

Swiftly Pass the Clouds of Glory

*Swiftly pass the clouds of glory,
heaven's voice, the dazzling light;
Moses and Elijah vanish –
Christ alone commands the height!
Peter, James, and John fall silent,
turning from the summit's rise
downward toward the shadowed valley
where their Lord has fixed his eyes.*

*Glimpsed and gone the revelation –
they shall gain and keep its truth
not by building on the mountain
any shrine or sacred booth
but by following the savior
through the valley to the cross
and by testing faith's resilience
through betrayal, pain, and loss.*

*Lord, transfigure our perception
with the purest light that shines
and recast our life's intentions
to the shape of your designs
till we seek no other glory
than what lies past Calvary's hill
and our living and our dying
and our rising by your will.¹*

Density of Light

*Density of light
that could shatter the cold rock of the moon
compacted flame
that only the face of holy love could withstand,
may Christ reflect your blaze
to the distant satellite of my heart
and melt the fear
that from the orbit of my days
you would scatter
my dim shards to darkness.*

*Sudden lightning
in the middle of night,
showing me
a vast land and a twisting trail
are waiting
where all I have seen is a wall of darkness,
persist in me as hope
and as strength to finish my descent
from the mountain through the valley
toward an open field I cannot see.*

*Density of light,
compacted flame,
sudden lightning,
draw me onward through the darkness
trusting
that light shall spring from the grave
and the coldest rock in space
shall join in the blaze of song;
glory, glory, glory
glory be to you O God.²*

¹ *The Faith We Sing* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 2102.

² Thomas H. Troeger, *Borrowed Light* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1994), 5.

These two poems exemplify a rare balance. Especially when considering the present-day divide between faith and science, it is unusual to see theological concepts paired with scientific terminology.

Thomas H. Troeger (b. 1945), J. Edward and Ruth Cox Lantz Professor *Emeritus* of Christian Communication, Yale Divinity School and Yale Institute of Sacred Music, has been intentionally integrating these two realms and their corresponding languages together for the past fifty years. In his own words, Troeger describes his hymn-writing approach as “translating between the worlds of science and faith.”³ This is a unique objective – and an imperative one – for today’s hymn writers. If the church is going to be relevant in the twenty-first century, it must hold this juxtaposition between trust in God and the expansion of human knowledge in balance.

These two poems accomplish just that. Meant to be performed together on Transfiguration Sunday in the liturgical year, with a narrator speaking the “Density of Light” stanzas between the congregation’s singing of the “Swiftly Pass the Clouds of Glory” stanzas, this tour de force transfigures one’s perception about life’s intentions.⁴ Not tarrying in the clouds, Troeger commences the hymn with a sense of mission. Already in the first stanza The Lord has his eyes “fixed” on the valley, where there is much Kingdom-work to be accomplished. His disciples, most likely stupefied, tacitly regather their thoughts on the way downward. The second stanza reveals a further destination in Jesus’ mind – the cross. This is, however, hidden from the disciples’ eyes until after the resurrection. Only Jesus knows the trajectory of his mission at this point, and the disciples must discover the meaning of the transfiguration and the mettle of their faith through “betrayal, pain, and loss.” Framed in a petition, the final stanza creatively discloses Jesus’ terminal stop with the words, “what lies past Calvary’s hill” and “our living and our dying and our rising.” That destination is the right-hand seat of the Father through the resurrection and ascension. Consequently, it is through faith in Jesus’ rising that the singer will be raised up and

³ Ray Waddle, “Professor Tom Troeger Retiring on a Song and a Prayer.” <http://divinity.yale.edu/news/professor-tom-troeger-retiring-song-and-prayer>.

⁴ Carl P. Daw, Jr., *Glory to God: a Companion* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 194.

transfigured as well. In the meantime, however, his disciples on earth may ask God to transfigure their minds and life's objectives, in order to shine light around them and render Kingdom-work into present-day shadowed valleys.

The poem "Density of Light" supplements the scientific counterpart to the experience. The hearer realizes that fact when the phrases "Density of light," "shatter the cold rock of the moon" and "distant satellite of my heart" are uttered. Indeed, anything is game at this point. Only six lines into the poem and the performance has already combined the instant of creation and the 21st century together. The first stanza requests that Christ's love may radiate into the hearer's hearts and melt the fear and darkness out of them. The second stanza petitions for hope while the journey "from the mountain through the valley" is undertaken. This, of course, is a beautiful allusion to the Transfiguration account.⁵ Then, in the third stanza, Troeger implements scientific terminology with phrases such as "the coldest rock in space" and the reiteration of "Density of light." This realm of science, however, is then balanced with the realm of faith with the concluding doxology "Glory, glory, glory, glory be to you O God." It is pertinent to note the final stanza combined images from the previous two (i.e. flame and lightning), masterfully unifying the whole poem. Then the tripod of light, flame and lightning are utilized to form a supplication for guidance through life's darkness into the radiant glory of the afterlife and the restoration of all creation.⁶

Having framed the structure of both poems, it is now time to elucidate some specific poetic techniques employed in "Swiftly Pass the Clouds of Glory." First, Troeger constructs a rhyme scheme of ABCBDEFE in each stanza, an excellent example of a cross-rhyme. For example, "glory" and "vanish" do not rhyme, but certainly "light" and "height" do. Similarly, "rise" at the end of line six rhymes with "eyes" on line eight. This pattern is also seen in the following stanzas with the words "truth," "booth,"

⁵ The correlating scripture passages are Matthew 17: 1-7, Mark 9: 2-13, and Luke 9: 28-36.

⁶ This is evidenced with the words "the coldest rock in space shall join in the blaze of song." I believe this pertains to Romans 8:19-22.

“cross,” “loss,” “shines,” “designs,” “hill,” and “will.” The second feature worth noting is the pervasive trochaic meter throughout the entire poem. Even though the syllable count alternates between 8 and 7, rendering a meter scheme of 8.7.8.7 D, Troeger does not stray once from the trochaic pattern.

The last observation about Troeger’s hymn is that each stanza employs a specific poetic technique. The first utilizes an antithesis which contrasts “the dazzling light” of the mountaintop experience with “the shadowed valley” in front of Jesus and his disciples. There is an alliteration which commences the second stanza. The words “glimpsed” and “gone” orchestrate the ephemeral moment of the transfiguration because of the fleeting quickness of the g’s. Last, but certainly not least, a powerful climax concludes stanza 3 with the phrase “and our living and our dying and our rising by your will.” The transition between living and dying is trumped by the progression from dying to rising. In other words, each word (living, dying, rising) builds an ascending order of intensity.

Before continuing with Troeger’s biography, it is pertinent to mention what tune is paired with “Swiftly Pass the Clouds of Glory” in *The Faith We Sing* and where it appears in the hymnal supplement. First published in 1943 through *The Hymnal 1940*, the tune GENEVA was written by George Henry Day (1886-1966).⁷ He was born in New York and resided in that state his entire life, serving as an organist-choirmaster for a few churches. The tune name comes from Geneva, New York, where George Day worked for Trinity Episcopal Church (1935-1966).⁸ The tune is split into equal halves, the first in the mode of F Minor while the second in F Major mode. This contrast highlights the antithesis between “dazzling light” and “shadowed valley,” albeit the order should be reversed.⁹ Almost as fascinating is the overall range of the tune. Only 4 notes (of the entire 79) are outside the tonic to upper dominant interval (F to C). Two of those are D’s in the staff and the others are Middle C’s, making the ultimate

⁷ Daw, *Glory to God*, 193.

⁸ Carlton Raymond Young, *Companion to The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 739.

⁹ I believe F Major could depict the “dazzling light” and F Minor should illustrate the “shadowed valley.”

range of the piece a major ninth. This pairing of George Henry Day's tune with Troeger's text falls appropriately within the "Christ's Life and Teaching" category in *The Faith We Sing*.

Much has already been said about Thomas Troeger, but perhaps some specific details will place his work in a clearer perspective. Born in Suffern, New York, 1945, Thomas grew up aspiring to become a professional flutist. During his high-school years, however, a dynamic and erudite minister – Richard Weld – arrived at his parish, altering Troeger's vocational direction. Using Troeger's own words, "In high school I had wondered if I could be intellectual and a devout Christian. He showed me I could."¹⁰ Thomas later graduated from Yale College and taught at Colgate Rochester Divinity School (1977-91), Iliff School of Theology (1991-2005), and Yale Divinity School (2005-2015). Interestingly, he is ordained in both the Presbyterian (PCUSA) and Episcopal Churches, aligning him with both traditions. Besides writing many books on homiletics, church music, and imagination in the creative process, Troeger has published nearly 400 hymn texts. Many of them can be found in current hymnals of most denominations, proving Troeger is one of the world's most relevant and prolific hymn writers of this era.

Some of the most salient poetic characteristics in Troeger's hymn-writing are a sense of development throughout the text and the inclusion of scientific terminology. The former is not only apparent but intentional: "I strive for a sense of development from stanza to stanza and for a text whose meaning is comprehensible upon first singing yet rich enough to bear repetition and to produce new insights upon closer reading."¹¹ This sequential progression is evidenced in "Swiftly Pass the Clouds of Glory" with the unraveling revelation of Christ's destination from stanza to stanza. Many other Troeger hymns can be used as examples, but that endeavor is for another paper. The integration of scientific language into his hymns is a distinct characteristic of Troeger. He avers that in the church, there are two types of current-day languages which envision the word – one viewing its cosmological vastness and

¹⁰ Ray Waddle, "Thomas H. Troeger: between the Life of the Imagination and the Life of God." <http://divinity.yale.edu/news/thomas-h-troeger-between-life-imagination-and-life-god>.

¹¹ Thomas H. Troeger, *Song That Blesses Earth* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015), 79.

societal fragmentation, the other through the perception of the saints of old (primarily in Biblical imagery). It is typical for a hymn writer to craft texts in one of those paradigms, “or the hymn writer might combine them both, drawing upon our global and scientific vision to expand the perimeters of tradition, and using tradition as a source of wisdom and revelation that deepen the meaning of our contemporary life. It is this integrative approach that I have chosen.”¹² Needless to say, the first page of this paper presents an excellent example of the convergence of these two languages.

Though Troeger has written on a myriad of theological themes, perhaps civil justice and creation (especially cosmology) are his primary ones. Troeger gives tribute to the cultural revolutions of the past 50 years – especially the women’s movement, civil rights movement, and environmental movement – for the inspiration of the former category.¹³ Of the many hymns available to choose from, “The Least in God’s Kingdom Is Greater than John” will demonstrate a typical justice hymn of Troeger’s:

*The least in God’s kingdom is greater than John
For God is not founding the kingdom upon
The standards we use to determine and gauge
Who ranks with the greatest and least of our age.*

*The world in which people and nations are classed
And property, privilege and profits dispersed
According to wealth and its system of caste
Will be in the kingdom completely reversed.*

*A shift in the world has already begun
Through wonders and healings that Jesus has done
Among those not favored by riches or birth
Yet bearing God’s image of infinite worth.*

*Christ, topple the ladder of arrogant thought
We climb in our struggle for status and gain
That we may embody the kingdom you brought
Through love that transfigures injustice and pain.*¹⁴

¹² Ibid., 75.

¹³ Waddle, “Thomas H. Troeger,” <http://divinity.yale.edu/news/thomas-h-troeger-between-life-imagination-and-life-god>.

¹⁴ Thomas H. Troeger, *New Hymns for the Life of the Church* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992), 54.

Notice how Troeger constructed the hymn in a progression. He stated a scriptural truth from Matthew 11:11 in the first stanza to accurately explain the current world's condition in stanza two. Next, Troeger brought a Christological focus on the matter in stanza three, concluding with a petition to Christ in the last stanza. Also noteworthy is the integration of current-day language (especially "ladder," which surely hints at the extant "corporate ladder" in our global economy) and Biblical language (bearing God's image).

As mentioned above, another primary theological category throughout Troeger's corpus is creation. He has written hymns on nature in general, but his texts utilizing biology, chemistry, and cosmology are particularly interesting. This is certainly true of "Each Breath is Borrowed Air" and "How Miniscule This Planet." Observe the explicit references to technical biological language in the first example and the present-day cosmological conception of planet Earth in the second.

*The sea flows in our veins.
The dust of stars is spun
to form the coiled, encoded skeins
by which our cells are run.¹⁵*

*How miniscule this planet
amidst the stars and night:
a mote that floats in vastness,
mere dust that catches light,
yet, God, you count of value –
of boundless, precious worth –
all creatures who inhabit
this tiny, mite-sized earth.¹⁶*

¹⁵ Thomas H. Troeger, *Above the Moon Earth Rises* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), 8. This is only a small portion of the whole text.

¹⁶ Troeger, *Song That Blesses Earth*, 55. This is only the first of the hymn's four stanzas.

Two more things are necessary to close this analysis on Thomas Troeger. The first is a list of his most frequently published hymns, compiled from *The Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology* and *Hymnary.org*, and the second is a complete list of Troeger's works. The parentheses in the list below indicate how many instances these eminent hymns are found in current hymnals. According to *The Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology*, these are Troeger's best-known and most widely-published hymns:

"As a Chalice Cast of Gold" (8)

"God Made from One Blood all the Families of Earth" (10)

"O Praise the Gracious Power" (11)

"Praise the Source of Faith and Learning" (5)

"Silence! Frenzied Unclean Spirit" (12)

"Source and Sovereign, Rock and Cloud" (7)

"These Things Did Thomas Count as Real" (7)

"View the Present through the Promise" (6)

"Wind Who Makes All Winds That Blow" (13)¹⁷

One may question, who would have imagined a title such as "Silence! Frenzied Unclean Spirit" would be Troeger's second most published hymn? Although the title might conjure up thoughts of exorcisms and demonology, Troeger's text artfully addresses one of the necessary components of Christian faith, that of deliverance and complete well-being. Perhaps the main reason, though, is that Troeger wrote hymns for specific lessons in the lectionary, especially those with few or any hymns.

¹⁷ JRW. "Thomas Troeger." *The Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology*. Canterbury Press, <http://www.hymnology.co.uk/t/thomas-troeger>.

The complete list of works by Thomas Troeger can be found at the end of this essay. It includes, among his published collections of hymns, homiletical and liturgical themed books as well. Before turning the page, however, please be reminded of the wisdom Thomas Troeger has offered in his words and rhymes: We should not pit faith against science, but instead continue to bridge the gap between trust in God and the expansion of scientific knowledge. Christians must hold this tension between the two, because this will be critical for the survival and efficacy of the twenty-first century church. Indeed, “to live gracefully with this tension is the mark of wisdom.”¹⁸

¹⁸ Troeger, *Above the Moon Earth Rises*, vii.

Complete List of Works by Thomas H. Troeger

Song That Blesses Earth (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015).

A Sermon Workbook: Exercises in the Art and Craft of Preaching, with Nora Tubbs Tisdale (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013).

Music as Prayer: The Theology and Practice of Church Music, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Sermon Sparks: 122 ideas to ignite your preaching, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011).

Wonder Reborn: Creating Sermons on Hymns, Music, and Poetry, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010).

God, you made all things for singing, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

So That All Might Know: Preaching to the Whole Congregation, with Edward Everding, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008).

Preaching and Worship, (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003).

Above the Moon Earth Rises: Hymn Texts, Anthems and Poems for a New Creation, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001).

Imagining a Sermon, tr. by Hirohide Koshikawa into Japanese (Tokyo: The Board of Publications, The United Church of Christ in Japan, 2001).

Preaching While the Church is Under Reconstruction. The Visionary Role of Preachers in a Fragmented World, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999).

New Proclamation Series A, 1999, Easter Through Pentecost, (Minneapolis: MN: Fortress Press, 1999).

Ten Strategies for Preaching in a Multimedia Culture, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996).

Borrowed Light: Hymn Texts, Prayers, and Poems, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

Trouble at the Table. Gathering the Tribes for Worship, with Carol Doran. (Nashville: Abingdon Press 1992).

The Parable of Ten Preachers, (Nashville: Abingdon Press 1992).

New Hymns for the Life of the Church, with Carol Doran (New York: Oxford University Press 1992).

Imagining a Sermon, (Abingdon Press: 1990).

New Hymns for the Lectionary: To Glorify the Maker's Name, with Carol Doran (Oxford University Press, 1985).

Open to Glory: Renewing Worship in the Congregation, with Carol Doran (Judson Press, 1983).

Creating Fresh Images in the Pulpit: New Rungs for Jacob's Ladder, (Judson Press, 1982).

Are You Saved? Answers to the Awkward Question, (Westminster Press, 1979).

Rage! Reflect. Rejoice! Praying with the Psalmists, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977).

Meditation: Escape to Reality, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977).

Bibliography

Daw, Carl. P., Jr. *Glory to God: a Companion*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016.

This book is a great defender of the Presbyterian tradition. The entries almost always comment how a specific hymn refers to the BCP's unique intentions for their liturgical services. Also, most articles are quite impressive in length and give a wealth of practical information.

The Faith We Sing. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000.

Troeger, Thomas H. *Borrowed Light: Hymn Texts, Prayers, and Poems*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Troeger, Thomas H. *Song That Blesses Earth*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015.

This is a collection of hymn texts split into six categories: Christ Is Born; Christ Suffers, Dies And Lives; Christ Wakens Song And Art; Christ, The Church's Wellspring, Root, and Source; Christ In Whom All Things Cohere; Christ Unnamed But Known. Also incorporated is a concluding, personal section in which the author shares his criteria for critiquing poetry.

Troeger, Thomas H. *New Hymns for the Life of the Church*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Troeger, Thomas H. *Above the Moon Earth Rises*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Waddle, Ray. "Professor Tom Troeger Retiring on a Song and a Prayer."

<http://divinity.yale.edu/news/professor-tom-troeger-retiring-song-and-prayer>.

Waddle, Ray. "Thomas H. Troeger: between the Life of the Imagination and the Life of God."

<http://divinity.yale.edu/news/thomas-h-troeger-between-life-imagination-and-life-god>.

Watson, J. R. "Thomas Troeger." *The Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology*. Canterbury Press,

<http://www.hymnology.co.uk/t/thomas-troeger>.

Young, Carlton Raymond. *Companion to The United Methodist Hymnal*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993.

This book has personality. The articles are written with sophistication and wit, and this is especially evident with performance practice suggestion. The entries also sometimes provide a historical narrative of the United Methodists and the publishing of their hymnals – a much appreciated characteristic.