



THE WORD IN

Song

Hymn of the Day
Studies for
EPIPHANY

ONE-YEAR LECTIONARY



THE
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MISSOURI SYNOD

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O Morning Star, How Fair and Bright

Lutheran Service Book 395 | study by Todd A. Peperkorn

Introduction

Philipp Nicolai looked out his window at the parsonage in Unna, where he served as a pastor in Germany. The year was 1597. It was August, a hot month, and a terrible time for the plague to hit their little village. Just the week before, he had buried 170 members of his flock. The number seems staggering to think about even now. He looked out of the window, longing to give his people hope in the midst of

their suffering. Perhaps this was the time he began to pen the words, “O Morning Star, how fair and bright ...”

- Why might Nicolai have used a wedding analogy to comfort his flock in the midst of such sorrow?
- What tools does God give His people today to comfort those in distress?

Exploring the Scriptures

Nicolai’s hymn is based to a large degree on Psalm 45. He subtitled the hymn as follows: “A spiritual bridal song of the believing soul concerning Jesus Christ her heavenly bridegroom: founded on the 45th Psalm of the prophet David.” Psalm 45 is called a “love song” in the Hebrew introduction to the hymn. Take a minute and read Psalm 45.

- Who is the psalm speaking to? Is it addressed to more than one person?

- What is the basic point of Psalm 45?
- How might this psalm tie in with our Lord’s Epiphany?
- Where do you see echoes of Psalm 45 in our hymn, “O Morning Star”?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Philipp Nicolai (1556–1608) was a pastor, poet and composer. He was a part of what is called the *Meistersinger* tradition, where both the text and the melody stem from the same artist. We know Nicolai best for his two hymns, “O Morning Star” and “Wake, Awake, for Night Is Flying” (*LSB* 516). These two hymns are known as the Queen and King of Chorales. Nicolai’s work has inspired many of the world’s greatest musicians, especially J. S. Bach, who wrote famous cantatas based on these two hymns (BWV 1 and BWV 140).

Nicolai lived and served at a time when sickness and disease were rampant, especially in the heat of a German summer. One of the roles that the pastor often played in these circumstances was to help his flock to realize that there is hope, that God has not abandoned them, and that they have a bright future in Christ. Nicolai did this well through his hymns and poetry.

- What does our culture do spiritually in the midst of disaster? Where do we turn and why?
- What can we as a church learn from pastors like Philipp Nicolai?

Text

Stanzas 1–3 of this hymn are addressed to Jesus as Morning Star (Rev. 22:16), heavenly Bridegroom (Matt. 25:1–13), and Lord (Matt. 17:4). Then God the Father is addressed in stanza 4 as “Almighty Father.” Stanza 5 is addressed to the Church, His holy bride. The final stanza extols how our Lord is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end (Rev. 22:13). It concludes by praying to Jesus that He would return quickly as we yearn for His returning (Rev. 22:20).

- How do the names that are used to address God give us a sense of the author of the hymn and of his basic point?
- If there is such an emphasis in this hymn on Jesus’ coming and His return, why do we usually consider it an Epiphany hymn?

The end of the second stanza also references the paradox of life in Christ under the cross: “Now, though daily Earth’s deep sadness May perplex us And distress us, Yet with heav’nly joy You bless us.” Then stanza 6 points us beyond this paradox to the joys of heaven: “He will one day, oh, glorious grace, Transport us to that happy place Beyond all tears and sinning!”

- Why does “earth’s deep sadness” perplex us?
- How could a hymn with stanzas like this be used to comfort those in the midst of sickness, sorrow or death?

This final stanza is considered by many to be one of the most beautiful hymn stanzas ever written. It points us to the source of our joy (Jesus), and the fact that He

encompasses all things. It ends with our yearning for His coming back to take us home.

- Where is the place “beyond all tears and sinning”?
- Why does Nicolai tie tears and sinning together here?
- How does this comfort us in our troubles of today?

Making the Connection

The link between the main text behind this hymn (Ps. 45) and the text of the hymn itself lies in Nicolai’s sacramental imagery. In the Scriptures, nearly every time a wedding is discussed, it is in the context of a wedding *banquet*. Furthermore, the way that God reveals Himself as the God of love (stanza 3) is by His ongoing, forgiving presence with His people by His Word and Sacrament. Just as wine and music make the heart glad, so we rejoice and celebrate in Him at His holy wedding feast. This heavenly meal ties the

presence of God here and now to our “happy place” with Him in eternity.

- How do we as a congregation and as individuals make this connection between the life of the believer, the Sacraments, and our eternal life in heaven?
- Why does this connection provide comfort to the Christian?

In Closing

Pastor Nicolai looked out of his study at the graves of so many of his flock whom he loved. What his eyes told him is that they were dead and gone. But with the eyes of faith, he saw their resurrection and the bright Morning Star that keeps them in His bosom until the Last Day.

- Sing or read together *LSB* 395, “O Morning Star, How Fair and Bright.”

Prayer

O God, by the leading of a star You made known Your only-begotten Son to the Gentiles. Lead us, who know You by faith, to enjoy in heaven the fullness of Your divine presence; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for the Epiphany of Our Lord).

To Jordan Came the Christ, Our Lord

Lutheran Service Book 406/407 | study by Todd A. Peperkorn

Introduction

As Luther sat down to write the preface for the Small Catechism, he reflected on what he found as he visited Evangelical (now called Lutheran) parishes throughout Germany. This is what he wrote:

The deplorable, miserable condition that I discovered recently when I, too, was a visitor, has forced and urged me to prepare this catechism, or Christian doctrine, in this small, plain, simple form. Mercy! Dear God, what great misery I beheld! The common person, especially in the villages, has no knowledge whatever of Christian doctrine. And unfortunately, many pastors are completely unable and unqualified to teach. <This is so much so, that one is ashamed to speak of it.> Yet, everyone says that they are Christians, have been baptized, and receive the holy Sacraments, even though they cannot even recite the Lord's Prayer or the Creed or the Ten Commandments.

They live like dumb brutes and irrational hogs. Now that the Gospel has come, they have nicely learned to abuse all freedom like experts. (*Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, 2nd ed. [CPH, 2006], 313)

As a result of this, Luther wrote his catechisms. He also wrote a series of hymns on the six chief parts. Our hymn for today, “To Jordan Came the Christ, Our Lord,” is one of these hymns.

- Who is Luther chiefly criticizing in his introduction above?
- Why did Luther employ music?
- What do we use music to learn today?

Exploring the Scriptures

There are two chief texts that Luther uses as the basis for this hymn. Read Matt. 3:13–17. In the Matthew account, Jesus speaks about His Baptism as a fulfillment of all righteousness. Matthew uses the word “immediately” to describe the Spirit descending upon Jesus like a dove.

- What does it mean “to fulfill all righteousness”?
- Why does Matthew emphasize the relationship between Jesus’ Baptism and the coming of the Spirit with the word “immediately”?

Read Matt. 28:16–20. Jesus is just about to ascend into heaven to sit at the right hand of the Father. The disciples

have seen Him rise from the dead, but even now, some doubt. Jesus then says to them, literally, “having gone, make disciples of all the nations by baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and by teaching them to keep/guard everything that I have commanded to you, and behold, I am with you all the days, to the end of the age.”

- What are the two parts to making disciples according to Jesus?
- What is the relationship between Baptism and Jesus being with us to the end of the age?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

This hymn was written around 1540/1541 by Martin Luther, and is the sixth and final of his “Catechism Hymns,” centered on the six chief parts of the Small Catechism. Luther’s hymns were particularly didactic (teaching-oriented), as he saw himself first and foremost as a teacher and preacher of the faith. His hymns often read like mini-sermons, with the ebb and flow of Law and Gospel prevalent throughout. This hymn is no exception.

- Do we still need didactic (teaching) hymns like this today? Why or why not?

- What are the chief doctrines about Baptism that need to be taught today? Why?

Text

Stanza 1 of the hymn paints the picture of our Lord at the Jordan River, and echoes the language of the Scriptures that talk about Baptism as a washing (Titus 3:5), death in Christ (Rom. 6:3–4), and new life (2 Cor. 5:17).

- Why does it please the Father for Jesus to come and be baptized?

- What is the connection between Jesus' death and Baptism in this stanza?

In stanza 2 Luther talks about Baptism as a token. He ties Baptism to faith and His Word. Remember again Luther's words from the Small Catechism: "*What is Baptism?* Baptism is not just plain water, but it is the water included in God's command and combined with God's word" (LSB, 325).

- Why is it so important to understand that Baptism is combined with God's Word?

He then talks about the Holy Spirit giving us kinship in Baptism (st. 2). The Holy Spirit makes us family through the token of Holy Baptism!

- Why does Luther call Baptism a "token"? Is this another way of saying "symbol," or does it mean something else?

- What does it mean to be a part of the family of God? How does that change your relationship with God?

Notice in stanza 4 how Luther moves from Jesus standing in the water to us standing in the water. Jesus stands in the water and extends His grace.

- What are the words in this stanza that describe what God does to us and for us?

Stanza 6 is a stern warning against despising Baptism. In some respects it seems out of place, but it shows the consequences for throwing away God's grace.

- To whom is this stanza written?
- How does this continue to teach us about the gifts of Holy Baptism?
- What role does faith play in Holy Baptism?

Making the Connection

This hymn is not merely teaching about something that God does. It actually preaches to us what God has done in Christ through Holy Baptism. As we go through each of the stanzas of this hymn, notice the emphasis on how God views us because we are in Christ. Luther was a master of proclaiming Jesus' death and resurrection, *and* how that great work of God is actually delivered to His people.

- As you look through the text of this hymn again, pick out all of the verbs that describe God's action toward us or how God looks at us in Christ. What is the most powerful image for you?
- What are the words Luther uses to describe what we either receive or what we are to do by faith in His Word?

In Closing

- Sing or read together LSB 406/407.

Prayer

Father in heaven, at the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River You proclaimed Him Your beloved Son and anointed Him with the Holy Spirit. Make all who are baptized in His name faithful in their calling as Your children and inheritors with Him of everlasting life; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for the Baptism of Our Lord).

Within the Father's House

Lutheran Service Book 410 | study by Shawn L. Kumm

Introduction

There aren't many accounts in Scripture concerning twelve-year-olds. In God's Word much space is devoted to the writings and goings-on of adults. Jesus Himself draws our attention to just how precious infants and small children are to the heart of God. But preteens and adolescents? They seem to be seriously under-represented.

Oh, there are a few examples: David, when he goes to fight Goliath, is described as "a youth" (1 Sam. 17:33); there is the reckless and heartbreaking vow of Jephthah and its deadly effect on his daughter (Judges 11:29–40); and there is the twelve-year-old king Manasseh who reigned for 55 years but whose kingship is summarized in these sad words,

"And he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord" (2 Kings 21:1–2).

So we are a bit surprised and refreshed to find another twelve-year-old making the pages of Scripture. That there is a hymn written about an adolescent is even more amazing. Today's hymn has us sing of the most famous preteen of all — Jesus, the Son of Mary, the Son of God.

- What other examples from Scripture can you think of in which young people are highlighted?
- What are the benefits to the whole people of God when biblical accounts that include young people are taught?

Exploring the Scriptures

Many Christians know the events surrounding the first days and weeks of Jesus' life: the announcement by Gabriel, Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, His circumcision on the eighth day, at forty days His presentation in the temple, and the adoration of the Magi. St. Luke then writes, "And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him" (Luke 2:40). Silence. Then there is silence for the next twelve years.

- Why is Scripture silent on most of Jesus' childhood?
- According to Eccl. 12:1–7, what is the benefit of youth?
When a young person knows God, for what things in life does such knowledge prepare him or her?

The Holy Gospel appointed for today opens one small window into the life of Jesus. Read Luke 2:41–52.

- In verse 41, what piece of information do we learn about the family of Jesus? In what ways is this information of great importance to understanding Jesus' ministry?

When Mary and Joseph could not find Jesus, St. Luke first records what they *did*. Not until later are we told how they *felt*.

- What feelings of Mary and Joseph are described in verse 48?

In verse 49 Jesus speaks of His "Father," and in verse 51 we are told Jesus returned to Nazareth with "them," that is, Joseph and Mary.

- In what ways does Jesus demonstrate He can perfectly live in the tension of the summary of the first three commandments, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deut. 6:5) and the Fourth Commandment, "Honor your father and mother" (Deut. 5:16)?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

What an honor it would be to rub elbows with the theological doctors of the Church *and* serve the monarch of the nation. That was the life of James Russell Woodford (1820–1885), this hymn's author. As a priest in the Church of England, Woodford showed exemplary scholarship and pastoral wisdom. His exceptional gifts led to service as an Honorary Chaplain to Queen Victoria.

Education was a particular focus of Woodford's, and he established a theological college where twelve students lived and were trained for work in the Church. His contributions to commentaries and sermon collections indicate that Woodford took seriously the study of God's Word. He delved into Scripture so that the living Word would be heard and read by many.

- How might the facts above have contributed to Woodford's interest in Luke 2:41–52?

It is easy to see why the account of Jesus in the middle of the teachers of the temple would catch Woodford's interest and set into motion his poetic pen. Not only did Woodford write theology that could be read in biblical commentaries and heard in sermon collections, but he also wrote theology that could be sung.

Text

Through the omission of one of the original stanzas, the framework of this hymn is now neatly divided into three sets of two stanzas each. In stanzas 1 and 2 Woodford provides a straightforward description of the scene. The first words of the hymn — “Within the Father's house”— make us curious to know who is in the house and what kind of house this is.

- Compare the details of the first two stanzas with the text of Luke 2:41–52. Which specifics did Woodford include? Which did he choose to omit?

Throughout Jesus' ministry His message of forgiveness will be at odds with the religious leaders and teachers of the Law.

Making the Connection

In His ministry Jesus is found in the temple during another Passover. First read John 2:13–20 and then read 1 Cor. 6:19.

- Discuss how the Holy Spirit uses the Word of God and the water of Baptism to connect you who are described as “a temple of the Holy Spirit” to Jesus, the temple incarnate.

Luther writes in the Large Catechism: “We always teach that the Sacraments and all outward things that God ordains and institutes should not be considered according to the coarse, outward mask, the way we look at a nutshell.

In Closing

Read again Luke 2:49. These are the first spoken words of Jesus to be recorded in St. Luke's Gospel. Begin to think of young people you know who need direction to seek Jesus in the Father's house.

- Sing or read together *LSB* 410, “Within the Father's House.”

- Which word in stanza 2 does Woodford choose to indicate the Gospel content of Jesus' questions and answers?

Stanzas 3 and 4 get to the heart of the matter. In stanza 4 Woodford uses the word “epiphany,” which means to make manifest or to show brightly.

- Connect the use of “veil” in stanza 3 with the curtain or veil in Luke 23:45. What is the “secret of the Lord” that is finally shown to the world?

After singing the objective statements of stanzas 1–4 the hearer, the singer, is brought personally into the account of Jesus in the temple through the use of the pronouns “our” and “us” and “we.” The truths of this hymn are now appropriated to us. Stanza 5 moves directly into stanza 6; there is no punctuation dividing them.

- Read 1 Cor. 13:12. For what does Woodford have us pray in the last two stanzas? When — and where — will this finally be fulfilled?

But we respect them because God's Word is included in them” (*Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, 2nd ed. [CPH, 2006], 425).

- Keeping in mind the words of Luther above and the proper Lutheran understanding of the means of “grace” (st. 5), how are Baptism, Absolution, and the Lord's Supper each a “dim revealing” of the Lord who visits your soul and yet also a clear epiphany of God's grace to you?

Prayer

Gracious Father, Your Son grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and all people. Bless, guide, and govern the children and young people of Your Church by Your Holy Spirit, that they may grow in grace and in the knowledge of Your Word. Grant that they may serve You well and usefully, developing their talents not for their own sakes but to Your glory and for the welfare of their neighbor. Protect and defend them from all danger and harm, giving Your holy angels charge over them; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen (For young persons, *LSB*, 315).

The Only Son from Heaven

Lutheran Service Book 402 | study by Todd A. Peperkorn

Introduction

In Gen. 15:5 God promised Abraham that his offspring would be like the stars in the heavens. This promise did not come immediately. Abraham and Sarah had to wait for many years before their first son, Isaac, was born. In this hymn we see the story of the brightest star of Abraham's offspring, Jesus Christ, who fulfills all the prophecies of the coming Messiah, and who brings us faith and trust in Him in all our times of need.

- Can you think of any examples in history or in your life where the coming of a child brought with it great promise?
- Why does the coming of a child mean new beginnings in so many ways?
- When is the first time in the Scriptures that God promised to send Jesus? Why did He make the promise?

Exploring the Scriptures

Stanza 2 of this hymn gives us the opportunity to explore the question of God's timing. Read Eccl. 3:1–8, where the preacher speaks about how there are times appointed for nearly everything in our life. These seasons or times demonstrate to us that God is the one who orders everything in our lives, and that these things happen in His way and time.

- If there is a time for everything under the sun, does that mean we have no choices in our lives, in how things turn out? Why or why not?

Read Gal. 4:4–7, where St. Paul teaches us how God's timing in sending Jesus had to be just right (the "fullness of time"), so that His holy purposes might be fulfilled.

- What are God's holy purposes?
- How does that help us to understand God's role in the individual happenings of our life within the context of God's plan of salvation?
- Why does Paul call us *all* (men and women alike) "sons"? What is the relationship between that and Paul calling us heirs?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

This hymn holds many distinctions. It is one of the earliest Lutheran hymns, as it was written around 1524, right about the time that Martin Luther began in earnest to revive the hymnody of the Church. Hymns from that period are well known for being substantive, and this one is no exception.

- Why do you think it would have been so common to have heavily doctrinal hymns during the early period of the Reformation?

The author of our hymn was a woman, Elisabeth (Meseritz) Cruciger (1500–1535), an ex-nun from Rega who married a theologian named Caspar Cruciger in 1524. She and her husband became close friends of Martin and Katherine Luther, and could often be found around the Luther dinner table. Given her age and the times in which she lived, it is nothing short of amazing that Luther and his colleague, Kantor Johann Walter, approved this text for the earliest Lutheran hymnals.

- What does this fact tell us about how Luther and others viewed the writing of hymns in their day? What could this teach us about encouraging poetry and hymn-writing in our circles today?

The hymn was not included in *The Lutheran Hymnal* of 1941, but was reintroduced in the Missouri Synod with its inclusion in *Lutheran Worship* in 1982. It has slowly but steadily gained acceptance and popularity in our circles since that time.

- Think of some of the other new hymns that you have learned over the past five years. Why did you learn them? What is good about learning new hymns? What is the danger in learning new hymns?

Text

Cruciger wrote this hymn in two parts. The first part encompasses stanzas 1 and 2, which are packed with Scripture references and teaching about God's purpose in

sending His Son. Notice how they hold up so many different doctrines or teachings about Christ, such as His relationship to the Father, His prophetic life, the incarnation, His kingship, the virgin birth, God's work in destroying death, opening heaven and eternal life.

- Is this too much to take in with one hymn, or does this teaching emphasis give us more reasons to come back to the hymn year after year? Why?
- What would be a way that a hymn like this could be used in Sunday School or at home to teach the faith?

The second part of the hymn is stanzas 3 and 4, which move from a teaching mode to more of a prayer. Notice what exactly we pray for in stanza 3: to love God more, to stand unshaken in faith and to adore God in spirit. Also note how we receive glimpses of heaven here which we pray would "reap its fullness" hereafter.

- What is the glimpse of heaven to which the author refers?
- Why must the Lord awaken our hearts to do these things?

Making the Connection

"The Only Son from Heaven" ties the birth and epiphany of our Lord to how God is present with us in the Divine Service. How would the following phrases make these connections for us now?

- "He comes, the king anointed, The Christ, the virgin-born."

In Closing

God gave Abraham a promise that the Son would come in His time and way, and that the entire world would be blessed through Him. The Son has come, and continues to come to us now in the Divine Service. God shows Himself to us week after week, year after year, to give us life, to rescue us from death, and to give us a glimpse of heaven itself.

- Sing or read together *LSB* 402, "The Only Son from Heaven."

The final stanza is a doxological stanza, that is, a hymn of praise to the Holy Trinity. There is a sense in this stanza that we stand in worship adoring God, and that we are suddenly surrounded by the angels who sing "Holy, holy, holy" with us! The threefold "holy" is from Is. 6:3, where the angels surround the throne of God and sing that the whole earth is filled with God's glory.

- Where in the Divine Service do we sing "Holy, holy, holy"?
- Why would our hymn writer want to make the connection between the worship on earth and the worship in heaven?
- How does it change our view of worship to know that we sing and pray and receive God's gifts "with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven" (*Lutheran Worship* [Concordia Publishing House, 1982], 146)?

- "To open heav'n before us And bring us life again."
- "That we, through this world moving, each glimpse of heaven proving, May reap its fullness there."

Prayer

Almighty and everlasting God, who governs all things in heaven and on earth, mercifully hear the prayers of Your people and grant us Your peace through all our days; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for the Second Sunday after the Epiphany).

From God the Father, Virgin-Born

Lutheran Service Book 401 | study by Todd A. Peperkorn

Introduction

The life-changing journey is one of the great themes in literature and film. For example, in the movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Ulysses Everett McGill takes a long journey to reclaim his true love. While on the journey, he encounters many things he never expected (a cyclops Bible salesman?), so that at the end of the journey he is a different man from when he began, as are his companions.

Today when we think of journeys, more often than not we are thinking about a vacation or a business trip. But sometimes, a trip takes on a deeper meaning than leisure or

work. Sometimes the journey can change who you are and how you look at the world.

- What is the most significant journey you ever took (either good or bad) and what made it so important?
- Did anyone else travel with you on the journey? How did that change it?
- How did this journey make you a different person at the end from who you were in the beginning?

Exploring the Scriptures

In the Scriptures, God's people always seem to be on the road somewhere. Abraham leaves Haran to go to the land promised to him by God (Gen. 12). Jacob and his sons join Joseph in Egypt (Gen. 46). Then after four hundred years of slavery, Jacob's descendants (now called the Israelites) leave Egypt and take the long journey back to the Promised Land.

- How is it that the Israelites can live in Egypt for four hundred years and never call it their home?
- How long do you have to live somewhere in order for it to be considered home?

Perhaps the answer comes in one of the great travel words in the Bible, the word "sojourn." It means traveling to a place and living there for a time, even though that place is not your home. In Genesis 47:4, for example, the children of Israel tell Pharaoh that they want to sojourn in the land of Egypt. Jesus on the mount of transfiguration (Luke 9:30) speaks with Moses and Elijah about His exodus, His departure.

- Does Jesus sojourn in our midst until He goes home, or is He here to stay?
- Where is home for you? Why?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

This hymn is an anonymous Latin office hymn for the Feast of Epiphany. It dates from somewhere between the ninth and eleventh centuries. The hymn seems to be almost a versification of the Second Article of the Nicene Creed:

who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried. And the third day He rose again according to the Scriptures and ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father. And He will come again (*LSB*, 158)

The movement in this hymn emphasizes for us Christ's travel from heaven to earth and back again, bringing us with Him on the journey.

Text

This hymn is really the story of the new creation that Jesus brings with Him by coming into our world. Stanza 1 introduces the journey by giving us two purposes for Jesus' coming down from heaven, "By death the font to consecrate," and "The faithful to regenerate." Read Rom. 6:3–4. The author of the hymn here uses "font" to represent the water of Baptism. Read what Luther has to say about the water of the font in the Small Catechism, on page 325 of *Lutheran Service Book*, beginning with "How can water do such great things?"

- What does it mean to consecrate something? How does Jesus' death consecrate the font?
- What is the relationship between Baptism and regeneration?

Stanza 2 confesses Jesus as true man (“In human flesh He came to die”), and then speaks about how Jesus restores creation by His death (Rev. 21:5). This restoration brings good tidings of great joy (Luke 2:10), so that at His resurrection they could hardly believe the news for joy (Luke 24:41). Jesus’ words now bring joy in all its fullness (John 15:11).

- Is there a contradiction in finding joy in Jesus’ death? Why or why not?

Stanza 4 is based on the story of Jesus appearing to the Emmaus disciples after His resurrection (Luke 24:13–35). We know some of the language from the familiar evening hymn, “Abide with Me” (*LSB* 878). This stanza holds up the connection between Jesus’ abiding presence, His work as the light of the world (John 8:12), and the healing that

only He can bring in the forgiveness of sins (Mal. 4:2; also stanza 3).

- What is the connection between Jesus’ presence and His forgiveness?

Stanza 5 confesses the common theme in early Christian and medieval hymns of the return of Christ. It echoes the language of the Nicene Creed, but then moves to a more military image. Psalm 91 in particular, teaches us how God is the one who guards and protects us from all danger. God is the one who fights for us, who does battle for us against sin, death and the power of the devil.

- Why would the biblical picture of God as the one who fights for us be troubling today?
- How does this view of God fighting for us offer comfort?

Making the Connection

This hymn in a wonderful way makes the connection between Jesus’ life and death and life again, Holy Baptism, the forgiveness of sins and His return on the Last Day. God reveals Himself to us in His Son, and we enter into the life of God by the waters of Baptism. This hymn ties it all together, draws us into the heavenly journey, and teaches us to look to Him in all our needs of body and soul.

In Closing

God gave Abraham a promise that the Son would come in His time and way, and that the entire world would be blessed through Him. The Son has come, and continues to come to us now in the Divine Service. God shows Himself to us week after week, year after year, to give us life, to rescue us from death, and to give us a glimpse of heaven itself.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 401, “From God the Father, Virgin-Born.”

- How might this hymn be used to teach the daily baptismal life that Luther talks about in the fourth part of Holy Baptism from the Small Catechism?
- What stanza in this hymn offers you the most comfort, and why?

Prayer

Almighty and everlasting God, mercifully look upon our infirmities and stretch forth the hand of Your majesty to heal and defend us; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for the Third Sunday after the Epiphany).

Seek Where You May to Find a Way

Lutheran Service Book 557 | study by Christopher I. Thoma

Introduction

The story of the RMS *Titanic* is a familiar one. It is quite possible that the very mention of its name conjures thoughts of pompous vanity in newspapers calling it “unsinkable.” Even worse were the recorded quotes from the crew, “Not even God can sink this ship.” And even though the *Titanic* was a visible testimony to man’s ingenuity and drive to conquer nature, early in the morning of April 15, 1912, on its maiden voyage, the first-rate ship hit an iceberg and sank, killing about 1,500 passengers.

I remember watching a movie version of the tragedy and asking myself, “If I were on that ship, what would I have done to save myself?” The ship was going to sink. That’s a fact. The only issue now was how to survive, how to be saved.

- Consider and discuss manmade structures. Which ones remain? Which ones have been destroyed?
- Which ones need maintenance and repair for preservation?

Exploring the Scriptures

Read John 6:68–69.

- What do Peter’s words reveal about the objective truth of the Gospel?
- Where do we hear these words in the Divine Service?

Read Matt. 11:2–6. In this text, John the Baptist sends word to Jesus to ask Him if He is the “one who is to come.” He is “seeking” an answer to this question.

- Why do you suppose John asked this question?
Considering the context of his imprisonment, what does

John do that we have a tendency to neglect doing in our daily lives?

- How does Jesus respond to John? In other words, no matter what the need may be, does He do anything for John other than what He does for us? In a time of great need, where does Jesus focus John’s attention (and ours)?

Read, compare, and discuss the words of Ps. 49:5–15 and Rom. 8:28–39. Both of these texts speak of tragedy, trust, endurance, life, and death.

- How does 1 Peter 3:21–22 shed light on this discussion?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

It is suggested that Georg Weissel (1590–1635), the son of a mayor and the author of at least twenty hymns, penned this hymn and used it at his ordination, which took place one week after the dedication of the new church building in Königsberg, Prussia, where he would serve as pastor until his death.

As with any building project, even in medieval times, the building of a new church structure was a magnificent accomplishment that heralded the abilities of man.

- Based upon the context above, does Weissel reveal in his hymn a familiarity with man’s pride in the face of accomplishment? In what ways?
- Have you experienced a new building project in your congregation? If so, what care was taken to see that all glory was given to God?
- What do the following words reveal about the pride

of man and perhaps imply Weissel’s intentions as a newly ordained pastor? “My heart is stilled, / On Christ I build, / He is the one foundation ... / Through Him I more than conquer” (st. 1).

Read Joshua 24:15.

- What similarities to Joshua’s words to the Israelites do you find within the text of the hymn?
- Where in particular in the hymn do you see Weissel driving the reader away from the works of man to the works and accomplishments of God given in holy worship within the building?

Text

In somewhat of a rhetorical sense, with stanza 1, “Seek Where You May to Find a Way” immediately begins by presenting the looming problem.

- What is the problem?

- What is the only viable solution?
- Read 1 Cor. 3:11–13. What is absolutely necessary for a secure faith structure that will not sink, collapse, crumble, or decay?

With stanza 2, Weissel continues to place before us the impenetrable hull (that is, doctrinal absolutes that cannot be rejected) of God’s redemptive plan in history.

- What does it mean that Jesus was “God-man,” and why does it matter? How is this denied in the world?
- Why is Jesus referred to as our “Servant-King”? How is this denied in the world?
- Which pinnacle event is referenced as the event that justifies? How does our Baptism connect to this objective truth? Read Titus 3:3–7.

Read Matt. 6:19–21, 25–34 and Luke 6:37–38.

- How do these texts speak to the abundance of God’s grace? How do they speak to God’s mercy reshaping our lives for service in this life?

Making the Connection

This hymn is calling for the reader to locate his trust and hope in the Savior, Jesus Christ, and the accomplishments of His life, death, resurrection, and ascension for those who could not save themselves.

- Where does Weissel call for the reader to locate Jesus with certainty?
- Read John 1:14. Who is the “Word”?

In Closing

Whether it is the almost immediate and epic sinking of the *Titanic* or the slower, drawn-out epic of the deterioration of all things in this world, “Seek Where You May to Find a Way” is a poetic division of Law and Gospel that has at its heart the epic of the Gospel solution for sin. It reminds the reader that all those who by faith build upon Christ, no matter the tragedy, no matter the strife, are secured for an eternity in the glorious presence of Jesus in heaven.

- What does this mean for your life and death in this world?
- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 557.

- How does the hymn reflect these truths in stanza 3?

Perhaps you noticed that within stanzas 1–3, the conversation of the hymn is taking place between the author and the reader. With stanza 4, we see a change. Stanza 4 becomes the confession of certainty of the hymnographer himself, making the joyful declaration that Jesus is his source of delight and eternal joy.

- Read John 15:18–19 and Matt. 25:34. What do these texts say about the inheritance of faith in Christ?
- Consider again Rom. 8:35–39 and consider the possibilities, worldly and spiritual, that seek to assault and separate us from Christ. Is Paul bold or timid in his words? How is this reflected in stanza 4? According to both, where is the power found to remain connected to Christ? In other words, is it man’s work or God’s work?
- Read Ps. 119:105 and 2 Tim. 4:7–8. How is the Gospel promise revealed, and to what end will it carry those who fight the fight of faith in this world?

Saint Augustine referred to the Word of God as being given in two forms, verbal and visible.

- What is the *verbal* giving of Christ?
- What is the *visible* giving of Christ?

Prayer

O Lord, keep Your Church in Your perpetual mercy; and because without You we cannot but fall, preserve us from all things hurtful, and lead us to all things profitable to our salvation; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the only Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Proper 20C).

Thy Strong Word

Lutheran Service Book 578 | study by Larry A. Peters

Introduction

Light is so commonplace to us. We turn the switch on and darkness disappears. Sometimes it is hard to escape it. We even drive out to the country so that we can see the night sky unobscured by city lights. But it was not always so. Light and dark governed the lives of people. Today we are reminded how light and darkness still define us. This darkness is not just the absence of light, but is known as a broken world where problems outnumber solutions and sin cannot be broken by our invention or effort. We face the darkness of good we cannot do, of evil we cannot avoid, and of death that steals our lives away. We need a light that will shine in this darkness, a light the darkness

cannot overcome, a light not of our own creation, but the Light that comes down from above (John 1:1–9).

- How does the imagery of darkness describe sin and its effects upon us?
- How does the imagery of light describe both who Jesus is and what He has come to accomplish?
- How does “light from above” illustrate both the limitations of our light down below and the divine intervention of God through His Son, our Light?

Exploring the Scriptures

“The Light Comes from Above” is the motto of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. The hymn “Thy Strong Word” is based on this motto. The motto is drawn from Matt. 4:16, part of a whole section of the Gospel where light is a prominent theme. The lessons for Epiphany 5A are focused on the same theme of light.

- Read Ps. 112:4. What light shines in the darkness?
- Read Is. 58:8. What light breaks through like the dawn?
- Read Matt. 5:14–16. What light gives glory to our Father in heaven?

Light is one of the most prominent themes of Scripture. It is laid against the darkness in creation, and it stands in contrast to the darkness of sin and death. But light is not just an image. Jesus Christ is called the Light. The prologue to John’s Gospel retells creation from the vantage point of the Light who is Jesus Christ, the Word through whom all

things came to be, and the Word who became flesh for us and our salvation.

While we have become masters of certain kinds of light (largely through electricity), we still associate darkness as a place where fear dwells, where mystery is hidden and even where danger lurks. Having light still connotes safety, security, and comfort.

- In 1 Cor. 2:1–16 we read of the secret or mystery long hidden and misunderstood, but now revealed to us through the Spirit. How do the light passages of the other lessons for the day relate? Paul says that “we have the mind of Christ”; how is this the result of the “light from above” that comes in Christ?
- God has chosen to reveal the light of Christ to the world through means. What are those means by which Christ’s light continues to shine upon us? Could we be the means by which God’s light shines in the world (Matt. 5:14–16)?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

In 1954 Martin H. Franzmann, a professor at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, was asked to write a text for the seminary to use as a processional hymn at commencement. The suggested tune is now known as “Ebenezer.” He put into song the seminary’s motto “Light from Above,” writing four stanzas. But the hymn was not finished until 1959 after Franzmann had added two more. Its long and distinguished use by the seminary continues to the present day.

- Think how the words of this hymn speak to a seminary commencement where pastors are being sent out into the Church and the world. How might these words give voice to the hopes of future pastors? How might they give voice to the prayers and expectations of a Church waiting to receive these new laborers in God’s harvest?

Text

Strong images are characteristic of Martin Franzmann's poetry. Compare this with another of his hymns, *LSB* 834, "O God, O Lord of Heaven and Earth."

"Thy Strong Word" unfolds like a story, each stanza building upon the other until it reaches its stunning close. Each stanza ends with a refrain that praises Him who sends us this light. What can we say in response to this gift of light? Only one word: "Alleluia" without end!

"Thy Strong Word" cuts through the darkness like the big blade of a sword. Stanza 1 begins with Gen. 1:1–3, John 1:1–5, and God's act of creation. We give thanks for created light that shines through the sun, moon, and stars to order all our days and our seasons.

- Can you imagine life without cycles of light and dark to define the day, or seasons to define the year?

In stanza 2 the images change. The darkness is no longer the state before God's creative Word speaks, but the result of the fall. This darkness speaks of the world marred by sin and death. Once glorious creatures who crowned His work, humans found themselves cursed and unable to free themselves.

- Read 2 Cor. 4:6 and John 8:12. See how many passages you can add which similarly describe how Christ, the Light of the world, broke into the darkness of our earthly dwelling place, both breathing in our death and breathing out His life as our salvation.

Making the Connection

The strong Word of God has worked salvation for us, calling us to live and speak the strong words of the Gospel. This is not pious sentiment, but the earnest prayer of all God's baptized servants.

In Closing

The Word of God is strong and powerful. It brings Christ's light and life wherever it is spoken or sung.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 578, "Thy Strong Word."

Stanza 3 describes the result of Christ's coming into the world. He "bespeaks us righteous" until we shine with His very own holiness (Rom. 3:5–6). Our lives on earth "press toward glory," where our eternal hopes are fulfilled.

- St. Peter and St. Paul both speak of our Christian lives as the press toward glory. Do you see your own life as this onward and upward journey?

We know Christ crucified (1 Cor. 1:22–25). He is our wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption. Through the cross, God breaks into our hearts with His shining, conquering might.

- What do we expect to hear from the pulpit on Sunday morning except this message of the cross?

In the fifth stanza we plead for God's light to enable a fitting response from us. We beg for "lips to sing" His glory, throats to shout our hope, and mouths to speak His holy name. In this stanza the image of light is implicit.

- What is the glory, hope, and name of God we are to proclaim?

And then what is perhaps the finest doxological stanza ever explodes in a burst of light, praising God the Father (light-creator), the Son (the Light of Light begotten), and the Holy Spirit (light-revealer).

- How do we respond to God's Light? Who responds to that Light? How long does our praise last?

- How has this life-transforming Word and Light changed who you are? What you do? Your story?

Prayer

Almighty God, grant to Your Church Your Holy Spirit and the wisdom that comes down from above, that Your Word may not be bound but have free course and be preached to the joy and edifying of Christ's holy people, that in steadfast faith we may serve You and, in the confession of Your name, abide unto the end; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen (For the Church, *LSB*, p. 305).

O Wondrous Type! O Vision Fair

Lutheran Service Book 413 | study by Bernard J. Schey

Introduction

We could use strobe lights, halogen headlamps and staring at the sun at midday (not a good idea!) to help us imagine just what Peter, James and John saw on the mountain of transfiguration. The point is that Jesus was seen in His heavenly glory. Also, prophets Moses and Elijah met with Him to discuss what would soon happen at Jerusalem. We

have the promise by the grace and mercy of Christ Jesus that we will one day see God's glory *unendingly*.

- Why were the sainted prophets Moses and Elijah chosen and not two others?
- How is it that "the Church may share" (stanza 1) this glory even now in this world?

Exploring the Scriptures

One of the Old Testament readings for this Sunday in the church year is all of Deuteronomy 34, wherein we read how Moses was taken to the summits of Mount Nebo and Mount Pisgah. From there he saw the Promised Land to which he'd led the Israelites over the last 40 years.

- Why was Moses not allowed to enter the Promised Land of Canaan? Did this mean that the Lord had not forgiven him?
- How is God's mercy shown in sending Moses to the mountain of transfiguration?

St. Luke the Evangelist gives us a detailed description in the ninth chapter of his Gospel of what happened before the eyes of Peter, James, and John on that incredible day.

- Note that Luke begins the episode (9:28–36) by writing: "Now about eight days after these sayings." Why does Luke make a point of saying this?
- In verse 30, Luke tells us that the topic of discussion between Jesus, Moses, and Elijah was Jesus' own "departure." What does this refer to?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

This hymn comes to us in Latin written by an unknown author in 1495, just before the dawn of the Reformation. The first examples of it were found in Salisbury, England. The Englishman John Mason Neale (1818–1866) gave us a fine translation of this hymn. His brilliance as a Greek and Latin scholar served us well, since he translated over 200 hymns from those two languages into our own. Two of his best-known translations are "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" for Advent, and "All Glory, Laud, and Honor" for Palm Sunday. Our *Lutheran Service Book* contains hymns from many languages, providing a varied treasury of praise.

- Is there someone in your congregation skilled at writing Christian verse?
- How can writing a hymn be a clear confession of the Christian faith?

The bold tune used for this hymn makes it a bit difficult to remain seated to sing it properly! One might be moved to make it a genuine "carol," a hymn designed to be sung while walking around. Hence, there would not only be "Christmas carols," but also "Epiphany carols."

- How could such caroling long before or after the Christmas season serve to spread the message of the forgiveness of sins in Christ?

Text

The joyous melody of this hymn and the clearly told facts of the transfiguration make it memorable. The very title of the hymn gives us a word that must be understood in its biblical sense — "type." A type is a preview of what was fulfilled in Christ Jesus. So, Melchizedek (Gen. 14:17–24; Ps. 110:4) was a type of Christ. In the transfiguration, the radiant glory of Jesus, Moses, and Elijah was a type (again, preview) of heaven.

- What about the straight reporting of the facts? Is this a good thing?

In stanza 2, Neale translates for us that "the incarnate Lord holds converse high." "Incarnate" means to have flesh, just as we do, and this flesh Jesus shares with us. See John 1 on this.

- What is the main difference between His flesh and ours?

■ What are the similarities?

In stanza 3, we have the promise of heavenly glory, where the writer indicates we shall all not only witness but also be a part of heavenly glory when we steadfastly “joy in God with perfect love.”

■ How is it possible to have perfect love? See John 3:16 and 1 John 1:7.

Stanza 4 is written to give us hope, we who walk so often in “the valley of the shadow of death” (Ps. 23:4). Despite life’s

tragedies, we sing hymns like this to spite Satan and the troubles he sends us.

■ Describe some situations wherein you have found joy in Christ and His promises even though tears have flowed freely.

Finally, stanza 5 is our closing prayer that our Triune God might bring us to the reality of eternal life.

■ In what sense do we already have this gift? See John 5:24.

Making the Connection

This grand hymn anticipates the joy of heaven even as it looks forward to the imminent shame of the cross. Both are manifestations of the glory of God. St. Peter referred to this extraordinary transfiguration event to show that the facts of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus were not myths. See 2 Peter 1:16–18.

■ What are some modern-day myths that need to be discredited?

■ How can the truth of the facts of the life of Jesus bring comfort to despairing people?

In Closing

Jesus gave a preview, a type, of glory before the face of Peter, James, and John so that we might realize that He is indeed the Chosen One, the Messiah, the King of the Jews. He then bore our sins on the cross with the approval of the Father and the Holy Spirit in order to fulfill the prophetic witness of Moses and Elijah.

■ Sing or read together *LSB* 413.

Prayer

O God, in the glorious transfiguration of Your beloved Son You confirmed the mysteries of the faith by the testimony of Moses and Elijah. In the voice that came from the bright cloud You wonderfully foreshowed our adoption by grace. Mercifully make us co-heirs with the King in His glory and bring us to the fullness of our inheritance in heaven; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for the Transfiguration of Our Lord).