



The Gift of the Song

In 1974, my husband and I were members of a Christian community at St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Houston, Texas. Sometime earlier in that year I had begun to follow the lectionary of the church and to use the assigned New Testament lesson as a springboard for meditation each day. One Saturday in August, the given lesson was **Luke 8:40**. Now having grown up in the Presbyterian Church, I was a relatively new Episcopalian, unfamiliar with at least one particular Episcopalian convention: when the lectionary table listed one Bible verse rather than a range of verses, the reader was intended to begin at that verse and continue to the end of the chapter. In my ignorance I read only, **“Now when Jesus returned, the crowd welcomed him, for they were all waiting for him.”**

I was mystified as to why the church had selected such a mundane statement to be the inspirational message for the day. Accepting the idea that surely there must have been a reason, I asked the Lord to speak to me and teach me. Later that morning my mind wandered back to that singularly unremarkable sentence over and over. Through the day I found myself imagining what it must have been like to have been a part of the crowd waiting for Jesus.

Eager anticipation . . . respite from burdensome daily chores . . . cool shady roadside . . . amiable chatter . . . dogs barking . . . steadily climbing sun . . . laughing neighbors . . . waiting . . . hunger . . . bread and wine shared with friends . . . idle talk . . . waiting . . . drowsiness . . . heat and dust . . . cross words, soothing words, gossipy news . . . aching legs, tired neck, sweaty jostling shoulders . . . children running and shouting . . . waiting . . . wondering what will he be like? what will he say? what will he do? will he have time for me? . . . waiting . . . until finally far up the road a shout goes up and we know he's coming! . . . straining on tiptoe to see, and at last . . . he is here.

This exercise of imagination led me to draw parallels between that long-ago crowd and our life together as a Christian community. I came in touch with renewed feelings of anticipation and reverence. As I prepared to go to our regular Saturday evening community gathering, I felt buoyed up and expectant, eager to meet the Lord in prayer and worship among his people. During the time set aside for communal prayer, I began to hear the song “Alleluia, He Is Coming”. I listened to the lovely melody and words and then I felt the Lord was asking me to sing it aloud. With mouth clamped shut, I said, “Lord, you know me. I wouldn't venture to sing a song I knew well alone, much less one I've never heard before!”

That night at home I did gather enough courage to share what had happened with my husband. Because of his encouragement, I shared the song several days later with two of my closest friends. One of them went to the piano and asked me to sing it again. Soon the three of us were singing it together. My friends also encouraged me and promised to sing the song with me at the next community meeting. The following Saturday night, before we had reached the middle of the second chorus, the entire community was singing "Alleluia, He Is Coming."

Since then, the song has found a frequent place among the wealth of beautiful songs given and shared in the richness of the Lord's Spirit. The blessing it brought St. Matthew's community has spread through the wide-reaching lives and ministries of those who were gathered together on that summer Saturday night. People have written from all over this country as well as Canada, England, South Africa, Norway, New Zealand, and Australia to say that they have been enriched by the song. I can only say in quiet awe and wonder that in spite of my ignorance and timidity, the Lord gently used me as a vessel for his Spirit. He continues to teach me that his is the wisdom and power. All he requires of us is to listen and receive and then share his Spirit with each other. Alleluia, he is coming. Alleluia, he is here.

*Martha Butler,
November 17, 1987*