentle people with names and faces, grandmas with ample laps and grandpas who loved and tasted the word, older folks with Swedish mints for kids, and people who reminded me of God. All of these folks “in God’s sanctuary,” on the corner of 42nd Street and Terrace, “the soul finds heavenly joys.” The choice seemed easy, even if it seemed at later times often less than easy.

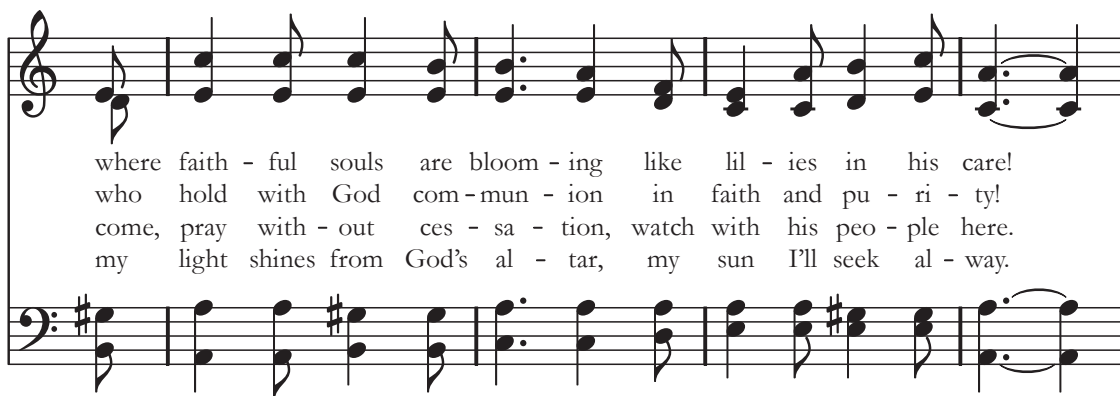
One day in my fourteenth year, I said “Yes” to my baptism and my name was added to these people, though sometimes with “faltering footsteps.” I am nevertheless thankful I have never looked back—except with gratitude for all I have been given. “Others have labored,” says Jesus, “and you have entered into their labor.” “Who then can be unwilling to join their circle blest?”



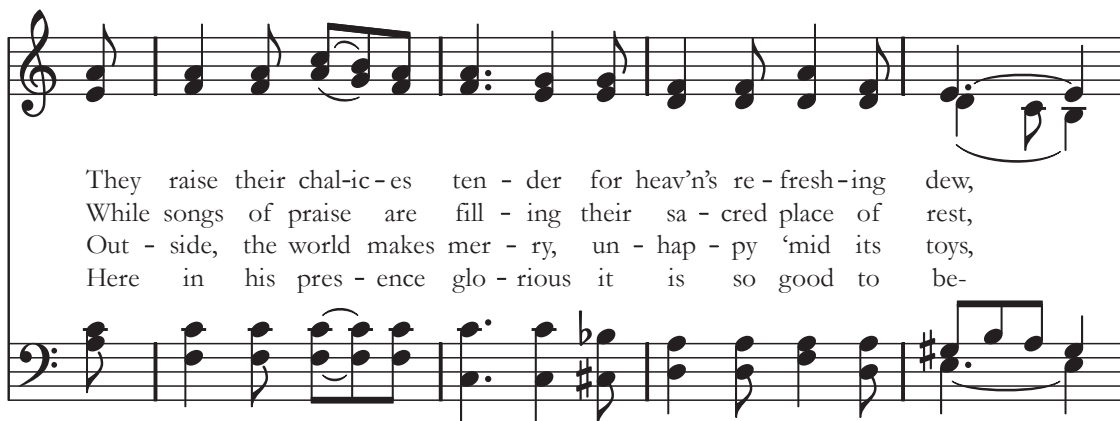
What Joy There Is



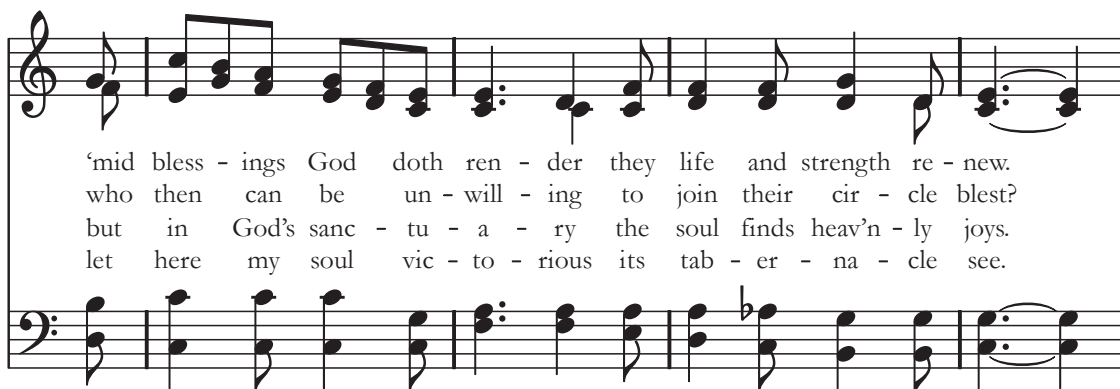
1 What joy there is in com - ing to God's own courts so fair,
 2 How beau - ti - ful the un - ion of souls re - deemed and free,
 3 Come, see the Lord's sal - va - tion and taste his love sin - cere;
 4 May ne'er my foot - steps fal - ter tow'rd night a - way from day;



where faith - ful souls are bloom - ing like lil - ies in his care!
 who hold with God com - mun - ion in faith and pu - ri - ty!
 come, pray with - out ces - sa - tion, watch with his peo - ple here.
 my light shines from God's al - tar, my sun I'll seek al - way.



They raise their chal - ic - es ten - der for heav'n's re - fresh - ing dew,
 While songs of praise are fill - ing their sa - cred place of rest,
 Out - side, the world makes mer - ry, un - hap - py 'mid its toys,
 Here in his pres - ence glo - rious it is so good to be -



'mid bless - ings God doth ren - der they life and strength re - new.
 who then can be un - will - ing to join their cir - cle blest?
 but in God's sanc - tu - a - ry the soul finds heav'n - ly joys.
 let here my soul vic - to - rious its tab - er - na - cle see.

'Mid bless - ings God doth ren - der they life and strength re - new.
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 Let here my soul vic - to - rious its tab - er - na - cle see.