

Music Notes this Sunday –Day of Pentecost – 5/31/2020

This Sunday, Briana Kupper, one of our soprano soloists, will be singing a pre-recorded arrangement of the hymn “Amazing Grace”. The story behind this hymn and its writer, John Newton, is interesting.

John Newton crammed a lot of living into his 82 years. His mother died when he was six years old, and he joined his father at sea when he was eleven. He served his apprenticeship as a sailor and rose through the ranks until he became the captain of a slave ship. He abandoned the religious training that he had experienced as a child and reveled in the dissolute life of a slave trader. He was noted for his profanity and his cruelty.

But one stormy night, when his ship was in danger of sinking and he was in danger of dying, Newton had a real change of heart. It might have been his religious training at his mother’s knee surfacing after all those years—or it might have been his love for Mary Catlett, a Christian woman whom he later married—or it might have been his reading of the book, “Imitation of Christ”, by William Law—or it might have been all three. In any event, Newton had a real conversion experience. For a while, Newton continued on his slave ship, but he began to treat both the slaves and his crew with a good deal more compassion. Finally, convinced that the slave trade was wrong, he left his ship and took a job onshore. He then felt a call to the ministry and was ordained at age forty and assigned to a church at Olney, England. He continued in ministry through the rest of his long life, even after his failing eyesight made it impossible for him to read.

This hymn, “Amazing Grace” is in a sense Newton’s own life story. It was amazing grace that saved him, and it was amazing grace that was the focus of his preaching. But “Amazing Grace” is the story of every Christian. It is amazing grace that saves us—nothing else—no works of our hands or gifts of our wealth. It was amazing that God would love and save John Newton, and it is amazing that God would love and save any of us. It is indeed a sweet sound to hear about it, but it is so amazing that sometimes it is hard to believe. Nonetheless we should believe it because it is true.