

Commentary for Vajda Hymn Sing

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Introduction

Jaroslav J. Vajda is one of God's good gifts to the church and is arguably, as one person has suggested, "the greatest Lutheran poet since Paul Gerhardt who lived 350 years ago." The son of a Lutheran pastor, he grew up in what is now East Chicago, Indiana, playing the violin at the age of 12, and by the age of 16 was translating Slovakian short stories into English. After his seminary years, he served bilingual congregations in Indiana and Pennsylvania, he was an editor and book developer at Concordia Publishing House. He began writing poetry at the age of 18 and made his first translation from the Slovak a few years later.

His contributions to Christian hymnody have been significant. He has authored more than 200 hymn texts and translations. Seven of his original hymn texts are found in *Christian Worship* together with one hymn translation from the Slovak. His work appear in every major Lutheran hymnal and in virtually every major hymnal of various Christian denominations. It has been my privilege as a composer to have set over 30 of Jaroslav Vajda's texts to music for congregational singing.

I would mention three aspects of Vajda's writing to note: first his ability to fashion a striking new image or to reshape an older image, recasting it in a way to bring fresh insight and understanding. Second is his affinity for less usual textual forms and meters. Third is the strong theological thrust of his hymn texts.

Amid the current flood of new hymnody—so much of it bland and insipid, on the one hand, or obtuse or overly clever, on the other, the work of Jaroslav Vajda stands as a unique testimony to clarity of expression, careful craftsmanship, and theological integrity. His writing is both accessible and popular in the best since of those terms.

Ultimately the texts of Jaroslav Vajda are a sign to God's people, a sign of hopefulness, expectation, and promise, They are a sign that the Holy Spirit has not forsaken his church, that we are still given new songs to sing, until that time when all our singing will be joined to that last and greatest song of the Lamb in eternity.

Now the silence

It was in the year 1969—the year of his fiftieth birthday—that Jaroslav Vajda first came to prominence as an author of hymn texts. It was that year that saw the publication of *Worship Supplement* containing two of Vajda's texts. One of them, "Now the silence", an Entrance Hymn for Holy Communion quickly won the attention of a wide public. Pronounced a tour de force by Erik Routley, prominent English hymnologist, it soon found a place in a large number of hymnals. Its broad acceptance placed the name and writing of Jaroslav Vajda at center stage, a writer of hymn texts to be reckoned with.

The text of "Now the silence" rehearses what is to come in the communion service of which this is the entrance hymn: confession and absolution, Word, Holy Communion, benediction. Comprising just 72 words with no active verbs or rhymes, it is a unique text. The musical form of the melody of "Now the silence" follows an arc which rises to the middle of the melody and returns again at the close to the same place where it started. The melodic high point coincides with the two textual high points which describe the Word and the Sacrament. The only musical request of the author to me as the composer of the music was that the melody end on the note G. This was so that the pastor would be given the starting note for the chanting of the liturgy as it was in *The Lutheran Hymnal* of that time. You hear the note G repeated three times at the close of the melody.

Christ goes before

The second hymn we sing—"Christ goes before"—is also an entrance hymn. While the author suggest the themes of Discipleship and Christ for this text, the text clearly suggests the procession at the beginning of worship with the crucifer carrying the cross and followed by choir, other assisting ministers, and of course, in spirit at least, each one of us. "Christ goes before, and we are called to follow"

Jaroslav Vajda likes to write in "threes." This hymn, written for the 50th anniversary observance of Ascension Lutheran Church, Riverside, IL, is a good example. The text evolved from the author's thinking that there might be "a parallel between the Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory of the Lord's Prayer, and Christ's description of himself as the Way, the Truth, and the Life. As I explored this possible connection," the author writes, "I thought of the third parallel trio: love, peace, and joy—all promised by Him who is the

Way, the Truth, and the Life." The melody of the repeated refrain sung by the congregation suggests in its final four notes the sign of the cross itself. If you pay careful attention to the melody setting the words "Who wants to live where there's no love like this" and the similar phrase in each of the three stanzas, you will catch the similarity between this phrase and the beginning of the Refrain.

See this wonder in the making

"Hymnody," Jaroslav Vajda remarks, "can help restore baptism to its central place in the life and worship of God's people." This popular baptismal hymn written in 1984 is a perfect example of that statement. This hymn text was prompted by a long-standing need for more contemporary baptismal hymns, and as a substitute for "Children of the heavenly Father" which was only indirectly related to baptism. For this Vajda text the charming 19th-century Swedish folk tune was retained.

Light the candle

The next two hymns relate to the Advent / Christmas cycle of the church year. Since many churches observe an Advent candle-lighting ceremony, the first of these two hymns, "Light the candle," has five stanzas, one each for the four weeks of Advent (representing love, peace, joy, hope), the fifth stanza speaking of the candle of Christ. The stanzas may be sung separately each Sunday, or cumulatively, ending with the Christ candle of Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. The tune was written for this text in 1989. Note how the words "love," "peace," "joy," "hope," "Christ," and "glow" are always found on a higher note of the melody, giving them a proper emphasis.

Where shepherds lately knelt

One might realistically ask "What is there left to say about Christmas and the scene at the manger?" A request to Jaroslav Vajda and myself from Augsburg Publishing House for a Christmas song for their 1987 *Christmas Annual*, a request which repeated the 1981 request the result of which was the well-received and popular "Before the marvel of this night," Vajda "wondered what fresh approach and contemporary application could be made of that central event in history. . . Rather than report the event again

in the third person, as so many Christmas songs do, I placed myself in spirit at that poor manger bed and reviewed the implications of that visit in my life and future and in that of my fellow human beings." Hence, the text suggests that not only were the usual characters—shepherds, angels, animals, Mary, Joseph—at the manger, but also Isaiah, who presumably came to see if his prophecies were fulfilled.

The original metrical structure of the text was 6.6.6.6.4.4.2 was modified by me to 12.12.10, a change which Vajda agreed made the lines more fluent and which give additional attention to the refrain. The music, Vajda graciously remarked, "captured the mood and style of the text" just as he had hoped. This hymn or carol ends with the beautiful words: "Can I, will I forget how Love was born and burned its way into my heart—unasked, unforced, unearned, to die, to live, and not alone for me?" The repetition of that final phrase brings this carol to a beautiful conclusion.

Shine like stars

"Shine like stars" was written for the Great Commission Convocation held in Minneapolis, MN in October of 1993. The text speaks of the stars as signs of a God with "might and care to spare." The text goes on to speak of how each of us is like a star which shines forth the care of our Father: the care of those who God gave us in our youth, the care of those who taught us and showed us the way, the care of our parents, teachers, pastors, those loved one who are always at our side, all are like stars, leading and guiding us to our proper destination. Now, as the text concludes, we are reminded that it is also our turn to shine that others may see the true Light. In the final words of the hymn, we should "Shine, shine like stars!"

Musically each stanza end on the dominant chord of the key of G, giving a sense that the hymn is not quite over—not, at least, until the very final chord which comes to rest on the final tonic of the key.

God of the sparrow

When was the last time you sang a hymn about sparrows and whales? Probably never, unless you have sung Jaroslav Vajda's hymn "God of the sparrow." Ultimately, of course, it is not simply about sparrows and whales, but about God's care for the greatest and least of his creatures, and especially for his care of us. The text addresses the question of how and why God's creatures, his children, are to serve Him? Each stanza has two parts:

the first half speaks, as in stanza one, of the goodness of God in creation; the second half asks for the creature's response—in the case of stanza one—Awe and praise. The stanzas progress with the creatures' response of Awe/Praise, Woe/ Save, Grace/Thanks, Care/Life, Love/Peace, and finally Joy/Home.

The hymn was written for Concordia Lutheran Church, Kirkwood, MO, and introduced during its 110th anniversary in 1983.

Again, like the preceding hymn, every stanza ends musically on a dominant chord with its attendant feeling of “the hymn is not quite over yet,” coming to a final rest only at the end of the last stanza with the word “Home.” This tune and text, possibly the most widely used and popular hymn of the Vajda/Schalk collaborations, is widely used in hymnals throughout the country. This tune was first sung, together with this text, at the 1987 convention of the Hymn Society of the United States and Canada held in Ft. Worth , TX. It should be sung quietly and devotionally.

What would the world be like?

The next hymn “What would the world be like?”, found on the separate sheet, was commissioned for a regional convention of the Association of Lutheran Church Musicians in 1992 in Des Moines, IA. Each stanza addresses the question: what would the world be like, what blessings would we know, what joy would fill the Father's heart, what would our lives be like if—we would truly know the one true God, if all received and loved your Son, if everyone sought truth and peace, if we loved God as God loves us, if every day began with thanks—what would the world be like?

The musical form is somewhat unusual—6 888 6—in keeping with Vajda's frequent use of less usual textual forms. The music is simple, flows along without any hindrance, but comes to an elongated note just before the final posing of the question once again—What would the world be like?

Catch the vision

This second last hymn, a hymn of mission, challenges us to “Catch the vision! Share the glory!”—Show the captives, tell them: Christ is here. This is a hymn of “show and tell.” It is a hymn of mission, of evangelism, church, and witness. The tune and text were commissioned in 1986 by the Division for Life and Mission in the Congregation of the American Lutheran Church for a year-long evangelism effort.

Musically, the melody employs both rhythmic and melodic sequence (note especially the repetition of the dotted quarter and eighth note rhythmic pattern) which makes the singing and learning of the tune quite easy. The melody of each stanza relentlessly drives toward the final refrain.

Go, my children, with my blessing

In the words of Jaroslav Vajda, this hymn, "Go my children, with my blessing," "quite unconsciously became the counterpart of "Now the silence,"—the hymn with which we began this session—which previews what is about to take place in the worship service. This hymn pronounces the benediction. "To set it apart from other versions of the benediction," Vajda remarked, "I placed the words of the hymn into the mouth of the blessing triune God dismissing the congregation after worship while drawing together a review of the events that transpired during the worship service."

So we end where we began. We began with the preview of the worship to come; we end with the look backward at what worship has been, and with the blessing of the benediction ringing in our ears. The tune is the popular Welsh melody which is familiar to all.

The contribution of Jaroslav Vajda to the hymnody of today's church has and continues to be immense. If we fail to avail ourselves of these treasures we have only ourselves to blame. Jaroslav Vajda has been a blessing to the church in our time. I am quite confident that his contribution will continue to enrich the church in the years ahead.

Let us rise to sing "Go, my children, with my blessing."
