

Now I see

By [Matthew Myer Boulton](#)

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*For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page, which includes Myer Boulton's current Living by the Word column as well as past magazine and blog content. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.*

It's a truism that Christianity lives and breathes as much (or more) through music as through preaching or teaching, to say nothing of dense theological texts--so Christian preachers and teachers should be on the lookout for ways to incorporate [the great hymns of the tradition](#) into our sermons, lessons and other theological work.

But which are "the great hymns"? That depends on the local scene, of course--and here, as usual, the first task of the preacher or teacher is the ethnographic task, the task of the participant-observer in a local culture, the one who asks, "How are things done around here?" What are the hymns and spiritual songs at the heart of this particular community's repertoire? What are the tunes people are likely to hum while doing the dishes, walking the dog, hiking a mountain or waiting in line at the bank?

Once one identifies this repertoire, the critical work can begin: preaching and teaching on these songs in ways that add to the pleasure of singing them, provide a new layer of meaning, a new insight, a fresh twist, etc. How can you strengthen the connections between a particular song and the scriptural content or background that informs it, or the key theological ideas that underpin it?

"Amazing Grace" is a marvelous case in point, both because the song is recognizable and beloved and because the story is so fascinating: John Newton, for instance, is an incredibly colorful, profane, fascinating character. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, three verses of "Amazing Grace" come up at a crucial point in the narrative, including the "When we've been there 10,000 years" verse, which by then had been circulating in African-American communities for decades.

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!