

“Behind the Music”

Rev. Brian R. Louis, Faith Presbyterian Church, July 23, 2023

Our Help is in God Always – Our God Our Help in Ages Past (687)

Thank you to our music director, Janis Wheat, for the idea for this worship service and the sermon format today, and for letting me borrow your book *Then Sings My Soul, 150 of the World's Greatest Hymn Stories*, by Robert J. Morgan. The information for most of what I talk about in these hymns comes from Morgan's book.

Our first hymn to discuss is Our God Our Help in Ages Past. Isaac Watts wrote this hymn in the early 1700s and it is based on Psalm 90. A couple of interesting facts about this hymn, according to Morgan: the BBC played the hymn when World War II was declared, and it was also sung at the funeral of Winston Churchill. ¹

Our God, Our Help in ages past. I think we can all agree that God has helped us all throughout our lifetimes. God has helped us in tough times. God has been with us in the trials that we face physically, psychologically, and emotionally. But God has also been there in the good times. For the birth of children, weddings, baptisms, all these amazing events in life. God is always there with us.

And we know by reading the Bible that God has been with our spiritual forebears for thousands of years. The Bible itself is the story of God's involvement in the life of the world and God's people. The Old Testament tells the story of God's involvement and covenant with our spiritual forebears, the Jewish people. With the arrival of Jesus, we have a new covenant through Christ.

Through Jesus, we gain the help and salvation we need from the darkness of the world. Through Christ, our sins are forgiven, and we gain the freedom of a new life in Christ. The hymn is hopeful too, isn't it? The first verse says God is our hope for years to come. I'd say God is our hope for the rest of our years. In God we take refuge and comfort. That whatever challenges we may be going through right now are not permanent, although it may seem like it.

God has helped us all. Our help, the help of our faith, of each other, is in God. It has always been that way. May it always be that way.

Jesus Loves Us All -- Jesus Loves Me (188)

This song has been famous in Sunday schools across the United States for over a hundred years. And perhaps it would never have been written if it hadn't been for the financial Panic of 1837. The sisters Anna and Sarah Warner grew up in New York City the daughters of a wealthy lawyer. But the panic and the recession that followed brought hardship to the family and they had to leave New York City and they moved up to Constitution Island across the river from West Point, the U.S. Military Academy. Ann and Susan started writing to help support the family. One of their projects was a novel named *Say and Seal* where the title character was a young boy who was dying and his Sunday school teacher comforted him by singing a little song he makes up, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the bible tells me so."² The words to the song come from a poem written by Anna.³ The novel was a bestseller and William Bradbury who wrote

¹ Morgan, 39.

² Morgan, 139

³ [Jesus Loves Me This I Know | The Remarkable Story Behind the Beloved Song \(bibilium.com\)](https://www.bibilium.com/jesus-loves-me-this-i-know-the-remarkable-story-behind-the-beloved-song)

hymns penned a little song to go with the words of the song sung by the teacher. According to Morgan's book, Anna and Sarah taught bible classes for cadets at the military academy for 40 years and they were both buried with full military honors. They are the only civilians buried at the West Point cemetery.⁴

Jesus loves me, this I know, the opening verse that I suspect most people in the congregation know. I find the love of Jesus one of the most comforting things about being a Christian. I find comfort and solace in thinking of Jesus as my friend. Walking beside me, with me always. Rejoicing with me in the good times and crying with me and comforting me in the dark times. Jesus is always there to help. I can call on him whenever I need him. And I also get to talk to him during an average day. I don't have to turn to him when things are good or bad. I can visit with him during the day. I can turn my attention to him and say a quick prayer, like, "Jesus, be with me today. Help me be the best follower of you that I can be." Jesus is my support and advocate, the source of my courage and resolve. He is always there for me because Jesus loves me. Amen.

The Promises of the Lord -- Standing on the Promises (1886) – Russell Carter (838)

The stories I like the most behind a hymn come out of difficult times, or where there is something miraculous and healing in the composer's past that paves the way for their faith and the creation of a beautiful hymn. That's the case with *Standing on the Promises*, written in 1886 by Russell Kelso Carter. According to Carter's testimony in Morgan's book, he grew up in a Christian household, but as a youth he was not interested in religion and didn't consider himself a believer in Christ. At 15 he decided to devote his life to Christ after getting involved with a group of Christians at a military school he was attending. However, he didn't ditch his old friends and habits and he slipped back and forth between devotion to Christ and wavering elsewhere.

When he was 30, after years of having heart troubles, Carter was near death. It was then that he knelt in his mother's room in her place in Baltimore and "made a consecration that covered everything" and all doubts he had vanished. He writes that a quiet came over him and the Bible was open and wonderfully satisfying to him. It was not long after that he was healed "by the power of God alone."⁵

God has promised many things over the years. God made a covenant with Abraham that he would have an amazing number of descendants and he would be given the promised land of Canaan and God would be the God to all his descendants. Through Jesus, we are promised never-ending love, forgiveness of our sins and eternal life. And that's only a few of the promises. When as the song says, we face howling storms of doubt and fear, we hope in the promises of the Lord, that we are loved, we are children of God, and that ultimately, God will take care of God's children. Today when Ana was baptized, the water of her baptism was a sign of God's covenant with us, a covenant of grace, where we are cleansed and made new, the beginning of a new life in Christ. Let us all leave here today remembering the gift of our baptism, that we have a renewed sense of being forgiven, and when we leave here today, we go into the world fresh, and supported by the grace of God and the promises of God to us. Amen.

⁴ Morgan, 139.

⁵ Morgan, 215.