Wednesday, March 26: Flood/Blood Hymns (Or: How Rhyme Drives Theology)
(Or: What the End Will Sound Like)

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https://open.spotify.com/track/68QjFdBRwqWSgfxRnEu9SZ

Some years ago, I invented a hymn category: the flood/blood hymns. As you would expect, these are hymns that rhyme the words "flood" and "blood" in an end rhyme. I noticed the rhyme several years ago when I was doing research on floods for my MFA thesis—I wanted to see how flooding was depicted in hymns over the last few centuries, and I found several great tunes. But here's what I hadn't expected: "flood" *always* rhymed with "blood."

There's "'Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus," written by Louisa Stead in 1882, and a favorite of mine that sparked that years-ago research: *O how sweet to trust in Jesus / Just to trust his cleansing blood / Just in simple faith to plunge me, / 'neath the healing, cleansing flood*.

But also: "Victory in Jesus," a 1939 hymn by Eugene Monroe Bartlett that was much-sung in my Baptist upbringing: *O, Victory in Jesus, my Savior forever / He sought me and bought me with His redeeming blood / He loved me 'ere I knew Him and my love is due Him / He plunged me to victory beneath the cleansing flood*.

And, take as a third hymn in which we are "plunged" 'neath the flood, William Cowper's catchy "There is a Fountain" from 1771: *There is a fountain filled with blood / Drawn from Immanuel's veins / And sinners plunged beneath that flood / Lose all their guilty stains / Lose all their guilty stains / Lose all their guilty stains / And sinners plunged beneath that flood / Lose all their guilty stains*.

Though, of course, not all of the flood/blood hymns wish to drown us; some presume our already having drowned, our need of rescue. There's the third verse of Edward Mote's 1834 hymn "My Hope is Built on Nothing Less," which sees Christ's blood supporting him in the midst of the overwhelming (presumably Genesis) flood: *His oath, his covenant, his blood / Support me in the whelming flood / When all around my soul gives way / He then is all my hope and stay*. And, if you'll indulge me with a final example, there's the refrain of G.A. Young's 1903 hymn "God Leads Us," wherein Young depicts God leading us through various trials: *Some through the waters, some through the flood / Some through the fire, but all through the blood / Some through great sorrow, but God gives a song / In the night season and all the day long*.

Rhymes marry otherwise disparate or irrelevant words, and the words "flood" and "blood" don't have any obvious relatedness. They are both wet, I'll grant, but aside from their liquid states, "flood" and "blood" seem as related in my mind as "notebook" and "chicken." So, why do English hymn writers return to this pairing again and again, century after century? Why not "flood" and "mud," or "blood" and "spud"? (I did check, and there are, sadly, no hymns that refer to potatoes.)

One answer is practical—historical. Not many words, save the couple I've just spouted off, rhyme with "flood" or "blood" (perhaps why I grasped for "spud"), but this wasn't always true. Before the Great Vowel Shift in England between the 14th and 16th centuries, "flood" and "blood" probably rhymed with other double-O words like "mood" and "food." (The Great Vowel Shift marked a period in English history when post-plague population migration and some French influence confected new dialects and pronunciations. Some words, like "flood" and "blood," for example, had their vowel sounds shortened. Words like "book" and "look," for whatever reason, did not.)

But another answer is that, while these words are, in a secular sense, fairly unrelated, in a Christian lexicon, there *is* a canonical imagination that relates them. "Flood," of course, refers broadly to Genesis 6-9. "Blood," while occurring countless times in the Bible, when used in these hymns, refers to Christ's blood shed during his crucifixion.

In "'Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus" and "Victory in Jesus," "flood" is used as a shorthand for baptism, a common turn supported by 1 Peter 3:18-22—baptism is "prefigured" by the flood, it reads. As the earth was cleansed of sin, so too does baptism cleanse us, and, indeed, baptism's cleansing properties in 1 Peter are also emphasized in these hymns—both floods are called "cleansing," the hymn writers specify. And, while not explicitly stated, the flood and baptism are also presumably linked by virtue of the watery deaths—literal or spiritual—they beget, though this is not the focus of the hymns. "Blood," in these two hymns, too, is also "cleansing" and "redeeming," extending the work of the flood. That is, the blood of Christ and the flood—of Genesis and/or of baptism—work together, sharing similar goals: healing, salvation. They are of similar substance, perhaps offering a picture of the water and wine combined in Christ's eucharistic blood in my Episocpal church each Sunday.

The second set of hymns, though, characterize the flood differently. In "My Hope is Built on Nothing Less" and "God Leads Us," the flood is overwhelming, or a trial, likened to fire, through which the hymn writer implores God to lead him; and the blood of Christ is more of a brace or bolster—a "support" that will help the hymn writers endure.

I'll confess that I like these latter two hymns better, especially in Lent. They seem to take more seriously the literal devastation wrought by flooding. And in the Genesis flood, at least, the devastation is literal (people really do die; the world really is subsumed) and figurative or symbolic—the flood is a consequence of, though not necessarily a punishment for, human sin. Indeed, in the flood story, the fullness of humanity's curse is borne out—God's grief in Genesis 6:6 tells us this. God's grief, God's *atzav*, is etymologically related to the curse, the *itzavon*, Adam and Eve bear in Genesis 3:17. God, in God's grieving, seems to take this curse on, and lets it break God's heart. Said another way, God's grief resembles—rhymes with—the curses of God's children, and the world will not ever be the same, for now even the earth knows the full severity and weight of God's pronouncement: cursed is the ground. And *this* flood—this world-destroying flood—is what our hymn writers rhyme with Christ's redeeming blood in all of these hymns.

Said more directly: **Our curse rhymes with our redemption.**

When I hear these hymns in Lent, I can't help but think of any number of recent headlines: Flooding in Kentucky. Hurricane Helene in North Carolina. A storm that could flood parts of Hawaii. A storm that could flood parts of the Midwest. A storm that could flood parts of North Texas. So it will continue: again and again, century after century.

But what I also hear in these hymns is that—if *this* is our curse, these floods, borne out of the Garden, of human greed taking resources from the environment that were not theirs to take—*if this is our curse*, redemption will rhyme.

What on earth could this look like? When I try to picture a flood that resembles blood—when I really try to picture it—I come up as confused as Pharaoh, staring in disbelief at an undrinkable, bloody Nile. And what good would that do anyway? I wonder.

I don't want to be overly literal, but I do want to be open to imaginative possibilities, the way these hymns are. Indeed, the first two hymns seem to suggest that "flood" can sound like something good—can sound like baptism, or like Christ's loving, redeeming work on the cross—rather than what it actually sounds like every time I hear it daily—climate change, catastrophe, death toll.

The rhymes in these hymns give me hope, though. They give me hope that, perhaps in the end, our vowels will shift again, made strange, for strange is His deed proclaims Isaiah, and new connections, new sounds will be possible for us. Maybe "flood" will rhyme with "restorative agriculture," or "renewable energy," or "carbon offsetting," or—I come up short.

It sounds clunky now, but I can imagine the hymns that will one day be written. The new song we will sing.