

People go to church for a variety of reasons. Some seek a connection with God, aiming to incorporate religious or spiritual aspects into their lives. Others are drawn to the church's atmosphere and the sense of community among like-minded believers.

There are also those who appreciate the rich musical history of the church – and are drawn for that reason. Of course, we don't attend church solely to hear the Top 40 songs on iTunes. We come to collectively sing praises to God and to learn from the *hymns*, as they contain valuable lessons and theology.

I must say I was relieved not to hear a collective groan when I mentioned the word "hymn." In fact, we're in luck today, as there are a few Sundays throughout the year when longer hymns are featured, and I'd say today is one of them.

Our hymn of the day is "Built on a Rock". It was composed by Nikolai Grundtvig and is often regarded as one of the great hymns of the church, second only to Luther's "A Mighty Fortress."

Originally, this hymn had a whopping *nine* verses all of which we will sing this morning!

Just Kidding!

Over the years, it underwent various iterations and translations. At one point, it was reduced to seven verses, and finally, in 1978, it was trimmed down to its current form of five verses.

While some may view the process of reducing the hymn as diminishing its power and message, I would argue that its current form, though smaller in comparison, still carries great significance.

One advantage of having an odd number of verses in a hymn is that it's easy to pinpoint the central message. Martin Luther was known for placing the Trinitarian formula in the middle of the hymns he wrote. Although it may not happen in precisely the same way, the third verse – the middle of "Built on a Rock" contains the richness of God's grace and a biblical promise.

How about we read the third verse together - "Christ, build a house of living stones: we are His own habitation; He fills our hearts, His humble thrones, granting us life and salvation. Where two or three will see His face, He, in their midst, will show His grace, blessings upon them bestowing."

This verse can be interpreted in various ways, but I find it most helpful to focus on agency.

What this central verse tells me, how it speaks to *me*, is that God is actively working within us. He shapes us into living stones and takes up residence in our hearts, which becomes His throne. He fills our hearts, and in return, we are granted life and salvation.

Okay – that all sounds really good.

What comes next? Well, our response follows.

God inhabits our hearts, has made us living stones, and we are called to seek God's presence by gathering together. As Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered, I am present." Therefore, our response should be one of praise, worship, and adoration.

That sounds even better! Jesus... worship...fellowship.

What's truly remarkable is that even after God has given us so much and we respond in worship, God continues to bestow grace and blessings upon us.

In essence, this one verse, positioned in the middle of the hymn, emphasizes what the author considers central to Christian living: grace, fellowship, and praise. While it may not be a Trinitarian formula in the same way as Luther's hymns, this verse encompasses every person of the Trinity. Jesus is present when believers gather, the Holy Spirit draws us to God, and it's God the Father who bestows blessings upon us.

Okay – enough with the hymn for now.

With this background and interpretation, I was prompted to consider the significance of the middle verse and what it means to be in the 'middle'.

So far my characterization of 'the middle' has been positive. It's important to note that being in the middle can have negative connotations as well. For instance, In middle school – being *in the middle*, it carries a different meaning than it does for adults. Being caught in the middle between two people can be challenging and unpleasant. There are times when, due to various circumstances, we feel stuck in the middle - ala Jimmy Eat World: "Everything will be all right, all right." So, being in the middle is not always positive, and this is our shared point of connection this morning.

From a theological standpoint, we are all in the middle, akin to a concept in theological circles called the "already and the not yet." We are a community of believers who understand that this life is not the end, and there is something more because of Jesus. This offers not only purpose but also comfort.

However, amidst the good news and the promise of resurrection, there are times when the world's troubles overshadow the message. It can be obscured by death, illness, loss, and the harsh realities of our world, where innocent civilians and children suffer due to political conflicts – arrogance, and the inability to see Christ in our neighbor. It is no mystery that numerous factors can shake one's faith, from the callousness of humanity to our propensity for destruction.

Yet - In all of those instances, the good news must be proclaimed. It's in instances like these that we are prompted to ask where God is in the midst of the tragic, unspeakable, and all-too-human ways of this world.

This is just a personal reflection, but whenever I feel down or encounter tragedy or death, a hymn, and specifically the beginning of a verse, plays in my mind.

As I mentioned, there are lengthy hymns designated for All Saints Sunday. This morning, we will not sing For All the Saints. Again, we got lucky! It is nearly as long as the original "Built on a Rock," consisting of just under eight verses. My favorite verse is the seventh, and its beginning is of chief importance.

The verse begins with the words: "But then there breaks a yet more glorious day."

It is a nice sentiment – but is there anything to it? For some, it's too simplistic to say that tomorrow will necessarily be a more glorious day. My situation might allow for optimism, as it's likely to be sunny even if it's not. However, for many, they may wonder from where this new day will come – and worst yet, *when*.

There are two answers to this question. The first is easier than the second.

The glorious day that this hymn speaks of is the resurrection, the "not yet." When we think of that day, we imagine an existence without pain, suffering, illness, violence, or death. This glorious day begins and ends with God's grace and everlasting life.

For us, in the here and now, we are in the "already." As people of faith who believe in miracles, we eagerly anticipate that day. However, it doesn't mean that we abandon everything else just because our salvation is assured.

By no means!

What it means is that, as believers, we have the opportunity not only to show others why Christ should and can be central in their lives but also how our faith guides us in various aspects of our lives. We must demonstrate to others that even in the midst of trials, our faith remains, and in our moments of doubt, God is still central. This is not to say that if we simply believe everything will be made alright – that's not what Jesus promises. We are promised that Jesus will walk with us *through* those times and that we are not left adrift. God still reigns in our hearts, and because of this, we are called to testify to that glorious day.

Although that day has not arrived in its fullness, both Georgie Schroeder and Rudy Svoboda are now a step closer to that glorious day. After this life and whatever trials they may have faced, they are now in the presence of God, singing praise and experiencing God's grace to the fullest. They are now, as we say, part of the cloud of witnesses. As people who still walk by faith, we are called to look to the example of the Saints. We never know how our actions might impact others, as Rudy once considered himself an Atheist or Gnostic. I believe that we are all both saint and sinner, and by very measure of being saint and sinner - cannot judge the quality of one's faith – better yet – I don't need to. It may be easy to deny but we just never know how God will work through us and others – even those for whom we vehemently disagree.

It was only a week ago that we held Georgie Schroeder's funeral, and we witnessed how her life touched others. We know that she was a messenger of the good news, and that's our calling today. This is why our lengthy hymns are so important. They speak to us – they inform our faith, and they reveal the hidden yet so very real presence of God. They remind us that Christian living is not a solitary journey but a shared one. And most importantly, that this life is one used to proclaim our faith and the good news of the resurrection.

All Saints Sunday *is* a mix of emotions, with joy and sadness intertwined. Yet, amid the sorrow, we remember that a more glorious day will come, and in the end, we will all be united as one, united to praise our Lord and Savior.

Amen.