



It was about this time in March six years ago, when the world was brought to a rather screeching halt, including in the church. We were all doing our best to navigate protocols with drive-thru and carry-out Communion and digital worship, while still trying to extend love and compassion in ways we never planned for, to say the least. Oddly enough, in the midst of all that, was when our

wider church had already planned well in advance to release our latest collection of songs in a book that could be added to our pew racks. Unfortunately, though, at that time, the pews were not being filled at all with people, let alone the voices to sing the treasured hymns together.

Nevertheless, it was rather fitting that one of the additional music pieces in the just-published *All Creation Sings* hymnal was a song called *When We Are Tested*. Now, although the hymn text is based primarily on the temptation of Jesus Christ, when he faces these struggles with Satan for bread amidst the Lord's hunger and power amidst his seemingly loss of control in the desert for 40 days and nights: a portion of Scripture that is meant to set the stage for this whole season of Lent, and yet, the composer eloquently crafts the words to not only retell the encounter of good and evil from long ago, but to beautifully hit home to us now.

And the title *When We Are Tested* could very well describe the journey of faith for the woman responsible for the poetic artistry, one of hundreds of incredibly talented musicians who shaped the *All Creation Sings* hymnal. But for Ruth Duck, she said herself that she was a shy and awkward teenager, who, at that time, felt a spiritual pull to be further committed in her faith. But the only way to do so in satisfying her rather strict Baptist family was a full-scale immersion baptism. It was also during her teenage years, that she and her family moved to Memphis, where she witnessed who she considered to be the greatest preacher she would ever see in none other than Martin Luther King, Jr., and at that point, she felt called to ministry. Of course, not all churches were the biggest fans of females in the clergy roles, but she pressed on anyway. Time and time again, The Rev. Ruth Duck was tested, to say the least: just how far was she willing to go to share the greatest story of love and compassion that could somehow manage to carry life-altering weight as much as in first century Galilee to a pandemic world thousands of years later and still today: when we feel as if our faith, our commitment to the Gospel, our role as proclaimers of hope and grace are still worth it at all. It's almost as if we could go back to the story of Ezekiel: mortals, look around to these bones tired and weighed down by hatred and fear and worry and not knowing where the heck this world is going; mortals, can these bones somehow, somehow still live?

One of the gifts that The Rev. Ruth Duck of the United Church of Christ tradition offered to the wider church, not just in her preaching, but also her hymn-writing, was to always ensure that the Gospel needed to be spoken in the present tense: that the joy and love and life-saving-ness of Jesus Christ is by no means limited to a far-off distant heaven, but already right here, right now. It was so expressed in that hymn, *When We Are Tested*:

2 *When in the desert we cry for relief,
 pleading for paths marked by certain belief,
 lift us to love you beyond sign and test,*

trusting your presence, our only true rest.
4 *When we have struggled and searched through the night,
sorting and sifting the wrong from the right,
Savior, surround us with circles of care,
angels of healing, of hope, and of prayer.*

And I like to think that one of the many gifts of music, is to hear an assembly join together: all in our various forms of musical expertise and background and practice; from all the different places we've come, from all the unique spots of our connection with the Divine; we come together as one voice, united by this insistent belief that not only will the tired and weighed down bones live, but that they can somehow, somehow live with love and grace and new life to form them into a broken, but still beautiful body of Christ for the sake of the world. That, when we come together for a song, we are reminded of the angels living among us in a chapel/sanctuary, and beyond: angels who will do their part for our own healing and hope and prayer to sustain us through it all. And so, for the angels who are blessed to make those works of art come to life in the words and the notes for us to sing out the Gospel to the world, we most certainly give thanks to God for all of them, indeed! Amen!