***“Now I See”***

***1 Samuel 16:1-13; John 9:1-41***

***March 19, 2023/Lent 4***

***Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake***

Have you ever wondered: *Why do we love the music we hear as teenagers?*

In recent years, psychologists and neuroscientists have confirmed that these songs hold disproportionate power over our emotions. And researchers have uncovered evidence that suggests our brains bind us to the music we heard as teenagers more tightly than anything we’ll hear as adults—*a connection that doesn’t weaken as we age.* Musical nostalgia, in other words, isn’t just a cultural phenomenon: *It’s a neurological command.* And no matter how sophisticated our tastes might otherwise grow to be, our brains may stay jammed on those songs we obsessed over during the high drama of adolescence.

To understand why we grow attached to certain songs, it helps to start with the brain’s relationship with music in general. When we first hear a song, it stimulates our *auditory-cortex,* and we convert the rhythms, melodies, and harmonies into a coherent whole. From there, our reaction to music depends on how we interact with it. Sing along to a song in your head, and you’ll activate your *premotor cortex,* which helps plan and coordinate movements. Dance along, and your neurons will [synchronize with the beat of the music](http://daniellevitin.com/levitinlab/articles/2013-TICS_1180.pdf). Pay close attention to the lyrics and instrumentation, and you’ll activate your *parietal cortex,* which helps you shift and maintain attention to different stimuli. Listen to a song that triggers personal memories, and your *prefrontal cortex,* which maintains information relevant to your personal life and relationships, will spring into action.

But memories are meaningless without emotion—and aside from love and drugs, nothing spurs an emotional reaction like music. [Brain imaging studies show](http://www.mni.mcgill.ca/media/news/item/?item_id=170538) that our favorite songs stimulate the brain’s pleasure circuit, which releases an [influx of dopamine](http://www.nature.com/neuro/journal/v14/n2/full/nn.2726.html), serotonin, oxytocin, and other neurochemicals that make us feel good. The more we like a song, the more we get treated to neurochemical bliss, flooding our brains with some of the same neurotransmitters that cocaine chases after.

Music lights these sparks of neural activity in *everybody.* But in young people, the spark turns into a fireworks show. Between the ages of 12 and 22, our brains undergo rapid neurological development—and the music we love during that decade seems to get wired into our lobes for good.[[1]](#footnote-1)

I share this with you because certain Christian hymns trigger the same kind of neurological reaction in our brains—and the #1 Christian hymn according to multiple surveys (at least for American Christians of all kinds) is *Amazing Grace.*

Although it had its roots in England, *"Amazing Grace"* became an integral part of the Christian tapestry in the United States. Somehow, [it embraced] *core American values* without ever sounding triumphant or jingoistic. It was a song that could be sung by young and old, Republican and Democrat, Southern Baptist and Roman Catholic, African American and Native American, high-ranking military officer, and anti-capitalist campaigner.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Do you know the story of how the hymn came to be?

English [Anglican](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglicanism) clergyman and poet, [John Newton](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Newton) (1725–1807), published the hymn in 1779 with words written in 1772. Newton wrote the words from personal experience; he grew up without any particular religious conviction, but his life's path was formed by a variety of twists and coincidences that were often put into motion by others' reactions to what they took as his *recalcitrant insubordination.*

He was *pressed* (navally conscripted) into service with the [Royal Navy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Royal_Navy), and after leaving the service, he became involved in the [Atlantic slave trade](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atlantic_slave_trade). In 1748, a violent storm battered his vessel off the coast of [County Donegal, Ireland](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/County_Donegal), so severely that he called out to [God](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/God_in_Christianity) for mercy. While this moment marked the beginning of [*his spiritual conversion*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Newton#Spiritual_conversion)*,* he continued slave trading until 1754 or 1755, when he ended his seafaring altogether. Newton then began studying [Christian theology](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_theology) and later became an [abolitionist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abolitionism_in_the_United_Kingdom).

Ordained in the [Church of England](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_of_England) in 1764, Newton became the curate of [Olney, Buckinghamshire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olney%2C_Buckinghamshire), where he began to write hymns with poet [William Cowper](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Cowper). *"Amazing Grace"* was written to illustrate a sermon on New Year's Day of 1773 and the [*New Testament*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Testament) served as the basis for many of the lyrics of *"Amazing Grace.”* The first verse, for example, can be traced to the story of the [*Prodigal Son*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prodigal_Son)*.* In the [Gospel of Luke](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gospel_of_Luke) the father says, *"For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”* The story of *Jesus*[*healing a blind man*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miracles_of_Jesus#Blind_people) (today’s Gospel) who tells the [Pharisees](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pharisees) that he can now see is told (of course) in the [Gospel of John](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gospel_of_John). Newton used the words *"I was blind but now I see.” Grace* is then recalled three times in the following verse, culminating in Newton's most personal story of his conversion, underscoring the use of his personal testimony with his parishioners.

Critics, however, have not always been kind to either Newton or the hymn. One critic, for instance, called Newton, (specifically referring to *"Amazing Grace"),* an *"unashamedly middlebrow lyricist writing for a lowbrow congregation,"* noting that only twenty-one of the nearly 150 words used in all six verses have more than one syllable.[[3]](#footnote-3) Ouch!

Nevertheless, between 1789 and 1799, four variations of Newton's hymn were published in the US in [*Baptist*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baptist)*,*[*Dutch Reformed*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dutch_Reformed)*,* and [*Congregationalist*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Congregationalist) hymnodies; by 1830 [*Presbyterians*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Presbyterian)*and*[*Methodists*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Methodist) also included Newton's verses in their hymnals.[[4]](#footnote-4)

But the greatest influences in the 19th century that propelled *"Amazing Grace"* to spread across the US and become a staple of religious services in many denominations and regions were *the*[*Second Great Awakening*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Great_Awakening) and the development of [*shape note*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shape_note) singing communities where songs often used *repetition* [with a variety of well-known, familiar tunes] to get across to a rural population of poor and mostly uneducated people the message of the Gospel.

There is a surprise, however, in verse 5:

*When we've been there ten thousand years,
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise,
Than when we first begun*

This verse was first recorded in [Harriet Beecher Stowe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harriet_Beecher_Stowe)'s immensely influential 1852 anti-slavery novel [*Uncle Tom's Cabin*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uncle_Tom%27s_Cabin). Three verses [of the hymn] were emblematically sung by Tom in his hour of deepest crisis. Stowe included this verse [verse 5], *not written by Newton,* a verse that had been passed down orally in African-American communities for at least 50 years.

Think of it: a song written by a former slave trader (and future abolitionist) and then picked up as a kind of anthem by slaves and former slaves. Amazing, indeed!

And so, with the message that *forgiveness* and *redemption* are possible regardless of sins committed and that the soul can be delivered from despair through the mercy of God, *"Amazing Grace"* is one of the most recognizable songs in the [English-speaking world](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English-speaking_world). American historian [*Gilbert Chase*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gilbert_Chase) writes that it is *"without a doubt the most famous of all the folk hymns"[[5]](#footnote-5)*and [*Jonathan Aitken*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jonathan_Aitken), a Newton biographer, estimates that the song is performed about 10 million times annually.[[6]](#footnote-6)

And why do people love it? Because (like the songs of our teenage years) our favorite hymns stimulate the brain’s *pleasure circuit,* which releases an [influx of dopamine](http://www.nature.com/neuro/journal/v14/n2/full/nn.2726.html), serotonin, oxytocin, and other neurochemicals that make us feel good.

But let’s be clear, both the hymn and our Gospel reading for today speak of a particular way of *seeing;* namely the *peculiar* way that God sees things.

For example, in John 9 when Jesus’ disciples ask him about *sin,* Jesus redirects the conversation to God’s works, *illuminated by the light of the world*—but he does not avoid the word sin. In fact, Jesus concludes this week’s narrative by speaking of sin in a very specific way; namely, *the sin of rejecting one sent by God.*

Some scholars maintain that John 9 addresses Jewish followers of Jesus who have been banished from the synagogue in John’s community—but we know that this was likely an isolated incident because we have documentary evidence that traditional Jews and Jews who believed that Jesus was the Messiah worshipped side by side well into the second and third centuries in many places—so we need to be careful not to paint with too broad a brush.

This reality [of separation between the two groups] is described in the text with three themes or verbs: belonging, inquiring, and transforming. And they are potential troublemakers—in John’s community and in ours.

You see, *belonging* is contested in John 9. The man’s parents avoid offending the authorities because they know *“that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah”* would face expulsion.

In the inaugural issue of the journal Othering and Belonging (2016), John Powell and Stephen Menendian declare that *“the problem of the twenty-first century is the problem of ‘othering,’”* of engendering *“marginality and persistent inequality across any of the full range of human differences based on group identities.”* Othering discriminates against those outside the privileged power structures. John’s audience is called to offer belonging instead. Jesus Christ *“has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall” (*Eph. 2:14). Jesus welcomes all.

*Transforming* describes discipleship, following Jesus in community. Engaging the light of the world transforms the healed man and leads to greater inclusion. Transformation empowers bold witness. The transformed man embodies the goal of John’s Gospel*—“that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God . . . and have life”* (20:31). The transformed community practices hospitality and puts the marginalized *orphan, widow, and alien* at the center of community.

*Inquiring* is marked in John 9 by the frequent use of *questions.* The disciples ask about *theodicy* (an attempt to justify or defend God in the face of evil). The neighbors inquire about the *identity* of the healed man and of his healer. The religious leaders begin with an appropriate if suspicious question about *the sign,* but their interrogation deteriorates into accusation and exclusion. When the one healed inquires of Jesus, he *believes and confesses.*

The overall point? Jesus opens the community to *all* who seek the light of the world. Jesus confronts sin, the sin that rejects those sent by God. Jesus welcomes *all* into this renewed people of God.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Which fits nicely with the themes found in the hymn, *Amazing Grace.*

*Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind but now I see.*

*(You won’t be surprised to learn that Newton was a Calvinist!)*

Nonetheless, you may recall that the *transformative power* of the song was investigated by journalist [*Bill Moyers*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bill_Moyers) in a documentary released in 1990. Moyers was inspired to focus on the song's power after watching a performance at [Lincoln Center](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lincoln_Center), where the audience consisted of *Christians and non-Christians,* and he noticed that it had an equal impact on everybody in attendance, *unifying them.[[8]](#footnote-8)*

James Basker also acknowledged this force when he explained why he chose *"Amazing Grace"* to represent a collection of anti-slavery poetry: *"there is a transformative power that is applicable ... : the transformation of sin and sorrow into grace, of suffering into beauty, of alienation into empathy and connection, of the unspeakable into imaginative literature."[[9]](#footnote-9)*

Even President Obama was moved to lead the singing of *“Amazing Grace”* during the eulogy for [Rev. Clementa Pinckney](http://abcnews.go.com/topics/news/charleston-church-shooting.htm), who was killed in June of 2015 in a shooting at a Charleston church, that has been widely acknowledged as one of the most powerful moments of his presidency.

Friends, *this* (in a nutshell) is the transformative power of the gospel to change both the lives of individuals and entire societies. The hymn has become a song that inspires *hope* in the wake of *tragedy,* becoming a sort of *"spiritual national anthem."*

As one commentator put it: “The music behind [the word] *'amazing'* has a sense of *awe* to it. The music behind *'grace'* sounds graceful. There is a rise at the point of *confession,* as though the author was stepping out into the *open* and making a bold *declaration,* but a corresponding *fall* when admitting his *blindness.*”[[10]](#footnote-10)

*It is the human story in miniature—and that’s why it continues to resonate with so many today—even some of us!*

1. Mark Joseph Stern, *Neural Nostalgia,* Slate, August 12, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Steve Turner, *Amazing Grace: The Story of America's Most Beloved Song*, HarperCollins, 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [Jonathan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jonathan_Aitken) Aitken, *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace*, Crossway Books, 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Mark A. Noll; Edith L. Blumhofer (eds.), *Sing Them Over Again to Me: Hymns and Hymnbooks in America*, University of Alabama Press, 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Gilbert Chase, *America's Music, From the Pilgrims to the Present*, McGraw-Hill, 1987.  [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Aitken, p. 226. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Lynn Jost, *John 9:1-41,* The Christian Century, March 13, 2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. John Pollock, *"Amazing Grace: The great Sea Change in the Life of John Newton*," The Trinity Forum Reading, The Trinity Forum, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. James Basker, *Amazing Grace: An Anthology of Poems About Slavery, 1660–1810*, Yale University Press, 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Steve Turner, *Amazing Grace: The Story of America's Most Beloved Song*, HarperCollins, 2002, p. 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)