

Worship Service

BY DAVID M. BRIDGES

Since aging is a profound part of our common human condition, this service is deliberately very participatory for the congregation. It engages worshipers in symbolically enacting their realization of God's timelessness and trust in God's eternal love.

The service is divided by the six stanzas of Isaac Watts' hymn, *O God, Our Help in Ages Past*, which may be sung, at the appropriate times, by a soloist, ensemble, or choir. Stanzas 2 through 5 have alternate tunes suggested; worship planners may substitute their choice of any Common Meter tune. The first and sixth, however, should be sung to ST. ANNE, the tune commonly associated with this text.

Solo:

"Poor Wayfaring Stranger"

I'm just a poor wayfaring stranger.
 A-travelin' through this world of woe.
 But there's no sickness, no toil or danger,
 in that bright land to which I go.
 I'm going there to see my Father,
 I'm going there no more to roam.
 I'm just a-going over Jordan,
 I'm just a-going over home.

American Folk Song

The Greeting:¹

Grow old along with me!
 The best is yet to be,
 The last of life, for which the first was made:
 Our times are in His Hand
 Who saith "A whole I planned,
 Youth shows but half; trust God, see all, nor be afraid!"

Call to Worship: Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

Leader:

For everything there is a season,
and a time for every matter under heaven:

People:

A time to be born, and a time to die;

A time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

A time to kill, and a time to heal;

A time to break down, and a time to build up;

A time to weep, and a time to laugh;

A time to mourn and a time to dance;

A time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;

A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

A time to seek, and a time to lose;

A time to keep, and a time to throw away;

A time to tear, and a time to sew;

A time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

A time to love, and a time to hate;

All:

A time to war, and a time for peace.



*O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come,
our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home.*

Tune: ST. ANNE

Hymn:

“A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”

Choral Anthem:

“Simple Gifts”



*Under the shadow of Thy throne Thy saints have dwelt secure;
sufficient is Thine arm alone, and our defense is sure.*

Tune: CRIMOND

Hymn:

“For the Beauty of the Earth”²



***Before the hills in order stood, or earth received her frame,
from everlasting Thou art God, to endless years the same.***

Tune: ARLINGTON

Hymn:

“Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise”³

Scripture Readings: Genesis 18:1-3, 9-15 and Luke 1:5-20

Sermon:

“Surprised by Age”

God summons anyone at anytime to service, including people who are “getting on in years” (Luke 1:7).

With both Sarah and Elizabeth, God subtly displays a sense of humor. Though Sarah laughs, then lies to God, God ignores this and has the last laugh. Zechariah’s understandable disbelief at the promise of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, is rewarded with muteness—both a sign of his being in the presence of someone holy and a kind of teasing by God.



***A thousand ages in Thy sight are like an evening gone,
short as the watch that ends the night before the rising sun.***

Tune: NEW BRITAIN

Reading and Hymn:

First Reader:

Abide with me, fast falls the eventide;
the darkness deepens; Lord with me abide:
when other helpers fail, and comforts flee,
help of the helpless, O abide with me.⁴

“O Day of God, Draw Nigh” (stanzas 1 and 2)

O Day of God, draw nigh
in beauty and in power;
come with thy timeless judgment now
to match our present hour.

Bring to our troubled minds,
uncertain and afraid,
the quiet of a steadfast faith,
calm of a call obeyed.

Second Reader:

Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;
earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away;
change and decay in all around I see:
O Thou who changest not, abide with me.⁴

"O Day of God, Draw Nigh" (stanzas 3 and 4)

Bring justice to our land,
that all may dwell secure,
and finely build for days to come
foundations that endure.

Bring to our world of strife
Thy sovereign Word of peace,
that war may haunt the earth no more,
and desolation cease.

R. B. Y. Scott (1937)
Tune: ST. MICHAEL



*Time, like an ever rolling stream, bears all who breathe away;
they fly, forgotten, as a dream dies at the opening day.*

Tune: MORNING SONG

Prayers of the People

Prayer Response:

Leader/**People:**

When the storms of life are raging, **stand by me, stand by me.**
When the storms of life are raging, **stand by me, stand by me.**
When the world is tossing me, like a ship upon the sea,
Thou who rulest wind and water, **stand by me, stand by me.**

In the midst of faults and failures, **stand by me, stand by me.**
In the midst of faults and failures, **stand by me, stand by me.**
When I've done the best I can, and my friends misunderstand,
Thou who knowest all about me, **stand by me, stand by me.**

When I'm growing old and feeble, **stand by me, stand by me.**
When I'm growing old and feeble, **stand by me, stand by me.**
When my life becomes a burden, and I'm nearing chilly Jordan,
O thou Lily of the Valley, **stand by me, stand by me.**

Charles Albert Tindley (1851-1933)

Prayer Response Hymn:

“Jesus, Still Lead On” (verses 1, 3, and 4)

Jesus, still lead on, till our rest be won,
And, although the way be cheerless,
We will follow calm and fearless,
Guide us by Thy hand to our fatherland.

When we seek relief from a long felt grief;
When temptations come alluring,
Make us patient and enduring;
Show us that bright shore where we weep no more.

Jesus, still lead on, till our rest be won;
Heavenly Leader, still direct us,
Still support, control, protect us,
Till we safely stand in our fatherland.

Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700-1760)

Tune: SEELENBRAUTIGAM

Choral Offertory:

“Saints Bound for Heaven”⁵

Our bondage it shall end, by and by;
from Egypt's yoke set free;
hail the glorious jubilee,
and to Canaan we'll return, by and by.

Our deliverer He shall come, by and by;
and our sorrows have an end,
with our three score years and ten,
and vast glory crown the day, by and by.

Though our enemies are strong, we'll go on;
though our hearts dissolve with fear,
lo, Sinai's God is near,
while the fiery pillar moves, we'll go on.

And when to Jordan's floods, we are come,
Jehovah rules the tide,
and the waters he'll divide,
and the ransom'd host shall shout, we are come.

Then friends shall meet again, who have loved,
our embraces shall be sweet,
at the dear Redeemer's feet,
when we meet to part no more, who have loved.

Then with all the happy throng, we'll rejoice
shouting glory to our King,
till the vaults of heaven ring,
and through all eternity we'll rejoice.

American Folk Hymn

Doxology

Closing Exhortation (2 Peter 3:8-9):

But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.



***O God our help in ages past, our hope for years to come,
be Thou our guard while troubles last, and our eternal home.***

Tune: ST. ANNE

Spoken Benediction (from Luke 2:29-32):

Gracious God, now let us depart in peace according to your word; for we have seen your salvation which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for the revelation to the Gentiles and glory to your people Israel.

Hymn of Benediction:

“I’ll Praise My Maker While I’ve Breath”

I’ll praise my Maker while I’ve breath,
And when my voice is lost in death,
Praise shall employ my nobler powers;
My days of praise shall ne’er be past,
While life, and thought, and being last,
Or immortality endures.

The Lord has eyes to give the blind;
The Lord supports the sinking mind;
He sends the lab’ring conscience peace;
He helps the stranger in distress,
The widow, and the fatherless,
And grants the pris’ner sweet release.

I’ll praise Him while He lends me breath,
And when my voice is lost in death,
Praise shall employ my nobler powers;
My days of praise shall ne’er be past,
While life, and thought, and being last,
Or immortality endures.

Isaac Watts (1674-1748)

Tune: OLD 113th

NOTES

- 1 Opening stanza of Robert Browning, “Rabbi Ben Ezra.”
- 2 Have all sing the first and last stanzas and all refrains, but assign various groups to sing the other stanzas (e.g. women only, men only, senior adults, choir, etc.).
- 3 A soloist sings stanza 1; an ensemble, stanza 2; choir, stanza 3; everyone, stanza 4.
- 4 From “Abide With Me,” by Henry F. Lyte (1793-1847).
- 5 This text, in a choral arrangement by Robert Shaw and Alice Parker, is available from Lawson-Gould Music Publishers by calling 1-800-327-7643 (catalog #911).

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