

# What was I thinking?

February 13, 2022



## **Psalms Continued (always)**

Last week I wrote of two things, which I'll stop short of calling promises. Maybe they are better called hopes. I hoped to get back to writing weekly. "This week should be an easy time to do that," I thought. On Monday I got one phone call and one e-mail, both of which changed my plans for the next few months. The e-mail said that an organ recital I was to play in May, one I've been practicing hard for, has been canceled, or at least postponed. The phone call came as a surprise in many ways. I was asked to play another recital, this one at Reid Memorial Presbyterian Church in Augusta. I'll explain the significance of that later. I immediately said "yes" (a risky thing to do), but that was in answer to "would you be interested in playing a recital here." Then I asked when. "How about April?" As in April, 2023? No, they meant April 2022, as in two months from now. That called for a significant change in the music I've been practicing, so I got to work.

The other intention I expressed last week was to continue to write about psalms. Last week I mentioned Paul Westermeyer's view of the psalms: "In the Psalms we deal with the height and depth of human life, articulated in a most compelling way. We see our struggles against the backdrop of God's goodness and mercy – our struggles with God and God's struggles with us in steadfast love and faithfulness."

In our service last week, we, as a congregation, sang a version Psalm 42. Psalms can be read, but they were really mean to be sung. They were first sung in prose form, chanted to flexible melodic formulas. In other words, the music was made to fit the text. Psalm singings has been an important part of the Protestant Reformed tradition from the beginning. One thing that came about with the Reformation was scripture being translated into the vernacular, the language of the people. That included the psalms. In addition to being translated, they were also put into poetic meter so they could be sung to tunes much like our hymn tunes. In fact, many of our hymn tunes are psalm tunes.

If I've lost you, let me give you an example. Most of us know something we sing every week, commonly known as "the doxology." You can probably do this from memory, but below are the words if you need them. Take the doxology, line-by-line, and count the number of syllables in each line (you may use your fingers, and as a hint, it will be easier if you don't use your thumbs):

Praise God from whom all blessings flow; (8 syllables)  
praise him, all creatures here below; (8 syllables)  
praise him above, ye heavenly host; (8 syllables)  
praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. (8 syllables)

You'll probably sing "amen" in your head our out loud too, and that's OK, but we're not counting that part.

So, we have four lines, each with eight syllables. As we've noticed before, in our hymnals, below the title, we usually see some numbers with periods between them. Those numbers tell us the number of syllables in each line of the hymn or psalm. It's the poetic meter. This one is 8.8.8.8. But in this case, if you look in your hymnal, instead of numbers you see "LM," which stands for "Long Meter." I won't get into all of them now, but there are some meters are quite common. The most common ones became known as Short Meter (SM), Common Meter (CM), and the one we've just seen, Long Meter (LM).

You might also notice in the hymnal, just below the title, the name of the tune in all capital letters. Our doxology tune is OLD HUNDREDTH. I'm sorry if this comes as a disappointment, God didn't originally write this tune for the doxology. OLD HUNDREDTH, as the tune name implies, goes with paraphrased text of Psalm 100:





Psalm 100 from *The Scottish Psalter, 1929*

These are pictured separately, because the tune actually ends up on the upper left page and the text ends up on the lower right. I don't know how well this idea would go over today, but I can see what they were trying to accomplish. These days if I want us to sing a psalm to a tune not paired with it in our hymnal, I write them out together in a music software program. That's probably easier than saying "let's sing Psalm 100, on page 123 on the bottom, to OLD 100<sup>th</sup> which is tune number 13 on the top.

Their point then, and our point now, is to sing the psalms. Singing things helps us remember them better. Putting them into meters so they can be sung to hymn-like tunes makes them more singable. This is an old idea that has roots in our Reformed tradition, but it's not just an old idea. Colleague and friend Michael Morgan, who lives in Atlanta, has carried on that tradition with his *Psalter for Christian Worship*. It was first published in 1999, with a revised edition published in 2010. The psalm we sang last week came from Michael's book. This week, Psalm 34 is one of our Narrative Lectionary texts. Our choir will sing a paraphrase of that psalm by Michael Morgan, set to the American tune LAND OF REST.

Singing the psalms bring them to life in a new way, as does singing any text. As Westermeyer wrote, the psalms deal with the height and depth of human life. May we give voice to those human emotions.

Soli Deo Gloria (to God alone be the glory),

John