

Oregon City United Methodist Church
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June 18, 2017

Series: Great Hymns of the Faith
Sermon: Be Thou My Vision

Jeremiah 9:23-24

This is what the Lord says:

“Let not the wise boast of their wisdom
or the strong boast of their strength
or the rich boast of their riches,
but let the one who boasts boast about this:
that they have the understanding to know me,
that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness,
justice and righteousness on earth,
for in these I delight,”
declares the Lord.

Sermon

I am 1/16th Irish. I think. Records are spotty. Two Great Great grandmothers on different sides of my family came from the Emerald Isle and married over here. When Samantha was born, she had red hair and I thought, ah ha! Go Irish! My beard, when I'm allowed to grow it, comes in lumberjack red. The only time I've had a small beard was 10 years ago, when we spent our 10th anniversary in Dublin and in Galway, Ireland. I can have a beard anytime I want, but if I want my wife to kiss me, there can't be anything else here. I love Irish music, the smell of a peat fire, we have Irish stew at least once a month. So, I'll be honest, I am jacked about today's featured Hymn. It sounds Irish, the rhythm of the Gaelic beat. Be Thou My Vision, O Lord of My Heart. I can imagine the Irish saints of ol' around a camp fire just playing the lute and fiddle and drums a singing the heart out of this song. Or me great great grandmothers humming the tune as they crossed the Atlantic. But alas, it probably wasn't the case. I'll get back to that in a little bit.

Be Thou My Vision. Jeremiah would have loved these lines. 600 years before Christ, and 1,000 years before our hymn, Jeremiah was a priest and prophet in the tribe of Judah. The nation of Israel had been overthrown and wiped away a hundred plus years before - but the tribe of Judah held out. The home of Jerusalem, Judah was its own independent nation for a couple of hundred years - give or take. The remnant of a once glorious nation that dwelt in this promised land. Judah was all that remained. During this time, the people of Israel were called Jews, after their last holdout. Judah, Jews. They weren't called Jews before this time. If you were to talk to King David and ask, Are you Jewish? He'd have no idea what you were talking about. The term hadn't been coined just yet. Only later did the term come about. Jeremiah was in Judah, but the future did not look good for them either. The Book of Jeremiah is a warning and a blessing to the Jews living in Judah right before the Babylonian exile. The Babylonians are about to come knocking, and its bad news for the country. They're about to lose their nation. And Jeremiah explains how they've gone wrong. For decades, Israel forgot about God. They forgot about worship, they forgot about the law, they forgot about mercy and kindness. Thank goodness this doesn't happen today! They are about to go into an exile, generations long, and they won't have their country anymore. Eventually, some will be able to come back, a small band who will remember their God of old - and Jeremiah gave them hope that this would be the case, and what they should do, or how they should worship.

I cherry picked two verses out of Jeremiah 9 that sets for us a reminder of what is temporal and what is eternal. Let not the wise boast of his wisdom, or strength, or riches. But if you are to boast, boast of the one who understands God, and knows him. The God of kindness, justice and righteousness. This is what God delights in.

Nothing wrong with being wise. Matter of fact, I want wise people around me. I want my dentist to have all of the training she should get. I want my house builder to know how to keep a roof on top of the house. I want my kids to do well in school. But character trumps wisdom. I'd rather my kids be dumb as rocks and nice kids, instead of smart kids and mean. If I could choose, I'd take both, wise and kind. But I'll take kindness over wisdom anyway. Nothing wrong with strength. Matter of fact, I want strong people around me. When I need police or protection, I want someone who could win the day. I'm not a gun enthusiast, but I'm glad that we have ample protection against those who wish to harm. I'm glad capitol security took down an armed attacker. Strength is good. But Character trumps strength. Strength without character is called a bully, or dictator. If I could choose, I'd take strength and character. But I'll take kindness over strength anyway. Nothing wrong with riches. I want to be one of them someday. I'll tell my daughter when she gets older - don't marry anybody for money. Don't marry for money. Just hang around rich people until you fall in love. Riches are good. But Character trumps riches. If I could give an inheritance to my children of either riches or a good heart, I'd choose good heart any day. I'd love to give them both, but you see what I'm doing. Jeremiah shared with his nation 3,000 years ago what we need to hear today. Let God be the Vision. Not wisdom, strength, or riches.

We all know the hymn "Be Thou My Vision," but we don't often think about the words that we sing. Helen Keller once said: "The only one thing worse than being blind is having sight but no vision." If you want to see the path that God has for you, then you must be able to say to God today, "Be thou my vision." "Be Thou My Vision" has Irish roots that goes back to the sixth century. One of the earliest known Christian hymns, it was written in Gaelic by Dallán Forgaill. He was an Irish poet and Latin scholar, and was considered the "King of the Poets." As a young boy, he became blind from studying too much when they didn't have things like glasses or contacts or laser surgery. He was given the name of Dallán, which means "little blind one." Because he was unable to see on his own, he asked God to be His vision. You are in the exact same place as he was, unable to see what is ahead of you. It is the best place to be because, if you are wise one, you will give Jesus your hand and ask Him to lead you. "If it is your heart's cry that you want His vision and that you want Him to be your vision, then He will direct your path." Dallán, the originator of "Be Thou My Vision," was called Dallán Eigeas. What a paradox: His name meant "the blind one and the learned one." That's what a Christian is: the blind one that sees through Jesus. Later on, the Roman Catholic Church canonized Dallán so that he became Saint Dallán. He doesn't have a happy ending, while he was working in a monastery translating Scripture, some pirates barged in and cut off his head. A couple of centuries before St. Dallán looked to God for His vision, another saint was working on a tune. You are familiar with St. Patrick about whom we celebrate on March 17 of each year. Patrick defied a royal edict by High King Logaire. The king ordained that no one was allowed to kindle a ceremonial fire until he lit his own to signal the commencement of the pagan spring festival. In defiance of pagan worship, on Slane Hill, St. Patrick lit the Paschal candle, also known as the Christ candle, to signify the beginning of Easter. The king was so impressed by his conviction and zeal, he pardoned him and then supported his missionary work in Ireland. A song tune came out, commemorating this event, called Slane Hill, or Slane for short.

Now, fast forward 1,500 years. In 1905 Mary Elizabeth Byrne was a translator of Old Irish into English. Gaelic was going bye-bye at that time, and nobody spoke the old old form of the language anymore. She was a linguist who graduated from the National University of Ireland. Although several biographies state that she graduated in 1905, women were not officially allowed entrance into that college until 1908. She also received the Chancellor's Gold Medal at the Royal University of Ireland, which was the first university in Ireland to confer degrees on women. She earned her M.A. in Modern Literature at St. Mary's University College in Dublin in 1910 - when hardly few women were earning Bachelor's degrees, much less Master's. She devoted her life to

higher education in Ireland and wrote several dictionaries on the Irish language. Her academic success was not her only call to fame. She married a lay Methodist minister and metalsmith, Samuel Cooke,” and in 1908 gave birth to Alistair Cooke. Maybe some of our older folk would recall him as the host of PBS Masterpiece Theatre from 1971 - 1992. So Bryne, took an old Gaelic prayer from a long forgotten saint, and translated his work into English. For the first time in 1905. Roughly at the same time, another lady, Eleanor Hull, another upstart in the field of music, found an old and forgotten Irish song Slane and published that for the first time in 1912. She gave it the meter and rhythm that we know today. It hadn’t been played for centuries.

So, follow me on this. In the early 1900's, a gal translated an old Gaelic prayer that no one remembered, into English for the very first time. Just after, another gal took an old Gaelic song, that no one remembered, and put it down on paper. And it was years after that - hear me? Years after that, that a publisher of hymns thought, I wonder if these two things would go well together? And sure enough, they did. And it was published together for the first time AFTER WORLD WAR ONE - under a hundred years ago. We think this is an ancient song - and it is. But John Wesley never sang Be Thou My Vision - it didn’t exist. My great great Irish grandmothers didn’t sing Be Thou My Vision - it didn’t exist. It’s not in the early Methodist Hymnals. It didn’t exist. If you want the church to go back to the 1950's, you can’t have this song - it wasn’t around! It didn’t make our hymnal till 1964. It’s only 9 years older than me - methodist speaking.

One final thought. We have three verses in our hymnal. But there’s a lot more. The first verse starts with, Be Thou My Vision. We have that one in our hymnal.

Second Verse - Be thou my wisdom and thou my true word. We have that one in our hymnal.

But the next few verses we don’t. The next verse, a little militant, starts off by saying, Be Thou my Breastplate, my sword for the fight. It goes on to say how God’s mighty arm protects. It is a sign of strength.

The next verse, might sound familiar, its in other hymnals like the Baptists:
Riches I heed not, nor man’s empty praise.

So the first verse: Be Thou My Vision. Second Verse: Be Thou My Wisdom. Third verse: Be Thou my Strength. Fourth Verse: Be Thou my Riches. Sound familiar? Look at Jeremiah again.
Let not the wise boast of their wisdom
or the strong boast of their strength
or the rich boast of their riches,

Pretty cool, huh? Be Thou my Vision. What’s your vision? Jeremiah would ask, is it wisdom? Is it strength? Could it be wealth? Those aren’t bad things, but they’re temporal things. They won’t last for eternity. What does? Understanding God. Knowing Jesus. Loving kindness, mercy, justice, righteousness.

If you are willing and able, let us stand and sing that new and ancient hymn, Be Thou My Vision.