

Almost 300 years ago a young priest who had been ordained for only a year sailed for Georgia at the age of 28.

After a terrible year in Georgia he sailed back home for England but the ship was hit by a massive storm in the Atlantic.

It washed away their livestock and they were taking on water faster than they could pump it out.

The priest prayed over & over to Jesus, continually repeating his name. When the storm reached its worst he prayed even more fervently until somehow he discovered a hope that the world, and the storm, could neither give nor take away.

He survived that storm and made it back to England and 2 years later he was ministering to men in prison awaiting execution.

But he was not their chaplain. He was their evangelist!

He preached to them frequently as they awaited death, telling them of the One who came from heaven to save lost sinners.

He described the sufferings of the Lamb of God and continued to preach the message of the crucified Lord until they began to believe that this God had suffered death and shame even for people as rejected by society as they were.

Sadly, there was no miraculous deliverance from execution for these men, some of whom were unjustly convicted, but they went to their deaths with peace and even with a hope that the world, and the executioner, could neither give nor take away.



This young priest wrote a poem about his experiences called
“In Temptation,” but you might know the poem as a hymn:
Jesus, lover of my soul.

His brother John didn’t like the poem at first.
He thought it was a little too touchy-feely, but then his brother was like that.

The priest, of course, is Charles Wesley,
one of the greatest Christian writers of all time.
Charles wrote over 6,000 hymns in his life,
(and begged his brother John not to leave the Church of England).



150 years after this poem was written, a century after Charles’ death,
the words found their perfect match in a hymn tune
written by Joseph Parry.

The tune expresses in music what Wesley’s words describes so well:
mounting danger until finally a discovery of trust in God.

The tension in the music builds slowly.
It starts in the lower part of your voice (as all the best songs do)
but in a minor key.

Minor keys make us feel a little unsettled, and the tune builds that tension
as the notes get higher and higher until just before the end
they hit their highest note and release into a major key.

But just after that major key releases,
as a kind of acceptance of whatever God may have in store for you,
it returns to the minor key and repeats the opening melody.



For years this was one of the most well-known hymns
in the English-speaking church but in recent years it had fallen out of favor
until it showed up on Netflix in an episode of *The Crown*.

That's where I first heard it and now it's one of those hymns
I could sing every day.

These last few Sundays I've been inviting you to take a moment
to invite Jesus into your thoughts, into your heart.

To share a moment of intimacy with Christ.

Fr. Rhett and I were talking about this hymn when he pointed out to me
that it embodies the kind of intimacy I think we all need right now.

So if you would open your hymnal to hymn 699
and look at it with me.

I want you to use this hymn, today and at other times in your life,
as a devotional tool, as a way to call on Jesus to be with you,
whether you sing it, read it aloud,
or just slowly walk through the words and melody in your mind.



This first verse is clearly a reference to his experience in the Atlantic:

Jesus, Lover of my soul, let me to thy bosom fly,
while the nearer waters roll, while the tempest still is high:
hide me, O my Savior, hide, till the storm of life is past.

He's saying, "Jesus, let me come to you because water is pouring
into the ship, and the storm doesn't seem like it's ever going to stop.
Hide me, Jesus. Hide me until it's safe to come out again."



Verse 2 keeps that desperate sense of reliance on Jesus' mercy in the storm,
but now Wesley, who knew his Bible as well as anyone,
brings in another element.

In verse 2 when we sing,
"Other refuge have I none, hangs my helpless soul on thee,"
I can't help but hear St. Peter talking.

In chapter 6 of John's gospel, many of Jesus' followers have just left him.
Jesus asks the 12, "Do you also wish to go away?"
And Peter said, "Lord, where else can we go?
You have the words of eternal life."

Peter doesn't know what to make of Jesus' hard teachings,
he doesn't even know how to accept them,
but he knows there's no other place to go but to Jesus.

And then in verse 2 when we sing,
"leave, O leave me not alone, still support and comfort me,"
I hear Peter calling out to Jesus after he tried to walk on water.



Now when you come to that third verse,
remember those men waiting to die in prison.

"Plenteous grace with thee is found, grace to cleanse from every sin;
let the healing streams abound, make and keep me pure within."

The justice those men faced in England in 1738 was brutal,
and when you learn that one of those prisoners was an enslaved man,
being executed for stealing from his so-called master,
you know that at least one of those executions was unjust.

I see those men consumed with fear and anger,
the injustice of it all pushing them into despair,
into even worse versions of themselves.

But Charles Wesley convinced them that there was a justice
greater than the courts of Newgate prison
and a love that could conquer death.

It was, he told them, a love to cleanse every sin.



One theory for why this hymn fell out of favor
is that the kind of people who go to church and sing hymns
aren't the kind of people anymore who find themselves
in the kind of danger Charles Wesley was in in the Atlantic,
and they aren't the kind of people who find themselves
in prison waiting on the hangman's rope.
And I suppose that's right.

But I don't think this hymn is entirely done with us.

I think it may have a new life for those of us who sing it today.

Our nation is in the middle of a mental health crisis.

More of us take mental health medicines than ever before,
including me, but still there is a death by suicide every 11 minutes
in this country, and rates of anxiety, depression, gender dysphoria,
and eating disorders among young people have skyrocketed.

We try to dismiss it as the problems of rich folks, as “first world problems,”
but first world life just means we have first world suffering
It doesn’t make us immune to despair, or to the storms of life.

When I’ve struggle with my anxiety the language I used to describe it
is a storm. Maybe that’s why this hymn speaks to me.

Spend time with this hymn today. We’re singing it at both services,
but if you’re not really familiar with the hymn it probably
won’t grab you all at once. It’s not that kind of song.

The best hymns take years and years of singing
before they reveal all their wisdom to you.
That’s why we sing them over and over.



One more thing.

In my newcomer’s class today we’re talking about vocation,
about finding the thing that God has given you to do.

Remember that these words were written as a poem 280 years ago.
150 years after they were written they finally found the music
that made them come alive.

Sometimes God’s schedule isn’t the same as yours.
Don’t give up. Trust in God’s good time.

So pray this song. Sing this prayer.

And if the storms of life are raging in your life right now,
call out to Jesus like Charles Wesley did on the Atlantic,
like Peter did on the water,
and like those prisoners did as they awaited their faith.

Amen.