

### **THE Story, Our Song**

In Fredrik Backman's book, *My Grandmother Asked Me to Tell You She's Sorry*, we meet Elsa's granny. Elsa's granny is unlike most other grannies. Elsa's granny smokes and swears and terrorizes the neighbors. She routinely escapes from the hospital and knows the inside of the local police station as well as the back of her hand. And Elsa's granny tells stories. Fantastical, beautiful stories. Through her stories, Elsa's granny shapes how Elsa comes to understand the world and the people around her. Elsa's granny understands the power of stories. She understands that the stories we tell reveal what we treasure, what we believe, what we hold to be true in our heart of hearts.

While we Presbyterians are a deeply faithful bunch, we are not always all that comfortable with saying what we believe about God, Jesus, faith, death, or salvation out loud on our own outside these walls, but we sing about these things with gusto in here every Sunday. Earlier this summer, we asked you to name some of your favorite hymns. We placed the top vote getters in a bracket, and yes, much like March Madness, favorites were pitted against favorites. Last week we began a four-week worship series inspired by the final four. Through those hymns we catch a glimpse of what we treasure, what we believe, what we hold to be true in our heart of hearts. In other words, these hymns are a significant piece of the story we tell. The words and melodies point to what we treasure, what we believe, what we hold to be true in THE story of God's love for humanity and for all of creation.

One of your favorite ways to sing the story is *How Great Thou Art*. The original text was written by a Swedish author named Carl G. Boberg. Boberg “wrote its [original] *nine* stanzas one summer evening in 1885 after he had admired the beauty of nature and the sound of church bells.”<sup>1</sup> Boberg’s family remembers that Carl wrote the original poem as a paraphrase of Psalm 8 and used it “in the 'underground church' in Sweden in the late 1800s when the Baptists and Mission Friends were persecuted.”<sup>2</sup> The text was translated into German and then Russian and later into English by Stuart Wesley Keene Hine, the writer most often associated with the hymn. Hine and his wife Edith built upon the original text while serving as missionaries in Eastern Europe and ministering with displaced persons back home in England. The words speak of wonder and awe in the face of creation, much like the words of the psalmist in Psalm 8. These words do not simply describe the landscape; they shape how we view that landscape. They teach us to look at the world around us in a different light. They remind us of the vastness of God’s creation and our small but treasured place in that creation.

Elsa’s granny creates an entire world of her own, one she names the Land-of-Almost-Awake. In her world there are different kingdoms, including the kingdom of Miamas. The kingdoms have extensive landscapes and detailed characters. The primary task in Granny’s fairytale world, however, is the creation and sharing of stories. The stories speak of good and evil and love and sadness and courage, but the most important job in the kingdom is to make sure the stories get shared beyond the bounds of the kingdoms. The stories must find their way from Telling Mountain into the real world. And then the stories must be heard, “For no stories

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<sup>1</sup> [https://hymnary.org/text/o\\_lord\\_my\\_god\\_when\\_i\\_in\\_awesome\\_wonder](https://hymnary.org/text/o_lord_my_god_when_i_in_awesome_wonder), emphasis added

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/How\\_Great\\_Thou\\_Art](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/How_Great_Thou_Art)

can live without children listening to them.”<sup>3</sup> In order for granny’s fairytales to survive, they must be shared, much like the story of faith, a living, breathing story that must be shared, too.

The psalmist cannot NOT share. The psalmist cannot NOT tell. He cannot help himself. He looks at the star-filled sky and wonders aloud how it can be that tiny human beings have a place in God’s vast and amazing world. And yet, perhaps the most amazing part of the story is that this awesome, powerful Creator chooses to be in relationship with us. The psalmist does not speak of *that* God or *a* Lord, but *our* God, *our* Lord. What are human beings that our God is mindful of them, of us? It really is quite staggering.

Elsa knows how this feels, for there are moments when she is stopped in her tracks by the real-life tales she discovers about her granny and her granny’s courage and compassion. God’s power and God’s care for humanity stop the psalmist in his tracks, too, changing how he looks at the world around him and at his life in that world. Apparently, Hine was stopped in his tracks by the faith of those he served among, too. He was inspired to write the first two verses of this beloved hymn as he looked out at the Carpathian Mountains, but it was the faithfulness of the people he met in Russia and the refugees in England who inspired the third and fourth verses. He listened to these peoples’ stories, to their witnessing to God’s faithfulness in the midst of struggles and grief, and he put those stories into words pointing to the wondrous nature of our God, the great Creator of the universe who is mindful of you and me.

These stories, these words are not shared out a naïve or simplistic view of the world. Elsa’s granny has lived through horrors and heartbreak, and yet remains convinced that the horrors and heartbreak are not the whole story. Stuart Hine lived among people facing

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<sup>3</sup> Fredrik Backman, *My Grandmother Asked Me to Tell You She’s Sorry* (New York: Washington Square, 2013), 231.

persecution for their faith and devastation as displaced persons, refugees who could not go home. And as the voice of a community whose story is marked by long seasons of slavery and exile, the psalmist proclaims that neither slavery nor exile is Israel's true story. In each case, the word-crafter, the storyteller shares a conviction that the tales of pain, anger, heartbreak, and cynicism do not have the last word; they are not THE story. Instead, the storytellers resist the ugliness in their midst and offer a counter-testimony, a powerful witness to dignity, hope, compassion, and awe by giving voice to the experience of something greater, by pointing to beauty and wonder that will not be overshadowed.

The tension remains today, of course. We, too, live amidst competing narratives, different voices that want to tell us what or who we should treasure, what we should believe, what we should hold to be true in our heart of hearts. These voices shout about despair, doom, anger, division, hatred, greed, and cynicism. These voices want to change how the story is told. But I wonder if those voices have heard THE story. I wonder when they were last stopped in their tracks by *that* story. What about us? What about you? When was the last time you were stopped in your tracks? What or who has caused your heart to skip a beat? In the past week alone, I have seen shining storm clouds and mama birds delicately and urgently feeding their fledglings and brittle and beautiful cicada shells—all moments that made me catch my breath and wonder. And lest we forget, the God who made the stars of night, the God who created mama birds and storm clouds and cicadas and rainbows and waterfalls and elephants and galaxies also created us, AND this same Creator, this Divine Storyteller is not content to stand at a distance. No, this same Creator seeks out humanity time and time again to be in relationship

with us, determined to weave the threads of our comparatively tiny stories into the grand story of justice, hope, beauty, love and redemption that God is telling even now.

We have been fortunate to celebrate several infant baptisms over the past three years, but even if we celebrated one every service from now until the next millennium, they would never grow old. They would still cause me to catch my breath. Most baptism Sundays, I quote the writer of 1 John: “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.”<sup>4</sup> If that doesn’t stop us in our tracks, I’m not sure what will. As the Common English Bible reads:

What are human beings  
that you think about them;  
what are human beings  
that you pay attention to them?  
You’ve made them only slightly less than divine,  
crowning them with glory and grandeur.<sup>5</sup>

It is staggering. The God who gives us mountains and oceans and strawberry moons and starfish and galaxies and rainbows and porcupines and peaches and volcanoes is the same God who comes to us in Jesus Christ and gives his life to save ours. This Savior, *our* Savior hangs out with outcasts, naysayers, and criminals. This Savior, *our* Savior calls women and children out of the shadows and confronts the powers of hatred, cynicism, oppression, and injustice without ever drawing a sword. And on the very night when he stares down those who will have him killed,

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<sup>4</sup> 1 John 3:1. Thanks to the late Rev. Jim Holderness for pointing me back to these words.

<sup>5</sup> Psalm 8:4-5, CEB

this same Savior gathers his friends around a table, gives them bread and wine, signs of God's unfailing promise of new life in the face of death, hope in the face of despair. This same Savior God invites us and trusts us to do the same in his name. *This* is our story; *this* is our song. It is really quite astonishing. This story, THE story is better than Elsa's granny's best, most outlandish fairytales, and this story, THE story is truer than any other tale we have been told or ever will be. See what love God has for us—has, present tense, now and always. We hear THE story when we gather around God's Word in scripture. We hear and see THE story every time we pour water into the font and remember our baptism; we hear and see and taste THE story every time we gather for this meal. And when we are able to hear THE story over every other, we are reminded that God's story and our story are bound up in one another because that's the way God has chosen to write and tell THE story. God has chosen to include us—ALL of us and ALL of them—as essential beloved characters in God's story. And by the grace of God and the work of God's Spirit, this story, THE story promises to take our breath away, break us out of our cynicism, and stop us in our tracks, just long enough for us to get our wits about us so that we too can sing with gusto for the waiting world to hear: "Then sings my soul, my Savior God to thee; how great thou art, how great thou art!"

Amen.