

The Song Goes On:
Learning How to Sing the New Song in a New Land
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This will be a singing session with commentary in exploring themes of pilgrimage and friendship in our Scandinavian hymnody that can be more than cherished icons of our immigrant past, but themes that can be relevant in learning how to host the recent strangers in this new land. My hope is that we can move beyond nostalgia, beyond sentimentality to a living memory which includes narrative and identity that can empower our future.

INTRODUCTION

To help you know who I am, other than biographical notes may provide, I would like to tell a story that I have never told publicly to a Covenant gathering but which I am free to tell to you. In serving my first congregation in a small hamlet in Connecticut, I was permitted in the mid 50s to pursue post-graduate work at Yale Divinity School in New Haven, as my predecessor had done. Among the distinguished professors I came to know at Yale was Dr. Sydney Ahlstrom, professor of American church history. Though not one of his students, we became friends who carried on a running conversation about Augustana and the Mission Covenant. In that era of ecumenical mergers, he thought, as an Augustana Lutheran and American church historian, that these two bodies would be an ideal merger given our Swedish background and the pietism in our Lutheranism. When I was a student at North Park College, I recall a chapel talk by Dr Conrad Bergendoff in which he said, “The Covenant is the vine that grew over the Lutheran wall.” (I am glad he did not say like Paul—“a wild shoot grafted into the vine.”)

Our conversations prompted me to look at my own history, including Augustana relatives, Lutheran grandparents who immigrated from Sweden, my sister graduated from Augustana College and married an Augustana pastor, but especially my love of liturgy and hymnody. These several factors led me to write to Dr. Oscar Benson, who was then President of the Augustana Synod (that was before you had bishops). I told him that I was interested in transferring ordination or, as the case may be, being reordained in Augustana, and that I was willing to go to Rock Island for orientation or any other course of entry that might be prescribed. I further reassured Oscar Benson that it was not out of any unhappiness or frustration with the local church that made me pursue this interest since I was serving a fine Covenant congregation.

I waited anxiously for a response. I later learned that Dr Benson was without the normal amenities of a denominational office, that he even did his own correspondence by hand. Finally, the letter came from Minneapolis, a letter I felt even before opening was a letter that held my destiny. It read as follows: “Dear Pastor Wiberg, I have received your letter and am grateful for your inquiry and interest in Augustana, and that you hold to a Lutheran theology. My advice to you is this: Stay where you are because the Covenant needs more good Lutherans like you.” My initial reaction was anger. Here I had laid my life on the line, so “stay where you are.” But since then I have been grateful for Dr Benson’s advice inasmuch as I have served in positions where my Lutheranism has served the Covenant Church in writing

confirmation materials, serving on two hymnal and worship book commissions, along with other denominational and seminary committees. So that's a little more insight as to who I am.

THE HYMNS

Before turning to the hymns we will be working with today, I would like to pay tribute to two hymnologists who have been so important in the preservation of our Scandinavian hymnody. The late J. Irving Erickson, author of *Twice Born Hymns* and *Sing it Again* saw the role of the Covenant Church as preserving the music of our common Swedish heritage. I also pay tribute to Dr. E. E. Ryden, author of *The Story of Christian Hymnody*, which is the only definitive study in English I know that deals with Scandinavian hymnody. He was also the author of several fine hymn texts which have appeared in our Covenant hymnals.

I met Dr. Ryden in the 50s in Princeton, Illinois, where I was serving the Mission Covenant Church. I had been invited to speak to a gathering of Augustana pastors in the district in the parsonage of a good friend, Pastor Harry Lundblad. The first thing Dr. Ryden asked me was whether Covenanters were singing his translation of Lina Sandell's hymn, "Thy Holy Wings, Dear Savior." And of course I said it had become one of our favorites. It is interesting to note that a recent poll was taken on Sweden's ten most popular songs. Three of these songs were by Lina Sandell, "Children of the Heavenly Father," "Day by Day," and "Thy Holy Wings."

"Thy Holy Wings, Dear Savior," *The Covenant Hymnal: A Worshipbook* (Hymn 80). This hymn appeared in *Hemlandssänger* (1892) and in our first official Swedish hymnal, *Sions Basun* (1908). Gracia Grindal has done a paraphrase on the hymn for the baptism of a family member. Hymn 741, *With One Voice*.

After inquiring about the reception of his translation, Dr. Ryden took a piece of paper out of his pocket on which was printed a hymn and asked if I would play it. The hymn was a Finnish hymn known as "The Pilgrim Song" which he said had become widely known in Finland as a source of comfort and hope during the dreadful days of the Russo-Finnish conflict, and that this hymn found its way into every corner of the country as "Lord, As a Pilgrim." The hymn appeared for the first time in the *Service Book and Hymnal* of 1958 and in *The Covenant Hymnal* of 1973.

"Lord, As a Pilgrim," *Service Book and Hymnal* (Hymn 536), paraphrase by E. E. Ryden. It is also in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, but with a melody difficult to sing.

The Swedish Psalmbook (*Den Svenska Psalmboken*) was the major literary achievement of Archbishop Johan Olof Wallin (1779-1839). Among the 500 hymns in the psalmbook, Wallin wrote 128 original hymns, made 178 revisions, and translated 23 hymns from the German chorales. Dr. Ryden says, "Some of the enduring quality of Wallin's hymns are reflected in the fact that the Church of Sweden did not make a single change in his hymnbook for 101 years."

One of Wallin's hymns in the *Psalmbook*, well-known if not popular, was the hymn translated and retained in the *Augustana Hymnal* of 1925 which speaks to its enduring quality.

“Where is the Friend,” *The Hymnal* (Augustana; Hymn 517)

“Where is the Friend for whom I'm ever yearning?
My longing grows when night to day is turning.
And though I find Him not as day receedeth,
My heart still pleadeth.”

He searches in nature and beauty for intimations of this Friend but then finally concludes that only in heaven will that yearning be filled:

“Soon on the shore where stormy wave ne'er breaketh,
The weary dove its final refuge taketh;
The timorous lamb shall by the Shepherd's favor
Find rest forever.”

One cannot help but wonder if C. O. Rosenius wrote the following hymn to answer Wallin's question: “Where is the Friend for whom I am ever yearning.” It is one of the best examples of a hymn expressing the theme of the Pietistic movement, namely, the believer's mystical, intimate union with the crucified and risen Jesus as Friend. The music is by Oscar Ahnfelt,

“Whereso'er I Roam,” *The Covenant Hymnal: A Worshipbook* (Hymn 427)

“Whereso'er I roam through valleys dreary,
over mountains or in pathless wood;
ever with me is a Friend to cheer me,
warning, comforting as none else could.
'Tis the Shepherd, who once dying, bleeding,
now through all eternity shall live.
Jesus leads his flock, protecting, feeding,
and the tend' rest care does give.”

The message of the Rosenian movement was plain.. The Risen One can be known here and now as Friend walking ever beside us with wise counsel, comfort, and good cheer. And if Wallin's “timorous lamb” shall at last find rest and favor, Rosenius' vision of the final, gladsome meeting is anything but timorous:

“To your presence—for this life is fleeting—
take me, wash my garments in your blood;
and with Thomas may I, at your meeting,
cry with joy, ‘My Lord and God!’”

But I am glad that Wallin asks the question which is the human question, one we have all asked in our painful journey with less than certain faith. It is a question asked in our generation perhaps more than any other: “Where is the Friend for whom I'm ever yearning?”

But I am also glad that Rosenius says that heaven does not need to wait for some final assurance of favor, but that the Friend is ever with me even when “I often feel forsaken, lonely.”

Now we turn to a contemporary hymn by one of Sweden’s finest and most prolific and much loved poets of hymns, Anders Frostenson, a priest in the Church of Sweden. He has been a leading figure in revising the hymnody of the Swedish Church. Born in 1906, he is still composing, and in the Swedish *Psalmbook* of 1986 there are over 145 Frostenson hymns. We have three of his hymns in our latest hymnal. One of his most popular hymns in all the churches in Sweden, a hymn universally sung on the First Sunday in Advent is “Jesus of Nazareth Passes By,” *The Covenant Hymnal: A Worshipbook* (Hymn 351).

I think it appropriate to sing in conclusion one other hymn by Rosenius that brings together the themes of God’s friendship and pilgrimage. It has been sung by generations of Augustana Lutherans and Covenanters.

“With God as Our Friend,” *The Lutheran Book of Worship* (Hymn 371) and *The Covenant Hymnal: A Worshipbook* (Hymn 592). Here in this hymn are both the themes of friendship and pilgrimage. As for God’s friendship there is no buddy system. In all his hymns, Rosenius kept the law/gospel motif without which Pietism can easily get lost in subjectivity and sentimentality.

CONCLUSION

In revisiting a few of the songs of our immigrant forebears, what might our Lutheran/Covenant pietistic tradition mean today? I suggested earlier that the themes of pilgrimage and friendship are more than cherished icons of our immigrant past, but themes relevant in learning how to host the recent strangers in this new land.

In his *Tales of the Hasidim* Martin Buber records comments from Rabbi Barukh: “He whom life drives into exile and who comes to a land alien to him, has nothing in common with the people there, and not a soul he can talk to. *But if a second stranger appears*, even though he may come from quite a different place, the two can confide in each other and live together henceforth, and cherish each other and *had they both not been strangers*, they would never have known such close companionship.”

Today, in long stretches we often feel as if we are living in a different land, a changing society and culture. As sojourners on the earth, we are the aliens, lost, misplaced because the familiar landmarks have been shifting or changing, if not removed. In short, we are becoming pilgrims again as our immigrant forebears, the second stranger.

But this is our great opportunity. Loosened from bondage to the comfortable, the familiar, we as church can discover our new role as “the second stranger” to those new and strange to the church, becoming hosts to the new immigrants, or better yet, the new Americans. As bearer of the gospel, the church is forever confronted with the new. Again in the words of the rabbi, “had they both not been strangers”—think of what both had missed. We have a language in our hymnody of God’s friendship and pilgrimage that speaks to the heart. The

music won't sound the same, the rhythm and beat will be different, but the story of pilgrimage and God's friendship will be the same. Which means: "the song goes on."