

## Hymns of the Faith: “Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming”

By [Dr. Bill Wymond](#)

*A Presentation of First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Mississippi,  
with,  
Dr. Ligon Duncan, Dr. Derek Thomas, and Dr. Bill Wymond*

**Dr. Wymond:** Good morning! This is “Hymns of the Faith,” brought to you by Jackson's First Presbyterian Church. The minister of the First Presbyterian Church is Dr. Ligon Duncan. Stay tuned for “Hymns of the Faith.”... And now with “Hymns of the Faith” is Dr. Ligon Duncan.

**Dr. Duncan:** Good morning, Bill Wymond! This is Ligon Duncan, and I'm here with Derek Thomas as well, and the three of us together are going to enjoy this hymn of the faith that we will be studying this morning. It's a very old and beautiful tune with a deeply moving text rooted both in medieval tradition, and especially the “Branch prophecies” of Isaiah—Isaiah 11:1, and how that's picked up in the New Testament. It's a hymn called *Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming*, and I love the flowing melody to it. In fact, before we even begin to study it, I wonder, Bill, if you'd just play through this beautiful melody once. [*Dr. Wymond plays.*] Now, I love singing that song, and I love the tune. The congregation struggles sometimes with the syncopation to it, and as you were playing it, Bill, I was wondering — did Praetorius give that syncopation in his arrangement of it, and would that have been unusual in the period, to have that kind of staggered rhythmic effect in the other parts?

**Dr. Wymond:** No, I think that it's really typical of music of the period because what happens is in the tunes of this era, you have the slow starting note at the beginning of the phrase, and then slow notes at the end of the phrase. And you're also having this play rhythmically between the time of 2/2 and 3/2. But anyway, it adds a kind of syncopation which was so characteristic of the time, and I think adds a lot of interest to the music. It's especially true of the folk-song feel — here we go again with folk songs! — but this obviously is a song at the marketplace, I think, originally. So both in the classical and in the popular music they use this play on these syncopated rhythms.

**Dr. Duncan:** Now, we were talking off-air beforehand about Praetorius, and you said he's a Lutheran church musician. So Lutheran hymnody would have had those effects of a little bit of rhythmic syncopation?

**Dr. Wymond:** That's right. You remember *A Mighty Fortress*, by Luther [*Plays*

*original rhythm*]...that same feel that would be a problem for our congregation because we're used to such regular rhythm now. But the music was very lively then.

**Dr. Duncan:** Is there a plainsong behind this somewhere, or do you think this is a folk melody?

**Dr. Wymond:** I think so. It's hard to know for sure because those things were so intertwined. The people would come out of the church and sometimes take the melodies they had heard and turn them into folk songs, and then the church took them back in an altered form. But it seems more folk oriented than early church oriented to me.

**Dr. Duncan:** Derek, we were talking about the interesting sort of transpositions that have happened in this song, because in the medieval times the rose, especially in Roman Catholicism, this sort of symbolism was always about Mary. And what Michael Praetorius has done is he's shifted the focus from Mary to Jesus, and he's kind of combined the rose imagery with the Branch prophecies of Isaiah. Talk us through that just a little bit.

**Dr. Thomas:** Well, yes; of course the name Rosemarie (or Rosemary) is a play on that, joining Rose to Mary. (Don't tell my wife that!) [*Dr. Duncan laughs...Dr Wymond: "Since her name is Rosemary!"*]

**Dr. Thomas:** And my mother's name was Mary Rose, and my grandmother's name was Rose, too. So there's this long tradition of it in my own family. But, yes, it's interesting how the Lutherans could pilfer what was evidently a very Catholic hymn of adoration to Mary and by a change of a few words — the syntax especially in the second verse of the hymn — alter it to a reference to Jesus. And I wondered if they did that with allusion to the Rose of Sharon motif in the Old Testament. So it becomes then a hymn about (or a carol about) a prophecy of Jesus rather than one of Mary.

**Dr. Duncan:** Tell us just a little bit about those Branch prophecies, Derek.

**Dr. Thomas:** Well, it's one of those great readings, isn't it, at Christmastime?

**Dr. Duncan:** You get it in the carol service that is done at King's College every year.

**Dr. Thomas:** In the "Lessons and Carols."

(Isaiah 1) — "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit."

And in those middle-teen verses of Isaiah you actually have several metaphors of

forests and trees (and Tolkien fans can resonate almost immediately); and this is a picture of desolation, the trees having been burnt to the ground. You can imagine grey, ashen landscape with tree stumps just sticking up out of the ground. And there is a solitary shoot, just one little sprig that seems to be alive amidst all this death and carnage, and from that shoot will come Jesus. That's the prophecy.

**Dr. Duncan:** And it's a symbol of Israel's hope, and the way that the Lord is going to cause His promise to continue to the descendants of Abraham.

**Dr. Thomas:** And the prophecy of course given right on the advent of the coming of the Assyrian Empire that would desolate the Northern Kingdom entirely and eventually the Babylonians who would desolate the Southern Kingdom in Jerusalem. So it was probably one of the lowest points in Israel's history, where hope was disappearing entirely except for this shoot that there is a prophecy that will still be fulfilled.

**Dr. Duncan:** And the New Testament writers pick up on that. It's possible that when Matthew is making that famous quote in the New Testament — and Old Testament scholars will scour the Bible for, trying to explain that “He will be called a Nazarene” doesn't refer either to Jesus being a Nazirite, which as far as we can tell He wasn't. John the Baptist *was* a Nazirite; that is, he had taken that peculiar Old Testament vow rooted in the first five books of the Bible not to drink fermented wine, not to cut his hair, to obey the unique laws of the Nazirite. Jesus wasn't that, because we know that He was accused of being “a glutton and a wine bibber.” Nor is that probably a reference to Jesus directly at least being from Nazareth.

But it may well be a reference to the *netzer*, if we use that root for *branch*...for Jesus being...He's that sprout, He's that stem, He's that thing that when you look at it first it might be despised, but in fact it's the root of what God is going to do in continuing the hope of His people. And so that becomes a New Testament image for Jesus Christ.

And of course it's picked up in this beautiful, beautiful hymn — carol — that we sing at Christmastime. We sing it a couple of times a year, and I love to listen to it. It's been done in numerous arrangements and you hear it if you're listening to these holiday channels that play on satellite radio and such, you'll probably hear it thirty times between now and Christmas.

**Dr. Thomas:** And that prophecy is then picked up again in Isaiah 35:

“The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them, and the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose; it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice even with joy and singing.”

**Dr. Duncan:** So the Rose of Sharon picture isn't just one from that; you get the rose picture from Isaiah 35 as well.

**Dr. Thomas:** Right. And actually, this prophecy mentions the excellency of Carmel and Sharon:

“They shall see the glory of the Lord, and the excellency of our God.”

**Dr. Duncan:** Bill, as you look at this tune and the arrangement that we have it in from Praetorius, we were talking off-air that as far as we know...we don't know who wrote the text originally. It was found in a Carthusian monastery, and Praetorius took a fifteenth-century German melody and arranged it. Talk us through the melody a little bit. I mean, why do we like this melody so much, for one thing?

**Dr. Wymond:** It's interesting how this is so popular. It's been, all of our lifetime, one of the main songs that collegiate choirs sang and is somewhat popular in the church. But in these days where people are looking for new and different Christmas music, it certainly is always included. It's very much a tune out of the early Baroque period or the high Renaissance period, and it's a solemn sound to us.

**Dr. Thomas:** Except that it sort of...when it changes half-way through it seems like a dance.

**Dr. Wymond:** Yes, it does.

**Dr. Duncan:** It gets really bright...it starts off mysterious...

**Dr. Thomas:** ...And then goes back into solemnity again.

**Dr. Wymond:** Because in this music you had different tempos within the context. We're so regular in what we do in our tempos now, but Baroque music so often had this A-B-A feel, and the B section a lot of times would pick up in tempo. Sometimes it would change the rhythmic figure from 2 to 3, so it was more dance-like.

**Dr. Duncan:** Walk us through that right now, and tell what you and Derek have just been describing. Just walk us through each line of the music and show us where it starts solemn and goes bright and then comes back again.

**Dr. Wymond:** So here it starts off... [plays]...it just went from 3 to 2 right there... [plays]...and then we go into a quicker feel... [plays]...and then back to the theme... [plays].

**Dr. Thomas:** And when you're singing that, you have to sing off the beat at the

end of the first line and at the end of the last line.

**Dr. Wymond:** Yes, that's right.

**Dr. Thomas:** I'm not using technical terms here....

**Dr. Wymond:** Well, that's okay. I like that. That sounds....

**Dr. Thomas:** There's another hymn where we have to do that, where we have to sing almost through the beat.

**Dr. Duncan:** *Thou Who Wast Rich Beyond All Splendor...yes.*

**Dr. Wymond:** The one that goes... [plays]...yes. Right there. Gorgeous English tune.

**Dr. Duncan:** Do you think that's one reason why chorales might like this piece, because it does provide that interesting syncopation? For a group that's singing together regularly, it's not hard for them to do. It might be a little challenging for a congregation unfamiliar with the piece, but...

**Dr. Wymond:** I think that's part of it. And also the tune itself is just a lovely, haunting kind of tune. It doesn't do a whole lot dramatically. It doesn't make a bunch of unusual jumps or anything like that. It's just a very well-crafted melody that kind of grips your heart.

Let me say something about Praetorius. He's one who is really important in music history. Michael Praetorius was born in Kruezberg, which means "city of the cross," in Thuringia. And this was all in the eastern part of Germany, for so long now that wasn't accessible to us. Dresden is in that area, and so on like that. His last name actually is Schultheiss, and if you've ever traveled in Germany, on every bistro or whatever you'll see that. That's the principal beer of Germany, I think. (Forgive me — I don't know whether his family....)

**Dr. Duncan:** Really!? This is the Budweiser of Germany! So, hold on! That's obviously his Latinized name, but what does it refer to?

**Dr. Wymond:** Praetorius...and you know, I should have looked up to see what the meaning of that was...I don't know. But anyway, his father was a Lutheran pastor. And the thing that is remarkable about the man — they say he was a polymath. He knew three or four languages, he knew theology, he certainly knew music, and philosophy as well. So he had a special interest in working with the text to Lutheranize it, because he was Lutheran. Most of his musical compositions are based on Lutheran hymn tunes, church melodies like that. And he's of that period when a musician in order to make a living had to be in the service of one of the princes of Germany. And of course there were just literally

hundreds of courts in Germany at that time — small little courts — and he served two principal courts during the time that he was there. And so back in those days the church was really indebted to these princes for supporting church music. Bach was another supported that way for a long time. And so we owe them. It wasn't the government who did it, you know; it was just these private families and individuals who took care of that. That's not all that important...but anyway, a very prolific composer who happened to die rich!

**Dr. Duncan:** How did that happen?

**Dr. Wymond:** Well, he had over forty volumes of music published during his lifetime, which was unusual; and I suspect that he was left some legacies by people for whom he worked, and also from his publishing. But he directed that when he died most of his money be given to the poor.

**Dr. Duncan:** Hmmm. Are there other pieces that people would recognize? I know we did some pieces both in choir when I was growing up — in my Mom's choir as a teenager, and as a young college student — and then probably at college, too, we did some pieces by Praetorius. Are there things we would know?

**Dr. Wymond:** There are arrangements that he made of hymns. There's a lot of organ music that we play based on these German hymns and so on, but this one particular song is the one best known.

**Dr. Thomas:** This carol, like so many carols, is utterly contextualized in middle Europe rather than Israel — the references to snow and the cold of winter, and so on.

**Dr. Wymond:** Now be careful! You're stepping on some sacred ground right there! [*Dr. Duncan laughs.*]

**Dr. Thomas:** I know! And it brings to mind in all the traditional Christmas cards that you see...

**Dr. Wymond:** Yes, Jesus was not born “in the bleak mid-winter”! [*All laugh. Dr. Duncan: “We’re all in trouble in music!”*] And of course theologically it's a winner, that motif of being born in winter and dying at Easter and April-ish, when everything is blossoming and coming into...and so it's from death to life, and from the grave to resurrection. So that has a wonderful thing of being woven into poetry, for sure...and theology, for sure.

What I like about this carol is the way that it reaches to those passages in Hebrews 2 and 4, that He knows...especially the last line:

O Savior, child of Mary, who felt our human woe;  
O Savior, King of glory, who dost our weakness know,

Bring us at length, we pray,  
To the bright courts of heaven and to the endless day.

(Hebrews 4:15) — “We do not have an high priest who cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, but was in all points tempted like as we are.”

And it does that, you know, from the height of glory to the depths of mid-winter.

**Dr. Duncan:** Which the best incarnation hymns do; they draw our attention...just like *Thou Who Wast Rich*. We were talking about that and the syncopation a few minutes ago.

**Dr. Thomas:** And the nodding in the direction of Chalcedon — “true man and yet very God.”

**Dr. Duncan:** Now when you say *Chalcedon*, you’re of course referring to the Council of Chalcedon...

**Dr. Thomas:** And the ecumenical creed of 451 AD.

**Dr. Duncan:** And it shows up in a number of Christmas hymns. Tell us where you see the nod to Chalcedon here, and why that’s important.

**Dr. Thomas:** It’s in the close of the fourth verse, where it refers to Jesus as “true man yet very God,” and the language “very God of very God; begotten, not made; being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.”

**Dr. Duncan:** And people will recognize that allusion also in the Christmas hymn *O Come, All Ye Faithful*, where we say, “God of God, light of light; begotten, not created.” The same kind of thing is going on there, and that was a good sign of a good orthodox hymn writer or text that’s giving testimony to a biblical and a historic view of Jesus Christ.

**Dr. Thomas:** And that’s the benefit of Christmas, of having to sing Christmas carols at least once a year — good Christmas carols, full of good theology about the incarnation — that it does remind us of this wonderful truth that Jesus was both God and man.

**Dr. Duncan:** And isn’t it interesting that in many ways that points back to the very origins of Christian hymnody? Because where the diet of the early church would have been predominantly in the Psalms, in response to the Arians who were teaching bad Christology, bad teaching about Christ — you had writers like Hillary and Ambrose and others who wrote hymns that were designed to do just what this hymn does, and that is give an orthodox view of Jesus Christ. And you’re right, Derek. It is one of the great benefits of Christmastime, because for about a month we are hearing and singing really good theology, usually. Even on

secular radio, if they're playing the traditional hymns you're hearing really good theology about Christ. Walk us through the flow of the song from stanza one to stanza five...

**Dr. Thomas:** Well, it begins of course with the prophecy of Isaiah and the picture of this stem that brings forth the flower, the rose that blossoms; that in the midst of bleakness of mid-winter and the bleakness of Israel's history in the seventh century BC, you have this wonderful hope that a Child will be born who will be the Savior of sinners.

**Dr. Duncan:** And when it says that this Rose is "of Jesse's lineage coming," what's that all about?

**Dr. Thomas:** Yes...you help me with that!

**Dr. Duncan:** Well, Jesse was the father of David, and so this is the reference, isn't it, to the Davidic lineage of the Messiah?

**Dr. Thomas:** Second Samuel 7 and the Davidic promise...

**Dr. Duncan:** ...of God to David that He was going to give him a son who was going to sit on his throne forever.

**Dr. Thomas:** And in the context of Isaiah's prophecy (you know the Northern Kingdom is about to be obliterated forever...the kings of Israel are about to disappear) that hope, then, of Israel lies in a king, the son of Jesse being an allusion to David. But "great David's greater Son," as He is often referred to, being Christ the King of Israel.

**Dr. Duncan:** I love the line that it came "as men of old have sung." It picks up on that sort of prophetic feel to it. This is not something that is just Johnny-come-lately. This has been sung about, this has been prophesied for years. But I love the line that follows that: "It came, a flow'ret bright." Now, I don't know the history of that word at all — a *flow'ret* — but it sounds like a tiny flower. I'd have to go back and look it up. Theodore Baker is the one who translated that particular stanza. I have to check on that. But it just emphasizes again that when God is going to institute this rescue operation for the whole of humanity, He sends this tiny little Babe into the world.

And, Bill, are we ready to hear the carol now? Well, let's hear it.

**Dr. Wymond:** Singing our carol this morning is Gena Everitt.

Lo, how a rose e'er blooming from tender stem hath sprung,  
Of Jesse's lineage coming, as men of old have sung.  
It came, a flo'ret bright,



Amid the cold of winter, when half-spent was the night.

Isaiah 'twas foretold it, the rose I have in mind;  
With Mary we behold it, the virgin mother kind.  
To show God's love aright  
She bore to men a Savior, when half-spent was the night.

The shepherds heard the story, proclaimed by angels bright,  
How Christ, the Lord of glory, was born on earth this night.  
To Bethlehem they sped  
And in the manger found Him, as angel heralds said.

This flow'r, whose fragrance tender with sweetness fills the air,  
Dispels with glorious splendor the darkness everywhere.  
True man, yet very God;  
From sin and death He saves us and lightens every load.

O Savior, child of Mary, who felt our human woe;  
O Savior, King of glory, who dost our weakness know,  
Bring us at length, we pray,  
To the bright courts of heaven and to the endless day.

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