

Verses for the King

Hymn-Writing for Poets and Non-Poets

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In the early 90s, just a few miles from here, an elderly man was lying on his bed, and his family was circled around him. He was a pastor, and he was dying. The family was singing. “Abide with me; fast falls the eventide. . . . I know that my Redeemer lives. . . . For all the saints who from their labors rest . . .” Hymn after hymn. As I was told it, the elderly gentleman was lying there, barely conscious, barely breathing, and suddenly he opened his eyes and said, “I see the gates! Oh, look – they’re opening.” And he breathed his last.

That family sang their husband, dad, grandpa, and pastor from this life to the next. Maybe some in the invisible “cloud of witnesses” sang along. What his family *might* have done is take turns telling him they loved him and reminding him of special memories and reciting Bible passages – and that would have been beautiful too – but instead they sang. They hymned him to heaven.

You know about the power of song, I’m sure. How it helps little children memorize words and truths, even those beyond their understanding. How, at the nursing home, a dementia patient may be unresponsive day in and day out, may not recognize her own children, but when a grandchild starts singing, “Jesus loves me, this I know,” her eyes light, and she opens her mouth, and she knows every word. Jesus loves *her* too.

Music itself is powerful, and when you pin the music to the very Word of God, then you have something mysterious, sometimes miraculous. Hymns *move* people. They plumb the profound mysteries of God in ways that expository writing cannot. They touch people not just in their cognitive center and in their emotional center, but in a spiritual center that we can hardly identify or explain. They give us goose bumps.

A hymn can teach, remind, inspire. A hymn can transform your morning – and your life. The best Beatles or Bob Dylan song is still a temporal thing. But a hymn! Angels sing those! Hymns are eternal.

For someone trying to write hymns, that’s a humbling thought. But my guess is that you already understand the power of a hymn. You’re here because you’ve been trying your hand at this – or you think you might want to.

I’ll tell what I can. It may not be much, but I’ll give it all to you. (I won’t be like the neighbor lady who won’t reveal the secret ingredient in her famous potato salad. I won’t hold back any secrets – if there are any.) And at the end, I’m hoping we’ll have a little time so you can add more thoughts that will help all of us in this task.

And one more thought before we begin: Martin Luther would sanction this inclination to write as well, wouldn’t he. Now you can’t quote everything Luther said. He was a man of his time, and sometimes he was a little earthy. But he himself wrote dozens of hymns, and he famously said: “Next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise. The gift of language combined with the gift of song was given to us that we should proclaim the Word of God in music.”

You probably already know that quote, but here’s one that was new to me: “If you want to change the world, pick up your pen and write.” *Pick up your pen and write.*

So, let's start with this question: **What makes a good hymn?**

A good hymn needs to have a two-fold foundation: Truth and Beauty. (Reminds us a little of Keats, right?) Let's start with Truth.

Truth

1. A hymn must be **SCRIPTURAL**. Someone should be able to look at your hymn and reverse-engineer it to see what Bible passage or passages it comes from. If you just start writing about how you've got the Spirit in you, and the Spirit is the wind in your hair and the roar of the bear . . . that's not a hymn. (I'm not sure what that is!)
2. A hymn should center on the **SAVIOR**. More than merely scriptural, a hymn should be Christological. To clarify, not every hymn has to contain the specific gospel or even mention Jesus – there are lots of good First Article and Third Article hymns – but a *body* of hymns should clearly have Christ at the center . . . because Scripture has Christ at the center. If you find that all your hymns are about the work of the Holy Spirit, but somehow Jesus doesn't enter the picture, then, you know, you might actually want to be at the Pentecostal worship conference down the road.
3. A hymn must have **SOUND THEOLOGY**. It must be orthodox. It should be clear on the person and work of Christ and on justification and sanctification issues. It should divide law and gospel properly, with the light shining brightest on the gospel. Fifty years ago Erik Routley, that great British hymnologist, said: "Wrong doctrine in preaching would be noticed; in hymns, wrong teaching comes to be believed." That's a lot of pressure!
4. A hymn should **STEER PEOPLE TO GOD, NOT US**. (Okay, I stretched a bit to find an S-word and maintain the alliteration!) A good hymn steers people's gaze up, not in. It points them to God, not to themselves. We can write hymns about *our* worship, about *our* prayer, *our* trust, but the main subject of that hymn had better be the Almighty God that we are worshiping, praying to, and trusting in. The main thrust of the hymn should not be us and our feelings. Otherwise we're like teenagers who say, "I love you" to their special someone, but they're not really loving that person, they're not putting that person's welfare above their own. They're just in love with love. So our hymns can't just be about how great we feel. They should be about how great God is.

Beauty.

A hymn can't just be correct doctrine put in rhyme: "Jesus' life for us was given—now we get to go to heaven!" That isn't a hymn. It may still have power, because the gospel has power. But it's poor packaging for the beauty and mystery of God. It's like having a stunning Faberge egg in our hand and then throwing it in a brown paper lunch bag.

A hymn should be both theologically sound (Truth) *and* aesthetically profound. Beauty matters too. A high-quality hymn should take you aback a little. Or make your heart skip a beat. Or make you wrinkle your brow and ponder. Or ease you into a long sigh of peace and quiet happiness. It should move you out of your daily, domestic rhythms into a slightly different state. As hymn-writers, we want to make the singers think, and we want to make them feel – think and feel about God and what God has done for us.

So how do we do that? With more S-words, of course.

1. With **SOUND** – the way the words roll off the tongue. (More on that later.)
2. With **SENSORY** images – pictures, colors, smells, sounds and specific, concrete details.
3. With **STORY** – The power of narrative is very strong. Human beings learn through story, right? I can tell you a joke that lasts 60 seconds, and you'll be able to tell it, almost word for word, at supper tonight. But

I can give you a grocery list that takes six seconds to convey, and you won't be able to remember it. You'll need to write it down.

Narrative is powerful. That's why Jesus told stories. That's why, as soon as the pastor says, "You know, I was at Pick 'n' Save the other day, in that corner where they have the organic vegetables . . ." and suddenly the whole congregation is alert: "What?! What happened in the vegetable aisle?"

Our hymns can sometimes tell stories too. My son, Phil, and I are writing a hymn a week, based on the Revised Common Lectionary, which is what the LCMS, ELCA, and the majority of mainline Protestant churches use, and some of our hymns are based very closely on Bible stories. We've established an online resource called Selah Hymnary. Many of the hymns ("Moses at the Burning Bush"; "The Blood of the Lamb," which is a Passover hymn; and "Don't Be Afraid," which is based on the crossing of the Red Sea) are just Bible stories. But I shouldn't say "just." Story is powerful. If you want to write "story hymns," I encourage you to do that. They can be very beautiful things.

4. And finally, beauty comes through the **SENTENCES** you write. (Or you could say syntax or semantics. Pick whatever word you want—just make it start with S!)

What I'm trying to say here in a general way is that the sentences and words in our poetry should be dignified—a little elevated even. At the very least we should use adult language. Let's please not ask grownups to sing children's songs every week.

On the other hand, the hymns can't be too difficult either. People in the pews aren't always as awake or alert as we'd hope. (I know I'm not always!) Worshipers aren't coming to wade their way through a jungle of words, trying to make sense of it. If we turn church into heavy labor, we are losing our focus. So a hymn can't be quite as pithy, as thick with thought, as most poems are.

* One last thing on poetry itself before we go on – please forgive me for another tangent, but I think it's important: In some ways, we conservative, confessional Lutherans are a literal-minded group. We believe in a literal interpretation of the Word of God (except where it's clearly figurative – "if your eye offends you, pluck it out.") *This is a good thing!* We also adhere to a systematic theology, with logical propositions ordered in a linear fashion, each fully supported by the Word of God. *This is also a good thing!*

Literal interpretation, linear thinking, logical systems—these are all good. But they are not the be-all and end-all. In fact, they can sometimes diminish the infinite, almighty God; they sometimes lead us to slice and dice the mysteries of God into bite-sized pieces that we think we can handle.

Poetry is a remedy for this. Poetry helps us remember that God is bigger than we are, that he lives outside the bounds of time and space and fallen human logic, that some of his infinite truth is too big for our finite intellects. Paul seemed to be pointing this out to the Corinthians when he said, "We just see a reflection now, we see through the glass darkly, we only see in part."

So maybe . . . just maybe . . . that's why God himself is a poet. Read the Psalms. Read Isaiah and Lamentations. Read the visions in Ezekiel and Revelation. Read the gospel of John! We need *poetic* language to try—as well as we can—to convey some of the mystery of God: the mystery of a God who humbled himself to be *born* on earth of a *virgin* mother . . . the mystery of a God who *died* . . . the mystery of a dead man who was *raised to life* again.

Mark Paustian talks about this in his dissertation on Kierkegaard and indirect communication. Mark says it this way: "Divine mystery, grace, and revelation do not reduce to reasonable sentences and philosophical abstractions. They are a voice crying in the wilderness. God's truth is domesticated and diminished when room is not given for its prophets and poets to speak the way they speak: in love song and rescue story,

smoky ritual and visions by the river. . . God might have limited himself to logical propositions and systems, but he did not. His way is the more powerful by far, and it is the Word of God.”

All of this is to say that I think we need to stop being suspicious of poetry. If a line of poetry can be read on a couple different levels, that’s not a lack of clarity; that’s depth, that’s nuance. Let’s give the poets a little room! Let’s see how their attempts at sharing the Word can teach, inspire, expand, and move us to pause, ponder, and praise.

Okay, that’s the end of that bit of pontificating. Summary: A good hymn is built on truth and beauty. That’s the goal anyway. I’m not saying my hymns are there, but that’s what I’m working for.

How to Write a Hymn: One Method

Let’s say we’re going to write a hymn on baptism. I’m going to share with you one way I would approach this hymn. This isn’t the only way, and I won’t even pretend it’s the best way, but it’s what I do, and if that helps you in any way, great.

I’ll give you my 10-step process, and then we’ll look closely at each step:

1. STUDY
2. PRIME THE PUMP
3. BEGIN WITH PRAYER
4. FREE-WRITE
5. FIND THE GOLDEN LINE
6. BUILD THE FRAME
7. WRITE THE STANZAS
8. ABANDON IT
9. SHARE IT
10. REVISE & FINISH IT

1. The first thing we do is STUDY.

We turn off the TV. Silence the phone. Close the door on the world. We read pertinent Bible passages on baptism – a couple different translations if you like. We read the Bible commentaries on the passages. We go to Luther’s Catechism and read about baptism. We could read other hymns on baptism, but I personally prefer not to. I don’t want to borrow someone else’s voice.

So in this first step, studying, we’re filling up with the Word. And we do this humbly. No matter how great our exegetical skills, no matter how awesome our Lutheran hermeneutic is – and it is awesome! – we still approach the Word of God humbly. We remember that we do not master the Word. The Word masters us.

2. The second step is to PRIME THE PUMP. Beckon the muse.

This may sound overly “meta,” but we want to open the right side of the brain to the left. We want to feel a spaciousness, a billowing creative energy that we can hardly resist. How? Maybe the Bible study we did in Step 1 is enough. We feel moved, and we need to take up our pens and write!

Or maybe we beckon the muse by reading secular poetry or lyrical prose. Keats, Wordsworth, Mary Oliver, Wendell Barry, Christian Wyman. For prose, Buechner is usually my go-to guy. Read this lovely prose and poetry aloud. Let your mind take in the words and swirl them around like a kaleidoscope. Or let the words take

you along on a gentle swell of water, like when you're floating in the lake or swinging on a hammock. Or read aloud until your heartbeat begins to pulse to the rhythm of the words.

Another way to beckon the muse is to put on music – romantic stuff like Debussy or Barber's "Adagio for Strings," or baroque stuff like Vivaldi and Bach and Telemann. They say that Baroque music takes you deep into an alpha brainwave state, which helps concentration and creativity. I don't know. Could be.

The point is, you can't wait for inspiration to come. You need to create the conditions for it. You want to get to that place where the world is closed off, and your mind is both wide open and also fully focused on the Word of God. Now we're in business.

3. Time to write! So let's BEGIN WITH PRAYER.

I like to write *Jesu Juva* at the top of the page – or of my computer screen. We all know Bach wrote SDG – *Soli Deo Gloria* – at the bottom of his manuscripts. What is lesser known is that he wrote JJ – *Jesu Juva* – "Jesus, help me" – at the top of his manuscripts. Isn't that wonderful? Then I pray some variation of "Help me, Jesus": Help me be clear, help my language rise to the level of this mystery, help me write something that can build and edify your people, Lord.

4. The next step is to FREE-WRITE.

Free-writing is a fairly common prewriting technique. It's simply writing in a stream-of-consciousness fashion. You write and write, without stopping. You let your pen – or your fingers on the computer – take you away into different directions. Here are a few things to remember when you free-write.

- a. It's often beneficial to imagine a particular audience. Who are you writing for? Who's going to sing this hymn? If this hymn is for your niece who's being baptized, you think of your family and the congregation – and the baby! Or maybe the hymn is an education hymn for your Sunday school class, or a marriage hymn for your son who's getting married, or a home and family hymn for a big family reunion. Maybe you're thinking of your grandma, who recently said aloud that she's afraid to die. Maybe God is your only audience, and it's just praise straight from your heart to his. For me, writing hymns is a form of worship. I'm more of an introvert, so when it's just God speaking to me in Scripture and me trying to respond with prayer and pen—when my mind and heart and soul are fully engaged—that's a kind of personal worship.
- b. When you free-write, you need to give yourself permission to write very, very badly. This is so important. Here's an illustration: What happens when you go up north to the cottage and you haven't been there all winter and you turn on the water for the first time? It's all rusty-orange and smells like sulfur and dead fish, right? It's gross. But if you keep running the faucet, it turns clear. Writing is like that. It's bad at first – for everyone. It's heavy with gunk, too many words, boring verbs, clunky clauses, and dangling modifiers – not to mention that it completely lacks any original thought. But you can't give up. You have to recognize that some of your writing – maybe most of it – is bad. And that's okay. You have to keep going – keep going that day, and keep going that year, and keep going your whole life. The writing does get better. Clearer and more nourishing.

I'm going to help you "write badly" by telling you this: When we do our exercise in a bit, you will not have to share what you write with anyone. I'm not going to ask anyone to read aloud. I'm not even going to ask you to share it with your neighbor. So you are free to write whatever you want and as badly as you want, and then you will just fold it up and put it in your folder or bag, and take it home with you.

- c. When you free-write, it's imperative that you create a judgment-free zone. We talked about audience earlier. Sometimes the audience we imagine can hinder the free flow of our thoughts and words because we perceive them to be judgmental. Here's the honest truth: If I imagine that I'm writing for a bunch of WELS pastors, I freeze up. I feel like they'll be sniffing for heresy: "Ooh – there's some semi-Pelagianism! . . . I think I feel a universalist vibe. . . . Well, that's just plain ecumenism right there!" So my solution: I don't think about them.

Maybe for you, there's an opinionated person at church who feels like he's not fulfilling his mission in life unless he's pointing out an error somewhere. When you're free-writing, don't think of him.

Maybe there's an English teacher from high school or college who was heavy with the red pen. Don't think of her either. If she starts whispering in your ear, just imagine taking her, tightly coiled bun and all, tossing her in a Mason jar, and screwing the cap on tight. She can pound on the glass and scream about split infinitives all she wants. It doesn't matter because you can't hear her anymore.

To create a judgment-free zone, you have to turn off your own internal critic too. No voice inside you is allowed to say, "You stink at this. Who do you think you are – a writer? Pfft." You need to shush that voice. You have to put up your hand and say, "Not now. This is between me and God."

- d. When you free-write, you don't want to get stuck. You want to keep writing, writing, writing until you've explored every corner and every crevice of your chosen topic. You don't want to go back and reread. You don't want to tap your pen on your desk and ponder. You don't want to stop at all. In fact, it's good not to even lift your pen off the page more than a split-second at a time.

So if you feel yourself slowing down or getting stuck, this is what you do: You write this question: "What do I mean by that?" What do I mean by that last thing I just wrote? Can I say it in a different way? Can I say it in five different ways? That will keep you writing, and pretty soon you're off to the races in a slightly different direction. (This idea is from the book *Writing the Mind Alive*.)

- e. [Free-writing exercise on baptism.]

**5. We've studied. We've beckoned the muse. We've prayed.
We've done our free-writing. The next step is to FIND THE
GOLDEN LINE(S).**

Now we go back and look at our freewriting. Those pages of words are like a storage unit that we filled up with all kinds of stuff. When we go back to look, yeah, there's a lot of useless junk, because we permitted ourselves to write badly. And that's just fine. But—lo and behold—there's also a small handful of real treasures. Circle those treasures: any words or phrases or thoughts that you think you might like to use. And look closely for something that might just be a "golden line." The golden line is a line or phrase that really resonates with you, something that maybe you can build your hymn around. What makes a golden line?

- Depth: It has meaning, richness, profundity.
- Beautiful sound: Your mouth feels good when you're saying it.
- Rhymability: If a line ends in 'purple,' it's not a golden line.

6. Step 6 is to BUILD THE FRAME.

When I start writing a hymn, I have no idea how many lines each stanza will have, but if I have a golden line, that might provide me with the meter. That will help me build the scaffolding, the skeleton, of the hymn. So

let's say I free-wrote on prayer, and my golden line was "When comes the sun, I rise to pray." (Maybe that's just a silver line, or nickel. But it was all I came up with in that exercise, so I'm going to go with it!) Let's look at this line and use it to discuss meter.

— / — / — / — / 8

When comes the sun, I rise to pray.

Looks like we have iambic meter here. An iamb is a two-syllable foot, first an unstressed syllable and then a stressed syllable: ba-BUM ba-BUM ba-BUM ba-BUM! How many syllables per line here? Eight. Eight syllables equals four iambic feet. So this is iambic tetrameter. Iambic is the most commonly used meter. Who wrote in iambic pentameter – with five iambs per line? Yep, Shakespeare.

"Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate."

How about if I free-wrote on a baptism hymn, and my golden line was "Welcome, welcome, child of God." I'll write about the blessings of baptism and the power of the Sacrament, yes, but my slightly different angle is to emphasize that the child is joining the congregation now, and we are welcoming him/her. This meter is trochaic: first a stressed syllable, then an unstressed syllable: BUM-ba BUM-ba BUM-ba BUM! And how many syllables per line? Seven.

Trochaic

/ — / — / — / 7

"Wel - come, wel - come, child of God,

Trochaic meter is more forceful than iambic, but you can use either one in your writing.

You can also use anapestic or dactylic, which are triple meters. "'Twas the night before Christmas when all through the house. . ." is an example of anapestic meter. But triple meters are not used very often in hymns.

And, to be frank, those terms are fun and all—anapest, dactyl, iamb, trochee—but don't let the terminology bog you down and kill the dream. If your brain just tuned out about three minutes ago, that's okay. Just know that you will want to maintain a strict meter: the right number of syllables in each line, and the *syLLABles* must have the right *emPHASis*, as my grandma used to say.

You can, however, mix up your meter a bit if you've got a composer who will work with you. Here's an example: We all love to sing "In Christ Alone." Let's sing it:

"In Christ alone, my hope is found.
He is my light, my strength, my song.
This cornerstone, this solid ground
Firm through the fiercest draught and storm."

Ooh, that meter! Getty and Townend start with iambic meter, and then they substitute a trochee at the beginning of the next line. Hear that? "He is my light . . ." And again at the beginning of the fourth line: "Firm through the fiercest . . ." That little leap, a kind of syncopation, propels the singer forward. They do this three times in each stanza – the second, fourth, and eighth line. That metrical mutation is one reason for the hymn's success, I think. It's super fun to sing.

Now most of us don't have a composer in the wings, waiting to write music for whatever we come up with, so the easiest thing to do is to use an existing tune that you like, a tune that fits the meter and that seems to fit the mood of your hymn. Just go to the back of the hymnal and check out the tunes according to their meters, grab one, and write your stanzas to that tune.

Let me interject a note – sorry, another tangent! – on the importance of the hymn's tune here. More often than not, the music makes or breaks a hymn. For us text-writers, this is not only true but also very humbling. Yes, we need a solid text to get past the gatekeepers: the theologians, pastors, and hymnal committees. But we need a singable, memorable, excellent tune to win over the people in the pews.

A good text will die for want of a good tune. And a mediocre text might become hugely popular because the music just whisks people away.

Words speak to the head and sometimes the heart. Poetry speaks to head, heart, and soul. But music! Music speaks to the *body*—to the cells. People don't sway or clap to the Formula of Concord. But they might if it were set to the right tune!

This is yet another thing to keep us writers in our place. Sigh. We can only go so far with our words.

7. Now, we're finally ready to WRITE THE STANZAS.

This takes the most time, and it's the most fun. Remember that this is still a judgment-free zone. We're going to write some bad lines, and that's okay! We need to get them out so that the good lines can follow. We have a lot to think about when we write. We'll look at these four topics:

WORD CHOICE

tone

SENSORY IMAGES

SOUND

Word Choice:

a. I try to stay away from archaic, hymny words, like “diadem.” (I find myself often going to “deem” and “deign,” but I try to control myself.) On the other hand, we don't want to be too casual. Our words should have some gravitas, some dignity.

b. Short Germanic words are more powerful than longer Latinate words, which often end in syllables like –tion or –ate or –ive. “Ask” is stronger than “inquire.” “End” or “stop” is better than “discontinue.” “Propitiation” might be a very fine word when we're explaining dogma, but let's not use it in a hymn.

c. We want to use new and fresh words and phrases. Consider this: When you move into a new house, and it's near a train or an airport, the noise drives you absolutely crazy – for a day or two. Then you stop hearing it, right? It's the same with language. If we hear the exact same-same words ordered in the same-same way in every hymn and sermon, we stop hearing them. Like that train, they become white noise. So we need to find new language. Now, some repetition can be comforting and edifying and uniting – like when we say the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Words of Institution every Sunday. Those are beautiful. But our hymns and our sermons are places where we need to find fresh ways of saying the ancient truths.

d. The most important words in your hymns are the verbs, which is true for all writing. The verbs are the meat. It's better to use verbs in the active voice than the passive voice. It's better to use action verbs than linking verbs. Finding better verbs is always the goal. For instance, when the children of Israel killed the Passover lamb

just before the Exodus, what did they do with the blood of the lamb? They *put* it on their doorframes. But “put” is weak. We can do better. What are better verbs for that sentence? [Discuss.]

Tone:

We want to show respect for our readers and singers and hearers, not talk down to them. If you find yourself wanting to write a hymn to fix something – “I’m going to show *them* how objective justification works!” – then you might just end up being condescending. We want to remember that we’re all Christians here, all pilgrims on this journey, and we’re all mature in some areas and immature in other areas. So let’s be humble – or as Peter said, “Speak with gentleness and respect.”

Sensory Images:

Sensory images are part of the “Beauty” of a hymn we mentioned earlier. “Sunset, chains, blood, slaughtered, stain, shadow, breath, drenched in red, crimson shades”: those are some of the images I chose for “The Blood of the Lamb.” You can do better, I’m sure! When choosing imagery for your hymn, go in close to your subject: Frame the picture, the event, in a black glossy frame. Smell the fish frying on the beach. Hear the birds that the deaf man just heard for the first time. Put your hand in Jesus’ side in the upper room after the resurrection. Hear Jesus saying your name.

Sensory images help us obey the “Show – Don’t Tell” writing rule. Remember that song, “The Cat’s in the Cradle”? The lyricist doesn’t say, “The father was quite busy with his job, so he missed out on some important milestones in his son’s life.” Instead, he says, “But there were planes to catch and bills to pay. He learned to walk while I was away.” That kind of specific detail, as opposed to general statements that have no images to hang onto, will make your hymns come alive too.

Sound:

The question here is how words roll off the tongue. We’ll look at the sound devices of rhyme, assonance, alliteration, and vowel color.

a. **Rhyme:** Rhyme is so fun. We could talk for an hour about rhyme. First, it’s important to select and stick to a rhyme scheme in your hymn: AABB / ABAB / ABABCC / etc. If you choose a hymn tune with a specific meter from the back of the hymnal, then you will want to follow that hymn’s rhyme scheme as well.

Here’s where I may differ from some hymn-writers. I’m a firm adherent of near rhyme in addition to perfect rhyme. Perfect rhymes are NIGHT and LIGHT. Near rhymes are NIGHT and LIE or PRIDE or STRIKE. When you sing, near rhymes still ring pleasantly in the ear. They sound almost exactly like perfect rhyme as long as the end consonants are *close*. So SIGN rhymes with TIME. It’s my own personal opinion, but I feel that when I limit myself to perfect rhymes, my vocabulary is very limited and my lines are more apt to be cliché.

What if you get stuck on a rhyme? Rhymezone.com is a good tool, as is a big thick book I have at home with the oh-so-clever title *Words to Rhyme With*. If you’re a total hymn nerd, you carry a teeny-tiny rhyming dictionary in your purse or briefcases at all times—like this Oxford one. Sometimes a rhyming dictionary gives me a whole new thought. For instance, in the hymn “We Praise the Christ for Martyred Saints,” I was looking at words that rhyme with “now,” and I saw “brow.” Suddenly I thought of our baptisms—how we were marked with the sign of the cross on our brows, and I worked that thought into the hymn, although that was not my original intention for that next line. I never would have thought to go to baptism if I hadn’t seen “brow.” So sometimes thought precedes word, and sometimes word precedes thought.

b. **Assonance** is the repetition of vowel sounds in words that are close together. For instance: “makes a way” and “seeks and steals.” Rhyme and near rhyme are forms of assonance.

c. **Alliteration** is the repetition of opening consonant sounds: “seeks and steals” again and “the lamb is slain as sun is set.” “Freedom came in crimson shades” has both assonance (came/shades) and alliteration (came, crimson).

d. **Vowels** come in different tones, different moods, different colors. Dark vowels are more effective for dark themes. They’re formed in the back of the mouth: long O and OO: “Oh, darkest woe! O tears, forth flow!” Brighter vowels are formed in the front of the mouth: long A and long E. You smile a bit when you say them: “Songs of praise the angels sang!” and “Let praises ring!” One small note: You don’t want to put a bright vowel on a very high note. Singers will not appreciate singing “free” on a high E.

**8. This next step may sound a bit strange,
but you must now ABANDON THE HYMN.**

For a while, at least. You’ve become so wrapped up in it, you’ve spiraled so far down into some lines that you’ve forgotten what day it is. The lawn hasn’t been cut, and the children have been eating nothing but mac & cheese and Thin Mints. It’s time to come up for air and leave that hymn alone. Don’t even think about it. But know that your subconscious will keep working on it. The subconscious is very busy, even while we sleep.

After several days (or weeks or months), come back to it. And then, *then*, you may allow yourself to be judgmental for the first time! Then you can – and should – say to yourself, “This line is dumb” and you change it. Or “I think that if I switch this and this . . . oh so much better!”

**9. What do you do when you think you’re done?
SHARE IT.**

But carefully. Share it in a way that you know you can handle, a way that will help the hymn and the hymn-writer get better.

I like to share with my adult kids. They know both theology and poetry. And they know the right way to give feedback: Tell me three or four lines you like first. Then say, “I didn’t understand this line” or “This line sounds a little cliché or a little too precious.” Three positive to one negative is a good formula – for critiquing hymns, raising children, working on a marriage . . .

I also share some of my hymns with Bryan Gerlach, head of WELS Commission on worship, and he too is kind enough to mix praise with criticism – without being condescending – so it’s always really helpful.

Sometimes if I’m sort of stuck, I’ll say to my husband, “I’m going to read this hymn stanza to you, and I want you to tell me it’s amazing.” And he’ll say, “Okay, dear.” And then: “That’s amazing. I like how you did that thing with those words in that one line . . .” And it’s just what I need.

Who should you NOT share with? *Still* do not share with that guy at church who’s not content unless he’s pointing out errors. Don’t share with someone who knows nothing about poetry or doesn’t appreciate poetry. Don’t share with someone who thinks that if a hymn doesn’t have the phrase, “By grace through faith,” it’s not a Lutheran hymn. And don’t share with anyone who doesn’t value this vocation. We’ll talk about that in a bit.

10. Last step! REVISE AND BE DONE. SDG.

Finally, take what people say and decide what you want to change. This isn’t about you; it’s about the hymn, so keep your emotional distance. If a bunch of people are confused about the same line, change it. Be willing to “murder your darlings,” as writing teachers have said for a century. You’ll survive.

Then put SDG on the bottom and call it done. Print it up for your niece's baptism or your parents' 50th anniversary. Or just put it in a drawer. Tie all of them up with ribbons, like Emily Dickinson, and hope someone finds them when you're gone!

Being a Writer (Heart and Art)

Finally, let's talk briefly about being a writer. Here are a few things I do. I'd love to hear what you do.

- **Keep a notebook with you.** If you read or hear something that is a beautiful line, note it in your notebook. Later you'll find that you can go there, and those lines will beckon the muse. They'll get your mind in the right place to write. And sometimes they inspire new lines.
- **Fill yourself with the Word.** Read the Bible. Read lots of different translations of the Bible. Read it aloud. Listen to it on tape as you go to sleep. Memorize long passages you like. Sing a psalm aloud with a tune you make up on the spot. (Maybe you'll suddenly be inspired by a line, and you'll realize it could be a refrain, and you sit down and metricize the psalm!)
- **Fill up with beautiful books – some of them about spiritual matters.** Please understand that you're not reading for correct doctrine here. You're reading for beautiful language and perhaps a new insight or two.
- **Fill up with poetry.** Read it aloud, whether you understand it or not. Read the Romantics, like Keats and Wordsworth and Browning. Read the Metaphysicals, like George Herbert and John Donne. Read the transcendentalists, like Emerson and Thoreau. Read Mary Oliver. Lucille Clifton. Read Bob Dylan and the Beatles: "Eleanor Rigby waits at the window, wearing the face that she keeps in a jar by the door. Who is it for?" The Metaphysicals were Christians, but the others not so much, so again, I'm not advocating that you will grow spiritually by reading them, but your aesthetic sensibility will increase. You will elevate your taste and expand your vocabulary and learn to read with both sides of your brain.
- **Read new hymns:** Vajda. Stuempfle. Dufner. But realize that you're your own writer. You can try to imitate them for a while – like painters who sit in museums and try to copy the masters. But then you want to move past your imitations of others and write in your own way, with your own voice. Because you're the only one who can do *you*.

This reminds me of an old Jewish story. Rabbi Zusya says, "When I get to heaven [apparently, he's a Jew for Jesus] God will not ask me, 'Zusya, why were you not more like Moses or Joshua?' No, he will ask me this: 'Why were you not more like Zusya?'"

The point is you shouldn't imitate others. You need to be the person – and the writer – God made you to be.

- **Join professional organizations** like The Hymn Society of North America and LutheranArts.
- **Go somewhere else to write.** Creativity sometimes roils up in the margins – outside the mainstream, in new places, new environments – maybe because there the old rules don't apply and the old routines don't work. When you travel somewhere, for instance, you'll find that you feel more creative.

Creativity doesn't usually occur in the kitchen at 6 pm, because that's the place where your brain is fixed on cooking and dirty dishes, and any creativity you have is with cumin and coriander. But it can occur an hour or two later, when the kids are in bed, and you find a comfortable spot, and you pour yourself a little cocktail, and you listen to a little music or read a little poetry aloud and then read the Scriptures and then say a prayer of "Jesu Juva! Jesus, help me to write something for you today."

Maybe – *voilà!* – words start pouring out of your fingertips. Take it and run. Don't assume those thoughts will come back or this same feeling can be conjured up any old time. Unless you live a total life of leisure – with a cook and a maid and a garden boy – you won't necessarily be able to find those atmospheric conditions again anytime soon. And that's the point. You need to . . .

- **Make time for this.** Take it seriously. I'd encourage you to see hymn-writing as stewardship of your gifts. Devote time to it. Give it a place of prominence in your schedule, a protected space. You can say no to other things – the Altar Guild and the Post-Prom party committee – because you want more time and bandwidth to write. Even if what you write never gets published, this is not selfishness. It's service. It's worship.
- **Watch for reasons** to write a hymn: Family reunion or 50th wedding anniversary coming up? Write a marriage or family hymn. School graduation, teacher or pastor retiring? Write a ministry hymn. Baby going to be born and baptized soon? Write a baptism hymn. Also, Google "hymn contest." The Hymn Society has lots of contests, and you don't have to be a member to submit.
- **Honor the nudges.** If you're in church and your pastor says something winsome, grab the courtesy pencil in the pew and jot it down on the bulletin. Then when you get home, just stay in the car and keep writing. Let the family go start the bacon. They can manage just fine without you for 15 minutes. You've got to capture these thoughts you had.

Or maybe you read Isaiah 55 on your morning phone devotion ("Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost"), and your mind starts spinning out words that rhyme with wine. Open up the NOTES app on your phone and start writing!

Or maybe you see the way the morning light prisms itself on the kitchen floor, and your heart gets big with gratitude to the Father. Grab a pen and the back of the Yahtzee score pad and start writing.

You know, I'm not one to say: "God told me to do this today." But God does certainly guide our daily steps, so if you suddenly feel a strong urge to write a new morning hymn, drop everything and do it.

- **Garner support.** Help a few other people in your life to take your hymn-writing seriously too. I don't usually say to my co-workers at lunch: "I'm so excited about this hymn I'm working on. This truly amazing verb came to me last night." Even though – truth be told – that actually is the biggest thing in my mind at the moment, and I can't wait to get back to it. But I do have a few people to talk to about it, and hopefully you can find some too – including your spouse! – people who share your love for writing, or who at least understand how all-consuming it can be and encourage you to do it.

In closing, thank you for letting me speak about this. I think about hymn-writing all the time. One of my favorite verses is Psalm 45:1: "My heart is stirred by a noble theme as I recite my verses for the king." Isn't that great? And God did say, "Sing to the Lord a new song!" did he not?

So do it. Do not become discouraged. Plenty of my texts have never been sung by another human being. Hours and hours went into something that, it turns out, is of no earthly use. But I loved doing it. And I offered it to Jesus. That's what you can do too. Fold it up and tuck it in the manger. Lay it down in the bloody mud at the foot of the cross. "This is for you, Jesus. Maybe it's not much, but it's what I had."

And for all you know, that hymn that never got any play in any church on earth . . . may be the first thing you hear when you open your eyes in heaven. Maybe God has already given it to Bach: "Do something with this,

will you, please, Johann?” And maybe an angel choir is rehearsing it in some kind of celestial music our ears aren’t even ready to hear yet.

What I’m saying is that this worship, this writing, is never wasted. If you feel the urge in your heart to write it, then turn off the TV, silence your phone, open your Bible, and do as Luther said: “Pick up your pen and write.”

We Cannot Help But Sing, O Lord

JJ

1. We cannot help but sing, O Lord,
Your deeds declare, your bounty bless.
In psalm and hymn and sacred song,
We praise you with our every breath.
From all the earth our songs arise;
In faith and praise your church is one.
All saints and angels harmonize
In this, your choir, so sweet and strong.

3. You gave this gift of music, Lord,
This urge to sing what’s in the heart.
You call us to create new songs,
To honor you with highest art.
Now help us make our melodies
When words alone cannot suffice.
In music, truth and beauty meet
When you, Lord God, are praised aright.

2. Our music brims with hope and joy
As we proclaim your victories,
Like Mary’s bold Magnificat
And Miriam’s dance at parted sea.
We also sing to beg for grace
When guilt and shame weigh down the soul,
Like David in his suffering psalms,
We sing: Forgive us, make us whole.

4. In ages when your Word is hid,
Your truth suppressed or taught askew,
May hymns of old make straight the path
And tell your timeless truth anew.
And when our health and memories slip,
And names and faces flee our mind,
Still may these hymns be in our grip,
Our lips still sing each hallowed rhyme.

5. We cannot help but sing, O Lord,
Your deeds declare, your bounty bless.
In psalm and hymn and sacred song
We praise you with our every breath.
And on that day when you appear
And give us each more glorious form,
Transform our music too that we
May sing for you a perfect song.

Laurie F. Gauger 2014

SDG

My heart is stirred by a noble theme as I recite my verses for the king. Psalm 45:1