

Today I am going to set up some of the background to the music which we will be singing and hearing today in worship. I am going to spend some time talking about the history behind these two songs and then I am going to allow the music to continue our sermon today. Because, honestly, as I thought through the Scriptures and the music this week I began to realize that the music really has a lot to say to us and I want to be sure that I don't get in the way.

What I am going to do is to spend this time now to help provide some background for two songs which we will be including in worship this morning. I want to then invite you to allow God to work on you through this background information and the words of the music to speak to you.

Musicians and artists have such a powerful role to play in our culture to help us interpret the world today. The Scripture which we will be reading from 1st Corinthians reminds us that the work of artists will become visible over time and I think these two songs give proof to that.

So how would you like your home town to be described in this way?

Okemah, Oklahoma was one of the singiest, square dancingest, drinkingest, yellingest, preachingest, walkingest, talkingest, laughingest, cryingest, shootingest, fist fightingest, bleedingest, gamblingest, gun, club, and razor carryingest of our ranch towns and farm towns, because it blossomed into one of our first oil boom towns.

That is the description of the town where Woodie Guthrie grew up. Woodie Guthrie is the folk singer who wrote and performed the song "This Land is Your Land" which Chris and Mike are going to be leading us in singing in a few minutes. I never knew the history of this song and the man who wrote it.

Never knew that it was a controversial song and that's its author was accused by some of being anti-American. But my personal journey into getting to know this song and the person who wrote it began when I was at Showmars restaurant with the Joy Group on Wednesday for lunch. Good things happen at Joy Group.

We were in the restaurant and playing over the speakers were various patriotic songs. And the one that attached itself to my ear was "This Land is Your Land." I heard the song played and I thought to myself, "I really like that song and I don't ever sing it anymore." Hearing that song briefly as background noise brought up very positive images for me. I don't know where those images came from but I knew that I liked the song.

So Mike, Chris, and I were meeting on Wednesday night to reflect on the "Congregational Fitness" book that some folks in the congregation have been reading and to talk about some music ideas they had and I shared with them this song that I had heard that day and I asked them if they would be interested in singing it this Sunday for worship.

So then on Thursday I started to research this song and Woody Guthrie who wrote it. And I discovered some very interesting background to this song, its author, and its connection to another song we will hear in worship today. Woodie Guthrie was born in Okemah, Oklahoma in 1912 into a cowboy family. Both of his parents were musically inclined and they taught Woody lots of songs from a variety of sources. Songs from Native Americans, songs from Scotland, and songs from the Midwest.

In 1920, oil was discovered in Okemah so it became a boom town and Woody Guthrie's family became rich very quickly. But the boom also brought lots of gambling, drinking, and prostitution into the town. In a few short years the oil disappeared and it left the town and its inhabitants "busted, disgusted, and not to be trusted." Guthrie also witnessed the death of his sister and then his mother being taken away to a mental institution.

Guthrie set out to the open road but there were two major catastrophes that made life for him and his family very hard. The Great Depression was at its peak and then adding to the misery, several families were fleeing Oklahoma and surrounding states due to the Dust Bowl, when poor farming habits and drought led once fertile farmland into desolate deserts.

Moneyless and hungry, Guthrie rode freight trains, hitchhiked, and walked his way to California, picking up odd jobs along the way. He painted signs and sang in saloons to get whatever money and food he could. Folks in California did not welcome the immigrants from Oklahoma. They feared these families that they did not know.

And Guthrie became a voice for these bands of travelers and anyone who was an outsider. Following the person of Jesus Christ for Guthrie meant challenging the structures of power and speaking up for justice. Guthrie spoke up for the common laborers whom he considered himself to be. Later in his life Guthrie became very outspoken and very controversial. Some believed that his political activities were un-American while others embraced his opinions.

All along his travels in the 1940s Guthrie kept hearing a song sung over and over again. A song that irritated him. A song which we will be hearing in worship today as well. That song that irritated Guthrie in the 1940s was written by Irving Berlin and it is entitled "God Bless America."

Irving Berlin was born in Russia and migrated to the United States with his family in the 1890s. They migrated to the US because Berlin's family was Jewish and their house was burned down due to an anti-Jewish attack upon their town in Russia. Like many Jewish families they settled in New York City where Berlin went to the streets to make money for his struggling family.

Berlin found out that if he sang while he sold newspapers that people would pay him some extra money. This eventually led him to singing in bars where he would sing his original music. His music eventually led to the development of ragtime which created a dance sensation in the 1910s.

In 1917 Berlin was drafted into the army at the age of 30 but the army wanted him for one specific purpose, to write patriotic songs to inspire the troops during World War I. He set out to do that with some of his music.

In 1938, Berlin was contacted by Kate Smith's agent for a patriotic song to mark the 20 year anniversary of Armistice Day, the day to mark the end of World War I. Hostilities were rising in the late 1930s with the rise of Hitler and conflicts between the US and Japan. So Berlin gave Kate Smith the music for "God Bless America" because Berlin hoped it would be a peace song.

"God Bless America" was a simple plea for divine protection during a dark period in our nation's history. For Berlin, the song was personal. It was a song to celebrate the country that had allowed him the opportunity to move from poverty into becoming a successful songwriter.

Woody Guthrie felt that "God Bless America" did not reflect the hard life which he knew. As a result he wrote a song he entitled, "God Blessed America." He kept reworking this song until he came to the words "This Land Is Your Land." One of the verses which will be sung today says this, "In the shadow of the steeple I saw my people, by the relief office I seen my people; as they stood there hungry, I stood there asking, Is this land made for you and me?" That verse is usually left off when we hear that song sung today by groups such as the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.

Both of these songs are social commentaries. Guthrie wrote his song as a plea for the country to be a place for all people and Berlin wrote his song as a plea for God to bring peace to a volatile situation and as a celebration of opportunities provided to him as a Jewish person in America.

I appreciate the opportunity this morning to share the stories behind both songs. I hope that by hearing why Berlin wrote his song and why Guthrie wrote his song we can catch a glimpse of what God may be saying to us today.

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-Information on Woody Guthrie from www.woodyguthrie.org and info on Berlin found at www.wikipedia.org.

-Given: July 6, 2014 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)