

# What was I thinking?

May 30, 2021



## Trinity Sunday

When it comes to planning music for a worship service, I start with the scripture. I know some organists who keep stacks of music, or sometimes a file cabinet or two, right beside the organ console. Hopefully it's all hidden out of sight because it can become quite a mess. It's not just organ music and a hymnal or two, there is also often a pair of worn-out organ shoes, a fan for summer, a space heater for winter, a box of tissues, lots of pencils, some post-it notes, and for some reason I have never understood, a tin of Altoids. What I'm getting at is that some organists keep everything they could possibly need within reach of the organ bench. Some years ago, I decided that the choir loft and the organ console should be kept clean and suitable for the public to see. (My office is another story, but I've vowed to clean it up one day before I retire.)

Not all, but some organists I know come in on Saturday morning and start digging through their pile thinking "what should I play tomorrow?" There are some church choir directors who do pretty much the same. I've seen looks of surprise from church secretaries or whoever prints the bulletin when I've turned in my music for Sunday more than a week ahead of time. "The last choir director didn't tell us what the anthem was until Thursday or Friday morning." It depended on when they had choir rehearsal. When I asked why they waited until the last minute to turn in music, I was told it depended on how choir rehearsal went the night before. I'm glad I was taught not to live that way. I don't mean to brag, I was just taught to plan ahead. If you fail to plan, then you plan to fail. I don't know who said that but it's good advice.

So, when it comes to planning for worship, including anthems, organ music, and most importantly hymns, I plan ahead and I start with scriptures. Some hymns come to mind immediately after reading the scriptures, but I also look through various planning resources for as many possibilities as I can find. Sometimes I come up with a long list and I have to narrow that list down to three hymns. Then I look for an anthem (or this year a solo) or two, and organ music to fill the service out. Preludes and postludes based on the hymns we will be singing will help reinforce the message of their texts and keep the tunes in our heads. The texts of anthems and solos should also reinforce the message of the scripture.

It's easy to find hymns for some Sundays. For others I'm scratching my head and struggling to find three appropriate hymns. But then there are special days in the church year and the hymns choose themselves. Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost are good examples. I don't have to know what the scripture and sermon title are. We pretty much know the subject matter. This Sunday is Trinity Sunday, so *Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty!* quickly went on the list. This weekend is also Memorial Day weekend, and while that's not a religious holiday, we do try to acknowledge it as best we can.

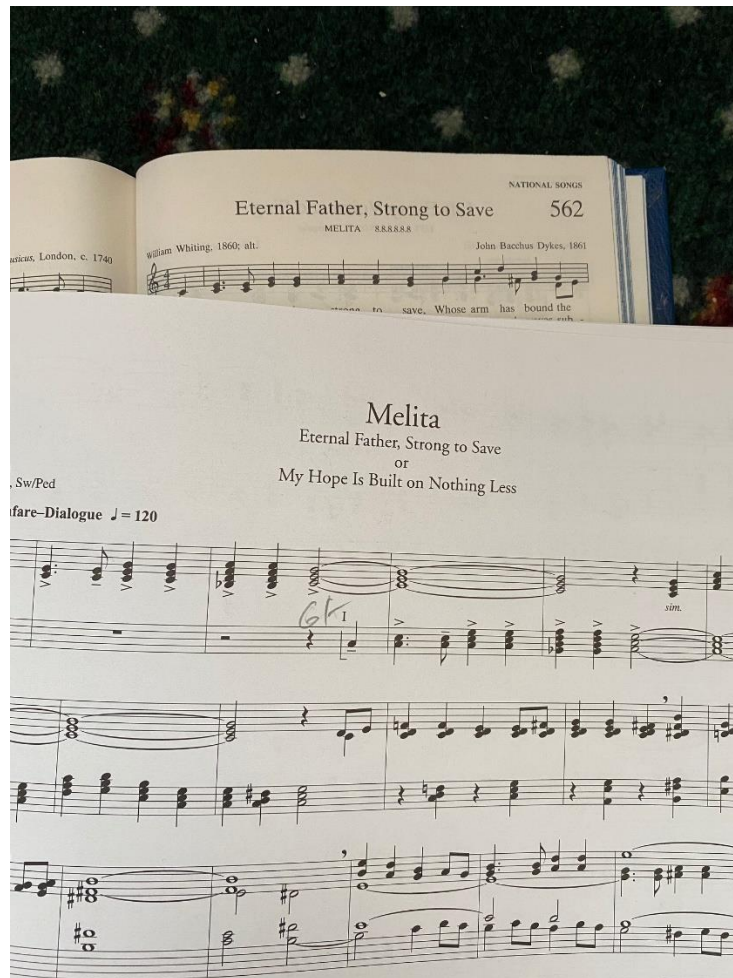
We will be singing *Eternal Father, Strong to Save*. It was originally written in 1860 by William Whiting, for a pupil of his who was sailing from England to America. Whiting once felt his life had been spared by God after sailing through a violent storm. Some inspiration for the hymn came from Psalm 107: "For he spoke and stirred up a tempest that lifted high waves."

The hymn was adopted and adapted by branches of the armed services in the United Kingdom and the United States. It is known to us as "the Navy hymn." Other stanzas have been written to acknowledge other branches of the service.

But it is also (maybe more significantly) a Trinitarian hymn. The first three stanzas each address each part of the Trinity: "Eternal Father," "O Savior," and "O Holy Spirit." The last stanza begins, "O Trinity." And while the first three stanzas end with the phrase "for those in peril on the sea," the last stanza ends with "glad praise from air and land and sea." We have a great Trinitarian hymn, and we have a tribute to those who served. On Memorial Day we specifically remember those who died while performing their military duties.

Hymns have meaning that applies to all of us. Hymns can also take on personal meaning for each of us. Specific phrases can speak to us in a personal way. Singing certain hymns can bring back memories of other times we've sung them. *Eternal Father, Strong to Save* is often sung at funerals for those who have served. It was sung at

Prince Phillip's funeral in April. I also remember singing the hymn at Bob Cobb's funeral in this church some years ago. Remember what I said about choosing organ music based on hymns being sung to reinforce their message? Sunday's postlude is an organ piece based on MELITA, the tune for *Eternal Father, Strong to Save*. I learned it and played it for the first time as the postlude for Bob's service.



When we sing this hymn on Trinity Sunday or the Sunday before Memorial Day weekend, I'm aware that we are at the beginning of summer, when many of us will be traveling. After the particularly challenging year we've had, some are traveling for the first time in over a year. We pray for safe travel for all (in air, on land, and on the sea). As our pandemic seems to be winding down, we hope, we venture out. The seas seem to be calming down, and the sun seems to be coming out. We are hopeful. But, at least some of us are feeling tentative as we journey on. We can't always see what's out there beyond the horizon even with all the latest weather forecasting technology. Even if we are staying home, we wonder what the future holds as we travel on the journey called life, and we pray for safety as we continue through uncharted waters.

O Trinity of love and power,  
all travelers guard in danger's hour;  
from rock and tempest, fire and foe,  
protect them wheresoe'er they go;  
thus evermore shall rise to thee  
glad praise from air and land and sea.

Whatever your summer plans may be, wherever your travels may take you, in the air,  
on land, or at sea (or even to the grocery store!), travel safe, and may God protect you.

God be with you till we meet again.

John