

Remarks Upon the Life of Fanny J. Crosby and Four of Her Hymns:
“Rescue the Perishing,” “He Hideth My Soul,”
“Tell Me the Story of Jesus,” and “Blessed Assurance”
A Sermon Preached on June 29, 2008,
The Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time and Hymnfest Sunday
by the Rev. Scott O. Stapleton

The Fanny Crosby I Wanted to Escape From

We are taking a break today from “thinking theologically.” Today, whatever theology we are going to take home with us will be captured in song. And in this portion of the service, at least, our teacher will be Frances Jane Crosby, better known as Fanny Crosby.

I cannot help but smile at this turn of events. Once upon a time, Fanny Crosby was *the* hymn lyricist I most wanted to escape from. I grew up singing her songs. “Blessed Assurance” was the national anthem, if you will, of every rally I attended. As much as anything else I can recall, her hymns symbolized—no, they helped *create*—the evangeli-cal culture I knew from my youth. I don’t wish to convey that was a bad thing. It was not, not by any means. But it was a culture that had little room for the likes of me, a young man anxious to put his mind to work as much as his heart. Fanny Crosby wrote over 9,000 hymns that came from the heart. She is blamed for contributing to and accelerating what is called the “feminization of American culture”—the shift, that is, from a culture rooted in tenacity and strength (Calvinist, of course) to a culture drowning in nostalgia and sentiment. I could not survive in that culture. I had to escape its suffocating empha-sis upon the home, upon certain prescribed emotions that you had to adopt whether or not you felt them. And yet, and yet, here I am—here *we* are about to embark on a reappraisal of this remarkable woman and the legacy she has left, and to do so in the very medium she preferred and I once despised. I smile, and I am glad. The turnabout, I suppose, represents a coming home—bringing my mind with me. I insist, along with the apostle Paul, that we must sing with our minds as well as our hearts (1 Cor. 14:15). But there is something to be said for doing so at home.

A few facts about her life: she was born March 24, 1820, in Southeast, New York, a stretch of land that borders Connecticut. A descendant of the Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay colonies, she inherited a musical disposition as well as the poetic one by which she became known. Bing Crosby is a relative of hers. Before she was two months old, she contracted an eye inflammation. Her family’s physician was not available, and a stranger claiming medical know-how was allowed to treat her. He did so with hot poultices, which made the inflammation worse. She lost her sight. A few months later, her father died, and her mother, Mercy Crosby, widowed at 21, hired herself out as a maid, leaving Fanny’s care to her Grandmother Eunice. A landlady helped. She taught Fanny to memorize the Bible—five chapters a week. Fanny gravitated towards writing from an early age. At the age of eight she wrote, “Oh what a happy soul I am, / Although I cannot

see;/ I am resolved that in this world / Contented I will be. // How many blessings I enjoy,
/ That other people don't; / To weep and sigh because I'm blind, / I cannot, and I won't."

“Rescue the Perishing”

The story behind “Rescue the Perishing” is this: On a hot summer’s night in August Fanny attended a rescue mission service in lower Manhattan. Convinced that “some mother’s boy” was in desperate need of salvation, she stood up and invited “any boy who had wandered away from [his] mother’s teaching” to talk with her after the service. One young man came forward. Fanny prayed with him, he confessed conversion, she went home that night and wrote “Rescue the perishing, care for the dying, / Snatch them in pity from sin and the grave; / Weep o’er the erring one, lift up the fallen, / Tell them of Jesus, the Mighty to Save.” The next day she sent it to William Howard Doane, a remarkable business man and composer in his own right, who promptly set it to music. It’s been in print ever since, often in more than a dozen hymnals at a time. Footnote: Fanny’s hymns were so popular that publishers refused to accept them. They were reluctant to have so many hymns written by just one person in their hymnals. So she adopted nearly one hundred different pseudonyms to confuse them.

Let us sing the first two verses of “Rescue the Perishing.”

“He Hideth My Soul”

This hymn perfectly captures a prominent evangelical theme in Crosby’s writing, namely, that of being hidden in Christ, the better to see him fully in time. Now we are beset within and without by temptation. Where can we turn? To our Savior, Jesus our Lord, who protects us, keeps us safe, comforts us. There are no stern judgments in this hymn. Joy is the reigning emotion—that, and the eager anticipation of meeting Christ again at his return. It is striking that in this reunion Fanny dares to speak of seeing again. It is the one time she allows herself to speak about what she has lost. Otherwise, what she said was “It seemed intended by the blessed providence of God that I should be blind all my life, and I thank him for the dispensation. If perfect earthly sight were offered me tomorrow I would not accept it. I might not have sung hymns to the praise of God if I had been distracted by the beautiful and interesting things about me.” Even so, “When I get to heaven, the first face that shall ever gladden my sight will be that of my Savior!” Fanny’s hymns have been criticized for being unduly passive. The ideal state for her, it is true, is the state of rest, of peace, of abiding. Still, that did not mean she was inactive. Her mission work on behalf of the perishing testifies against that. Nor did it mean she was merely content. Hidden in the cleft of the rock, she was grateful. And a grateful heart is poised to do great things.

“Tell Me the Story of Jesus”

This hymn should speak for itself, but I cannot resist these few observations. The story is “sweet” and “precious,” a sure mark of the domestic mind-set that produced it. Nevertheless, it also includes “the cross where they nailed him, writhing in anguish and pain.” Contemplation at the foot of the cross was key to evangelical fervor. You could

not rest in Christ without knowing the whole, painful story.

Another footnote: This hymn and others were collected in a small hymnal titled *Gospel Hymns and Sacred Solos* that was incredibly popular. Dwight L. Moody and Ira Sankey made use of it in their New York crusades. In the spring of 1876 alone, it sold one million copies. Crowds would bring their personal copies to the rallies, and while they were waiting for the main event to begin, they would be prompted to sing and thus to tell the story of Jesus.

“Blessed Assurance”

“Blessed Assurance” began as music first, and only then, text. Phoebe Knapp, the daughter of “a spiritual giant of a mother,” Phoebe Palmer, wrote music for her mother’s lyrics. They were published at the end of each issue of *The Guide to Holiness*, a monthly Methodist publication devoted to Christian perfection. Phoebe and Fanny became friends. When Phoebe composed the music that became “Blessed Assurance,” she asked Fanny what she thought of it. “It said ‘blessed assurance’,” Fanny said. And that is how hymns are born. The hymn was immediately successful. By 1898 it appeared in more than twenty-three different hymnals. And, of course, it quickly became the staple of many an evangelical rally and altar call, right down to the ones I remember back in my little home church in Fanwood, New Jersey. It contains all the themes near and dear to Crosby, close communion with her Savior, perfect submission, perfect rest, and washed in the blood of the Lamb. It is Fanny J. Crosby in a nutshell.