

God is Here!
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Saugatuck Congregational Church

Psalm 100
September 3, 2006

*Though what's ahead is mystery,
and life itself is ours on lease,
each day the Spirit says to me, "go forth in peace!"* Fred Pratt Green, hymnist

Make a joyful noise unto the LORD, all ye lands.
Serve the LORD with gladness:
 come before his presence with singing.
Know ye that the LORD he is God:
 it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves;
 we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.
Enter into his gates with thanksgiving,
 and into his courts with praise:
 be thankful unto him, and bless his name.
For the LORD is good; his mercy is everlasting;
and his truth endureth to all generations.

Psalm 100 King James Version

The Message translation by Eugene Peterson

On your feet now—applaud GOD!
 Bring a gift of laughter,
 sing yourselves into his presence.
Know this: GOD is God, and God, GOD.
 He made us; we didn't make him.
 We're his people, his well-tended sheep.
Enter with the password: "Thank you!"
 Make yourselves at home, talking praise.
 Thank him. Worship him.
For GOD is sheer beauty,
 all-generous in love,
 loyal always and ever.

What a difference in those two versions! And isn't that the difference we are partly trying to articulate as we ask for more joy in worship? How do we translate our faith for this new day, so that for us and for our children, as for generations past, worship is lively, challenging, delightful, surprising, vital, relevant; where we can feel at home, talking praise! I can guarantee you, no one ever gets there by criticizing or complaining!

We know joy in worship when we enter with the password: "Thank you!"

Thank you, for being here.

Thank you for being you.

Thank you, God, for this new day.

Thank you God for Caesar!

Thank you for John Danner and a little well deserved rest for him.

Thank you for this meeting house.

Thank you for choirs and teachers and children.

Thank you for saints, saints past and saints present.

Thank you for those we have loved, who sat in these pews,
who shaped the church and shape us still.

Enter God's gates with thanksgiving!

Thank you for scripture, for traditions to hold us.

Thank you for sacraments that comfort and heal us.

Thank you for beauty, for eyes and for ears.

Thank you for music, for voices, for hymnals.

Bring a gift of laughter, sing yourselves into God's presence. Enter with the password: "Thank you!" and I promise you, worship will be joyful for you.

Wake with the password: "Thank you!" Walk with the password: "Thank you!" and life will be joyful for you. The quote at the top of the bulletin by Fred Pratt Green speaks a truth of my own life

I lie in my bed when I wake and pray my thanksgivings, I draw the tasks and concerns of the day into God's presence and *each day the Spirit says to me, "go forth in peace!"* I am so grateful when a hymnist captures so beautifully, so memorably, what I struggle to say or long to remember. *Each day the Spirit says to me, "Go forth in peace!"*

I have become fascinated by the hymns of Fred Pratt Green. Most are new to me since I came here. There are 15 of his hymns in our hymnal; only Brian Wren with 21 hymns has more original poetry in the *Chalice Hymnal*. And for me, one of the wonderful things about Fred Pratt Green is that he wrote his poetry mostly to old, beloved tunes that already sing in my heart.

I'm omnivorous about hymns. My approach is like the Brownie song, "Make new friends and keep the old, one is silver and the other gold." I may have met a hymn I didn't like, but I can't recall it. When I meet a hymn that's new, I try to make myself at home with it. I memorize the words. I play it and sing it over and over. I remember the times I sang a hymn for the first time, the surprise of it.

It's been one of the gifts of coming here to a new hymnal; there are so many hymns that are new to me, and beautiful. And many of them are hymns by Fred Pratt Green: new words to old tunes, words that speak to our times and our struggles with a faith that is strong and inclusive and joyful and deep.

I started looking his hymns up systematically this spring when I was thinking about Stewardship hymns and came on the hymn we sang first today. I began to think how much it captures of who we are and long to be. I thought of having a hymn contest with people writing additional verses!

*God is here! As we God's people meet to offer praise and prayer,
may we find in fuller measure what it is in Christ we share:*

What a great prayer: may we find in fuller measure what it is in Christ we share.

*Here, as in the world around us, all our varied skills and arts
wait the coming of His Spirit into open minds and hearts*

*Here are symbols to remind us of our lifelong need of grace;
Here are table, font and pulpit, here the cross has central place.
Here in honesty of preaching, here in silence, as in speech,
Here in newness and renewal God the Spirit comes to each.*

May it be so.

*Here our children find a welcome in the Shepherd's flock and fold;
Here as bread and cup are taken, Christ sustains us as of old.
Here the servants of the Servant
(what a great way to describe the church)
seek in worship to explore
what it means in daily living to believe and to adore.*

And then this powerful prayer:

*Lord of all, of Church and Kingdom, in an age of change and doubt,
Keep us faithful to the gospel, help us work your purpose out.*

Words: Fred Pratt Green Words © 1979 by Hope Publishing Co.

Green was a prolific hymn writer, writing over 300 hymns. He was a Methodist and some think the most important Methodist Hymnist since Charles Wesley. He was born in England 1903 and lived to the year 2000.

His father was a leather worker and a Methodist lay preacher but resigned from that task because he just couldn't believe the emphasis then on the damnation of unbelievers. It didn't fit his view of God. His son, Frederick, the hymnist we know as Fred, followed in his father's liberal, loving theology. After working with his father in the leather business, Fred felt a call to ministry, but while his best friend went into the Anglican priesthood, Fred trained in the Methodist church partly because of its open welcome to the communion table. He came to feel strongly that Fundamentalism was a serious misrepresentation of the Bible. He felt that Christian unity, though elusive, was an important goal. And he embodied the social gospel of his age, preaching, and in his hymns teaching that the church must involve itself in social concerns.¹

*The church of Christ in every age, beset by change but Spirit-led,
must claim and test its heritage and keep on rising from the dead.
Then let the servant church arise, a caring church that longs to be
a partner in Christ's sacrifice, and clothed in Christ's humanity.
We have no mission but to serve in full obedience to our Lord:
to care for all, without reserve, and spread his liberating word.*

Chalice Hymnal #475, Words: Fred Pratt Green Words © 1971, Hope Publishing Co

*When the Church of Jesus shuts its outer door,
Lest the roar of traffic drown the voice of prayer:
May our prayers, Lord, make us ten times more aware
That the world we banish is our Christian care.*

Chalice Hymnal #470, Words: Fred Pratt Green Words © 1968, Hope Publishing Co

Green loved the church and he loved God. He had a deep optimistic faith, but he was no Pollyanna. His hymns speak to our doubts and trial.

*When our confidence is shaken in beliefs we thought secure,
When the spirit in its sickness seeks but cannot find a cure,
God is active in the tensions of a faith not yet mature.
In the discipline of praying, when it's hardest to believe;
In the drudgery of caring, when it's not enough to grieve;
Faith, maturing, learns acceptance of the insights we receive.*

Chalice Hymnal #534, Words: Fred Pratt Green Words © 1971, Hope Publishing Co

And Green helps us to sing words of comfort, words of hope. Green wrote most of his hymns after he retired. He took tunes he loved and wrote new words, and you can too. It can be great therapy.

¹ <http://www.stainer.co.uk/green.html> London, 1991.

It's a kind of journaling: putting your struggles or joys into rhyme can bring clarity and insight and healing. It can be a gift to others. Many deep truths are better sung than said. Green is one of the saints who have given us words to live by, words to die by, words to sing when our own words fail.

*How blest are they who trust in Christ
when we and those we love must part;
we yield them up, for go they must,
but do not lose them from our heart.*

*In ripened age, their harvest reaped,
or gone from us in youth or prime,
in Christ they have eternal life,
released from all the bonds of time.*

Chalice Hymnal #646, Words: Fred Pratt Green Words © 1972, Hope Publishing Co

Singing it can help us believe. It's a gift from God. One of my mottos is: "Earth hath no sorrows enough hymns cannot cure." I am so glad to have discovered the hymns of Fred Pratt Green, and I commend them to you.

I want to close with one of his prayer hymns.

*Loving Lord, as now we gather, of that love unworthy still,
give us courage to surrender rebel heart and stubborn will,
and in us, in faith maturing, all your promises fulfill.*

Chalice Hymnal #427, Words: Fred Pratt Green Words © 1977, Hope Publishing Co

Amen.

Thanks to Rev. Roy Grubbs from Westport United Methodist Church for his background paper on the hymns of Fred Pratt Green.