

## Our Story, Our Song

In Fredrik Backman's book, *My Grandmother Asked Me to Tell You She's Sorry*, we meet Elsa's granny. Elsa's granny is unlike most other grannies. Elsa's granny smokes and swears and terrorizes the neighbors. She routinely escapes from the hospital and knows the inside of the local police station as well as the back of her hand. And Elsa's granny tells stories. Fantastical, beautiful stories. Through her stories, Elsa's granny shapes how Elsa comes to understand the world and the people around her. Elsa's granny understands the power of stories. She understands that the stories we tell reveal what we treasure, what we believe, what we hold to be true in our heart of hearts.

While we Presbyterians are a deeply faithful bunch, we are not always all that comfortable with saying what we believe about God, Jesus, faith, death, or salvation out loud on our own outside these walls, but we sing about these things with gusto in here every Sunday. Earlier this summer, I asked you to share your favorite hymns with me, and together you selected about 40 hymns. Over the course of the next five weeks, we will sing many of them in worship. Through those hymns we will catch a glimpse of what we treasure, what we believe, what we hold to be true in our heart of hearts. In other words, these hymns are a significant piece of the story we tell. The words and melodies point to what we treasure, what we believe, what we hold to be true in THE story of God's love for humanity and for all of creation.

One of your favorite ways to sing the story is *How Great Thou Art*. The original text was written by a Swedish author named Carl G. Boberg. Boberg "wrote its [original] nine stanzas one summer evening in 1885 after he had admired the beauty of nature and the sound of church bells."<sup>1</sup> Boberg's family remembers that Carl wrote the original poem as a paraphrase of Psalm 8 and used it "in the 'underground church' in Sweden in the late 1800s when the Baptists and Mission Friends were persecuted."<sup>2</sup> The text was translated into German and then Russian and later into English by Stuart Wesley Keene Hine, the writer most often associated with the hymn. Hine and his wife Edith built upon the original text while serving as missionaries in Eastern Europe and

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<sup>1</sup> [https://hymnary.org/text/o\\_lord\\_my\\_god\\_when\\_i\\_in\\_awesome\\_wonder](https://hymnary.org/text/o_lord_my_god_when_i_in_awesome_wonder)

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/How\\_Great\\_Thou\\_Art](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/How_Great_Thou_Art)

ministering with displaced persons back home in England. The words speak of wonder and awe in the face of creation, much like the words of the psalmist in Psalm 8. These words do not simply describe the landscape; they shape how we view that landscape. They teach us to look at the world around us in a different light. They remind us of the vastness of God's creation and our small but treasured place in that creation.

Elsa's granny creates an entire world of her own, one she names the Land-of-Almost-Awake. In her world there are different kingdoms, including the kingdom of Miamas. The kingdoms have extensive landscapes and detailed characters, but the primary task of Granny's fairytale world is the creation and sharing of stories. The stories speak of good and evil and love and sadness and courage, but the most important job in the kingdom is to make sure the stories get shared beyond the bounds of the kingdoms. The stories must find their way from Telling Mountain into the real world. And then the stories must be heard, "For no stories can live without children listening to them."<sup>3</sup> For granny's fairytales to survive, they must be shared, much like the story of faith, a living, breathing story that has to be shared, too.

The psalmist cannot NOT tell. He cannot help himself. He looks at the star-filled sky and wonders aloud how it can be that tiny human beings have a place in God's vast and amazing world. And yet, perhaps the most amazing part of the story is that this awesome, powerful Creator chooses to be in relationship with us. The psalmist does not speak of *that* God or *a* Lord, but *our* God, *our* Lord. What are human beings that our God is mindful of them, of us? It's really quite staggering.

Elsa knows how this feels, for there are moments when Elsa is stopped in her tracks by stories she discovers about her granny and her granny's courage and compassion. God's power and God's care for humanity stops the psalmist in his tracks, too, changing how he looks at the world around him and at his life in that world. Apparently, Hine was stopped in his tracks by the faith of those he served among, too. He was inspired to write the first two verses of this beloved hymn as he looked out at the Carpathian Mountains, but it was the faithfulness of the people he met in Russia and the refugees in England who inspired the third and fourth verses. He listened to these peoples' stories, to their witnessing to God's faithfulness in the midst of

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<sup>3</sup> Fredrik Backman, *My Grandmother Asked Me to Tell You She's Sorry* (New York: Washington Square, 2013), 231.

struggles and grief, and he put those stories into words pointing to the wondrous nature of our God, the great Creator of the universe who is mindful of you and me.

These stories, these words are not shared out a naïve or simplistic view of the world. Elsa's granny has lived through horrors and heartbreak, and yet remains convinced that the horrors and heartbreak are not the story. Stuart Hine lived among people facing persecution for their faith and devastation as refugees displaced because they could not go home. As the voice of a community whose story is one of slavery and exile, the psalmist proclaims that neither slavery nor exile is Israel's true story. In each case, the word-crafter, the storyteller shares a conviction that the tales of pain, anger, heartbreak, and cynicism do not have the last word, are not THE story. Instead they resist the ugliness in their midst and instead offer a witness to dignity, hope, compassion, and awe by giving voice to the experience of something greater, by pointing to beauty and wonder that will not be overshadowed.

The tension remains today, of course. We, too live amidst competing narratives, different voices that want to tell us what we should treasure, what we should believe, what we should hold to be true in our heart of hearts. These voices speak of anger, division, hatred, greed, and cynicism. These voices want to change how the story is told. But I wonder if they have heard THE story. I wonder when they were last stopped in their tracks by that story. What about us? What about you? When was the last time you were stopped in your tracks? What or who has caused your heart to skip a beat? I saw storm clouds and powerful waves and a tiny fish the size of a penny and a double rainbow during my time away last week—all moments that made me catch my breath and wonder. But perhaps one of my favorite breath-catching, stop-me-in-my-tracks moments happened earlier this morning, when we baptized Bodhi. We have been fortunate to celebrate several infant baptisms over the past few months, but even if we celebrated one every service from now until the next millennium, I think they would still cause me to catch my breath, or I hope they would. Most baptism Sundays, I quote the writer of 1 John: “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.”<sup>4</sup> If that doesn't stop us in our tracks, I'm not sure what will:

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<sup>4</sup> 1 John 3:1. Thanks to the late Rev. Jim Holderness for pointing me back to these words.

What are human beings

that you think about them;

what are human beings

that you pay attention to them?

You've made them only slightly less than divine,

crowning them with glory and grandeur.<sup>5</sup>

It's staggering. The God who gives us mountains and oceans and blood moons and starfish and galaxies and rainbows and porcupines and peaches and volcanoes is the same God who comes to us in Jesus Christ and gives his life to save ours. This Savior, *our* Savior hangs out with outcasts, naysayers, and criminals, calls women and children out of the shadows, and confronts the powers of hatred, cynicism, oppression, and injustice without ever drawing a sword. And on the very night when he stares down those who will have him killed, this same Savior gathers his friends around a table, gives them bread and wine, signs of God's unfailing promise of new life in the face of death, hope in the face of despair. This same Savior God invites us and trusts us to do the same in his name. *This* is our story; *this* is our song. It's really quite staggering. It is better than Elsa's granny's best, most outlandish fairytales, and truer than any other tale we've been told. If we listen closely enough it will take our breath away, break us out of our cynicism, and stop us in our tracks, just long enough for us to get our wits about us so that we too can sing with gusto for the waiting world to hear. "Then sings my soul, my Savior God to thee; how great thou art, how great thou art!"

Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Psalm 8:4-5, CEB