



Ships on a Stormy Sea, by Albert de Marées, oil on canvas, 1848

THIS MONTH WE'RE TAKING A LOOK AT THE BIBLICAL INSPIRATION for some of our best-loved hymns, and at the theology in the hymns themselves. It just might be that "Amazing Grace" is THE best-loved hymn. If there were a Billboard Top 40 of all-time favorite hymns, "Amazing Grace" probably would be #1, although I suspect that's partly because it's the only hymn, other than a few Christmas carols, that almost everybody knows, whether or not they've ever stepped inside a church.

So what is it about "Amazing Grace"? A recent count found more than 1,100 different recordings of the hymn,ⁱ from Johnny Cash to Ladysmith Black Mambazo, from Pavarotti to Elvis Presley. Bill Moyers made a whole documentary about it, exploring the hymn's enduring power.ⁱⁱ Something about "Amazing Grace" transcends religion, culture, color, and geography.ⁱⁱⁱ Its soaring phrases have long had a special

resonance for those struggling for justice. It was sung in slave churches before the Civil War. It was an unofficial anthem of the civil rights movement of the 1960s.^{iv}

Judy Collins, one of many who have recorded it, gives these insights into the song's nearly universal appeal: "'Amazing Grace' is a song about letting go, bottoming out, seeing the light, turning it over, trusting the universe, breathing in, breathing out, going with the flow ... don't push the river, ease on down the road, get on your knees, let your guard down, ... drop your defenses ... don't be afraid, when all else fails, pray; there are a million ways to say it."^v

The song itself says it this way: "I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see."

Luke 15:1-10

The Parable of the Lost Sheep

15 Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. 2 But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

3 Then Jesus told them this parable: 4 "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? 5 And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders 6 and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' 7 I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

The Parable of the Lost Coin

8 "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins[a] and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? 9 And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' 10 In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

THERE'S A SAYING THAT WHILE RELIGION IS FOR THOSE WHO ARE AFRAID OF GOING TO HELL, the songs we call "spirituals" are for those who have been there.^{vi} "Amazing Grace" is one such song. It speaks to those moments in life when all you can do is trust God. Somehow, it has had the power to accompany people through times when they are called to look deep within their own souls. Somehow, it reverberates with the truth that when you think you can't go on, there is a power greater than yourself that can move you to do the impossible or the unimaginable.

This flows naturally from the experience of the man who wrote "Amazing Grace." John Newton was born in London in 1725 and began sailing with his sea captain father when he was 11 years old. At 17 he planned to go to Jamaica to make his fortune but before that could happen, he suffered the fate feared by every young man living near England's seaports: he was kidnapped by a naval press gang and forced to serve in the Royal Navy. After a year he deserted, was recaptured and punished, and so he took the first opportunity to be traded to a slave-trading vessel captained by one of his father's friends. At 19 he was bound for Africa and the lucrative and at that time quite respectable slave trade.^{vii}

Newton contracted malaria. The poor treatment he received during his illness caused him to feel as though he were "deep in the grip of sin."^{viii} Not because he was in the slave trade, mind you, because that was just his job. But he drank heavily and even for a sailor, he was unusually profane. He swore such a blue streak that even his sea-hardened captain thought Newton's curses might bring the wrath of God onto their ship.^{ix}

On the trip back to England, the ship was hit by a storm. As Newton climbed from below deck at the sound of the alarm, a sailor ahead of him was washed overboard. Someone cried that the ship was sinking. The half-frozen, exhausted sailors frantically worked the pumps, bailed with buckets, and jammed clothes and bedding into cracks in the hull. The storm blew away most of the sails and swept all of the ship's pigs, sheep, and chickens into the sea.

Eventually, the storm subsided. Newton wrote that he had seen "the hand of God in our ... deliverance. ... The Lord had wrought a marvelous thing; I was no longer an infidel; I heartily renounced my former profaneness... I was quite freed from the habit of swearing." Back on shore, he began going to church, sometimes twice a day. God had brought him safe thus far, as the hymn puts it; he was certain that God had saved him,^x not just from the storm but from the profane and wretched life he'd been living. Some hymnals change the word "wretch" to the word "soul" in "Amazing Grace." "That saved a soul like me;" not "a wretch like me." I get this – no one should tell us we're wretches; I don't believe God sees us as wretches – not any of us. But I know that feeling of being lost, of feeling separated from God or distant from God and God's love and that is truly a feeling of wretchedness. And when something happens that causes you to feel found, claimed, restored, loved once again, it feels like being saved.

For Newton, the feeling of being found was transformational. His experience of God's mercy eventually flowed back out into the best-loved hymn in the English language.^{xi}

Now, it's fascinating that Newton's story has blossomed into a flourishing mythology. Most versions of this myth place the writing of "Amazing Grace" immediately after the storm, and they all connect Newton's conversion to his leaving the slave trade. One writer tells the story this way: "One day, when he was in his ship's cabin reading a sermon ... he suddenly saw the evil of what he was doing. He ordered the ship to turn around in mid-ocean, and returning to Africa, he set his human cargo free."^{xii}

If only this were so. In fact, at the time of the storm, Newton's promising career as a slave trader had just begun. Six years later, he did leave the slave trade, but not because he found it morally reprehensible, because he didn't. He quit because he became ill. He decided *that* was a message from God to take up a less physically demanding calling than seafaring. Ten years after leaving the sea, Newton was ordained as an Anglican clergyman. His powerful sermons quickly won him a reputation as a leading Evangelical preacher.^{xiii} He wrote "Amazing Grace" in 1772, over 20 years after the storm at sea. But it wasn't until 1788, when he was in his sixties and had been retired from the slave trade for 34 years, that Newton at last spoke against slavery.

A year earlier, in 1787, a small group of committed men had taken up the cause of abolition in the British Empire and started a movement. John Newton was riding this wave of changing public opinion when he published his forceful pamphlet, "Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade." Late as it was, it was an important statement for the movement, because it was the equivalent of a celebrity endorsement. Newton begins by apologizing for his confession, which he says comes too late, that he "was once an active instrument in a business at which," as he put it, "my heart now shudders."^{xiv}

Adam Hochschild writes, "That Newton shuddered now is testimony to the way a strong social movement can awaken a conscience – even in a clergyman, whose very business is the awakening of consciences."^{xv} The first printing of Newton's pamphlet sold out. He became an ally of William Wilberforce, leader of the British abolitionist campaign, and testified against the slave trade before Parliament. Newton lived to see the passage of the Slave Trade Act in 1807.

For me, the truth about Newton is much more powerful and grace-filled than the myth, especially in light of the passage in Luke that Newton references. Here in Luke, the religious leaders are grumbling about Jesus. Hanging around with tax collectors and sinners is definitely not an honorable thing to do. It brings dishonor on these leaders because they had been associating with Jesus, too. They grumble because they should have known that he was the kind of guy who would hang out with these disreputable types.^{xvi} We might stumble over the term sinner the way we trip over wretch, thinking either, "Aren't we all sinners?" or "Why do we have to label anyone as a sinner?" "Sinners" isn't a popular word in 2026, in spite of a recent movie by that name, and fair enough. It's a word that's been used to bully people, to make people feel less than, to shame them. Sadly, it's a word that has been abused by the church. But we need to take the passage and the way Jesus uses the word on its own terms. What really matters here is that Jesus embraces the very people the rest of religious society rejects.^{xvii}

Jesus begins by asking an engaging question: "Which one of you ...?" When we hear this, we want to respond: "Me. Me. I fit in; I'm one who" Then he sets up a desirable situation: "Having a hundred sheep ..." "Wow," we'd think. "What wealth. I'd love that." But then we learn a sheep is lost. The one who loses a sheep wouldn't be the owner; it would be a shepherd. In Jesus' day, shepherds were a despised occupation. And so "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep" turns out to be a highly insulting inference. It would be like saying, "Which one of you, having a hundred dumpsters (not that you own, but that you dive into searching for garbage to live on) ..." So

Jesus turns our hearts and imaginations to a troubling truth: God is not like a well-fed priest or a king in a palace. God is like a despised shepherd who is extravagant about the well-being of every single one of his charges.^{xviii}

And just in case you thought he was kidding about this, Jesus goes on to use an example that would shock *all* the men who are listening, whatever their background. God is like a woman! And a shameless woman at that. The coins in question would have been her dowry. Losing one of them would have breached the marriage contract and dishonored her whole family. The woman redeems her initial shame by diligently searching for the lost coin. But then, she tells everyone! She tells everyone about her shameful private business. But her joy is greater than her shame. In fact, in her joy, there is no shame.^{xix}

Think about that. In God, there is no shame, only joy. No shame about us, whatever we've done, whatever we've experienced, whatever's been done to us. Only joy. And the thing is, the "moral" that's attached to these parables about repentance doesn't really mesh with the stories themselves, because in the stories, neither the lost sheep nor the lost coin "repent." They do nothing. In fact, these two parables are about the *searching*. The searching by the shepherd and by the woman, and especially about their joy. There may indeed be joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, but these parables *aren't about* that; they focus on the joy to be had from hearing the good news of the extravagant God who risks all to search for each one of us personally, individually – joyfully. Our God isn't sitting off somewhere in heaven waiting for someone to bring news that a sinner has repented today. Our God is actively searching for us.

It's easy to condemn Newton for being blind to the evils of slavery not only when he was in the middle of it, but for decades afterwards. The fact that he was more concerned with swearing than with slavery tells us how morally invisible slavery was in his world. It's appalling; it really is. But Jesus eats with sinners. Four times Luke reports meals in which Jesus is criticized for his relationship with sinners, but Jesus never once comments on the sinners' behavior.^{xx} He sits with them, eats with them, accepts them. It is a dramatic acting out of his insight into God's indiscriminate, merciful, redeeming love, what Philip Yancey calls "the scandal of grace."^{xxi}

Here is what is so amazing about grace, what Jesus shows us by eating with these outcasts: Love is a far better stimulus to change than shame, threat, or pressure.^{xxii} Shame does not bring about positive transformation. One writer puts it this way: "In terms of spiritual growth, the faith conviction that God accepts me as I am is a tremendous help to become better."^{xxiii} One of my favorite pieces of wisdom from Anne Lamott, one I return to again and again, is that God loves you just the way you are. God loves all of us more than we can possibly imagine, exactly the way we are. And God loves us too much to let us stay like this.^{xxiv}

Sally, a member of the church I served in San Anselmo, told me that for many years, the choir of that church gave Christmas concerts in San Quentin. Some of those years they were allowed to stand in the courtyard outside the building that housed death row, and many of the prisoners who had attended the concert inside the prison would stand with the choir and sing Christmas carols and hymns to the death row inmates. "Amazing Grace" was always, inevitably, one of their requests. When the choir and prisoners in the yard sang it together, the prisoners on death row would flick their lights off and on, which Sally said was their way of sharing the message of this beloved hymn.

The message is that Jesus eats with sinners. If you don't like the word, "sinners," then substitute "ordinary slob." Jesus eats with ordinary slob. Or "perfectly imperfect human beings;" Jesus eats with perfectly imperfect human beings. Or even just, "me, just exactly the way I am." Jesus eats with me, just as I am. It took Newton 60-some years to figure out slavery was cruel and inhuman. All that time, God loved him and continued searching for him. The hymn, "Amazing Grace," produced in the face of sin and desolation, reminds us powerfully, in that healing way that only music can, that God never, ever, ever gives up on us.

Which is truly, deeply, powerfully amazing.

May it be so for you, and for me. Amen.

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- ⁱ Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire's Slaves* (New York: Mariner Books, 2006 [Houghton Mifflin edition first published in 2005]).
- ⁱⁱ <https://billmoyers.com/content/amazing-grace-bill-moyers/>
- ⁱⁱⁱ Judy Collins, *Amazing Grace* (New York: Hyperion, 1991).
- ^{iv} Hochschild
- ^v Collins
- ^{vi} Collins
- ^{vii} Hochschild
- ^{viii} Hochschild
- ^{ix} Collins
- ^x Hochschild
- ^{xi} Collins
- ^{xii} Hochschild
- ^{xiii} Hochschild
- ^{xiv} Hochschild
- ^{xv} Hochschild
- ^{xvi} David Ewart, www.holytextures.com.
- ^{xvii} Greg Carey, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=9/12/2010.
- ^{xviii} Ewart
- ^{xix} Ewart
- ^{xx} Luke 5:27-32; 7:36-50; 15:1-32; and 19:1-10.
- ^{xxi} Philip Yancey, *What's so Amazing About Grace?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).
- ^{xxii} Brennan Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books).
- ^{xxiii} Peter Van Breemen, *Certain As the Dawn* (Denville, N.J.: Dimension Books, 1980).
- ^{xxiv} Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999).