

THE
WORD IN

Song

Hymn of the
Day Studies for

FEASTS,
FESTIVALS &
OCCASIONS





THE
LUTHERAN CHURCH
MISSOURI SYNOD

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Hymn of the Day Studies for FEASTS, FESTIVALS & OCCASIONS

ARRANGED
BY CHURCH
YEAR

All hymns are from *Lutheran Service Book*.

Contents

FEASTS AND FESTIVALS

St. Andrew, Apostle (Nov. 30)

586 Preach You the Word 1

St. Thomas, Apostle (Dec. 21)

720 We Walk by Faith and Not by Sight. 3

St. Stephen, Martyr (Dec. 26)

661 The Son of God Goes Forth to War. 5

St. John, Apostle and Evangelist (Dec. 27)

523 O Word of God Incarnate 7

The Holy Innocents, Martyrs (Dec. 28)

969* Sweet Flowerets of the Martyr Band 9

764 When Aimless Violence Takes Those We Love 11

Eve of the Circumcision and Name of Jesus—New Year's Eve (Dec. 31)

899 Across the Sky the Shades of Night 13

Circumcision and Name of Jesus (Jan. 1)

900 Jesus! Name of Wondrous Love 15

896 Now Greet the Swiftly Changing Year 17

The Confession of St. Peter (Jan. 18)

512 At the Name of Jesus 19

St. Timothy, Pastor and Confessor (Jan. 24)

682 God of the Prophets, Bless the Prophets' Sons 21

The Conversion of St. Paul (Jan. 25)

611 Chief of Sinners Though I Be 23

834 O God, O Lord of Heaven and Earth 25

St. Titus, Pastor and Confessor (Jan. 26)

586 Preach You the Word see page 1

* Available in *Lutheran Service Builder* and in *Lutheran Service Book: Accompaniment for the Hymns*

The Purification of Mary and the Presentation of Our Lord (Feb. 2)	
519 In His Temple Now Behold Him	27
St. Matthias, Apostle (Feb. 24)	
831 “How Shall They Hear,” Who Have Not Heard.	29
St. Joseph, Guardian of Jesus (March 19)	
863 Our Father, by Whose Name	31
The Annunciation of Our Lord (March 25)	
356 The Angel Gabriel from Heaven Came	33
St. Mark, Evangelist (Apr. 25)	
836 O God of Light.	35
St. Philip and St. James, Apostles (May 1)	
861 Christ Be My Leader	37
The Visitation (May 31, Three-Year; July 2, One-Year)	
385 From East to West	see page 45
St. Barnabas, Apostle (June 11)	
837 Lift High the Cross	39
The Nativity of St. John the Baptist (June 24)	
346 When All the World Was Cursed	41
St. Peter and St. Paul, Apostles (June 29)	
647 Lord Jesus Christ, the Church’s Head	43
The Visitation (July 2, One-Year; May 31, Three-Year)	
385 From East to West	45
St. Mary Magdalene (July 22)	
465 Now All the Vault of Heaven Resounds	47
St. James the Elder, Apostle (July 25)	
420 Christ, the Life of All the Living	49
St. Mary, Mother of Our Lord (Aug. 15)	
670 Ye Watchers and Ye Holy Ones	51
St. Bartholomew, Apostle (Aug. 24)	
583 God Has Spoken by His Prophets	53
The Martyrdom of St. John the Baptist (Aug. 29)	
750 If Thou But Trust in God to Guide Thee	55

Holy Cross Day (Sept. 14)	
454 Sing, My Tongue, the Glorious Battle	57
455 The Royal Banners Forward Go	59
St. Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist (Sept. 21)	
730 What Is the World to Me	61
St. Michael and All Angels (Sept. 29)	
522 Lord God, to Thee We Give All Praise.	63
St. Luke, Evangelist (Oct. 18)	
810 O God of God, O Light of Light	65
St. James of Jerusalem, Brother of Jesus and Martyr (Oct. 23)	
797 Praise the Almighty	67
St. Simon and St. Jude, Apostles (Oct. 28)	
856 O Christ, Who Called the Twelve.	69
Reformation Day (Oct. 31)	
656/657 A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.	71
555 Salvation unto Us Has Come.	73
All Saints' Day (Nov. 1)	
677 For All the Saints	75

OCCASIONS

Anniversary of a Congregation	
912 Christ Is Our Cornerstone.	77
Mission Observance	
823/824 May God Bestow on Us His Grace.	79
Christian Education	
861 Christ Be My Leader	see page 37
864 Shepherd of Tender Youth.	81
Harvest Observance	
894 For the Fruits of His Creation.	83
Day of Thanksgiving	
785 We Praise You, O God	85
Day of Supplication and Prayer	
766 Our Father, Who from Heaven Above.	87
Day of National or Local Tragedy	
733 O God, Our Help in Ages Past	89

Preach You the Word

Lutheran Service Book 586 | study by Larry A. Peters

Introduction

It seems a little thing to write a hymn — until you sit down and try to actually write one! Gifted hymn writers are not only poets who can write well but those who can write with an economy of words. Compacting imagery and truth into the sparest of words is difficult, but writing a text that endures is harder still. Think of your favorite hymns and how the language sings the faith into your memory. Martin H. Franzmann (1907–1976) left us more than a few durable and memorable hymns. Today we examine “Preach You the Word.”

- Every year men are sent out from the seminaries of our Church to “Preach the Word.” What do you say to those who are sent out for such a noble task?
- Though we send out those who will serve the Church as pastors, we are neither alone nor the first. St. Paul was teacher, mentor, and father in the faith to Timothy and to Titus. He wrestled then as we do now on what to say and how to direct those who proclaim the Word. How has the preaching task changed? How is it the same?

Exploring the Scriptures

Christianity is by nature an evangelistic faith. It is a Gospel meant to be shared, to be proclaimed. This preaching is formalized in the liturgical setting, but it also takes place in catechetical and outreach settings. Jesus preached. He called apostles to preach. The apostles appointed successors to preach.

- “Preach the Word” (2 Tim. 4:2) is the official motto of Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Ind., but it is the formal task assigned to Christ’s Church through the centuries. Has the Church or the preacher a choice? Can we choose not to proclaim the Word?

In Matt. 13:1–23 and Luke 8:1–15, Jesus spoke the parable of the sower and explained it in detail to His disciples. This parable describes the Gospel as seed sown by the Spirit into the hearts of people. There are different outcomes, but the attention of the sower is on the seed and the task of sowing it. God brings the fruit.

- Who is the sower? What is the seed? Who brings the growth? Whose is the fruit?

The Word of the Lord endures forever. Everything else passes away. Read Is. 40:6–8.

- What is the Word that God has called the Church to proclaim and the preacher to preach?
- Will any other proclamation last? Will any other word produce the fruit God has appointed?

The Word of the Lord is not bound (2 Tim. 2:8–9) but we are bound to the Word. The Spirit works through the Word. Read John 16:4–15. The Word is efficacious and does what God intends and promises. Read Is. 55:10–11.

- Can we trust God’s Word to do what God purposes?
- What if we do not see the results?

The text 2 Tim. 2:15 speaks of “rightly handling the word of truth.” As Lutherans and heirs of the careful distinction between the Law with its demands and the Gospel with its gifts, we understand how important it is to rightly handle the Word.

- What is the Law and why do we preach it?
- What is the Gospel and why do we preach it?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Dr. Martin H. Franzmann was a visiting professor at Concordia Theological Seminary (then in Springfield, Ill.) when it was about to observe its 125th anniversary. He was asked to write a hymn for the occasion; he had already written “Thy Strong Word,” *LSB* 578, for Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.

Dr. Franzmann based the hymn on the seminary motto, but built it around the parable of the sower. His poetic gift is displayed in the use of plain and simple words that convey both the seriousness of the task and its urgency.

- What other hymns by Franzmann are in the hymnal?
- What similarities do you note in his writing style?

Text

The first and final stanzas relate directly to the motto (2 Tim. 4:2). Though pastors do many things, preaching is central to the office.

- Is a preacher tempted to preach what hearers want to hear? What are the common pitfalls of preaching?
- Note the contrast between being faithful to the Word that endures forever and the changing tastes of people. What happened to the prophets of old who spoke what people did not want to hear?

The second stanza hits the preacher and hearer where we live. We seek results and we define success by those results. We are often impatient awaiting the results.

- Who accomplishes the results from faithful preaching? Who defines its success?
- The task is hard; the temptation of earthly success is great. What should be the focus of the preacher?

In our eyes God is foolishly extravagant. We labor where it is most fruitful. God sows the seed of His Word recklessly everywhere (st. 3).

Making the Connection

We talk about sermons all the time — good ones and bad ones. Pastors are judged by their preaching for good or for ill. Preaching is judged; some call it an outmoded form of communication. But the Lord commanded that His Word be preached faithfully, the full counsel of that Word, whether or not we think the results are worth it. He works through that Word. Whether it is preached in the formal setting of a worship service, a devotion shared at a family table, or the Gospel shared with a co-worker, God's Word will not return to Him empty but will accomplish His purpose.

In Closing

In the final stanza Dr. Franzmann wrote the words “never faint.” The task is great and the preacher only human. It is easy to believe God's call is too hard and the work too great. The Word is not always welcomed and sometimes meets great opposition. It is easy to give up with only the Word as our tool and weapon. But God will not faint. Pray, brothers and sisters, that neither preachers nor hearers will faint!

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 586.

- Why does God's lavish mercy seem foolish in our eyes? What is the character of His mercy?
- What is His will? Mercy seems wasted upon people who do not respond. Is it wasted?

The miracle is not that so much of the seed does not sprout and grow, but that any of it grows. The same sigh of wonder before God's ways in stanza 4 is echoed again in stanza 5 as the preacher sees the hundredfold harvest. Only God can make it happen.

- Though we want to be in control, God grows the seed according to His will and purpose. Our calling is to trust Him. Which is the harder path, controlling things as if we were in charge or trusting God?
- God is faithful. He will do it (1 Thess. 5:24). Every preacher faces this as he mounts the pulpit. Every hearer faces this as he listens to the Word preached. Do we believe it? Do we trust God to do what He has promised through His Word?

Generation after generation has had to come face to face with the command to preach, the call to trust the Lord to work through His Word, and the promise that He will produce the results. Ours is not given to judge but to be faithful in the task, preaching that which is not popular or liked as well as what we love to hear.

- Will preaching ever end? Will God ever fail to act through His Word to deliver His appointed results?
- Classes of seminarians come and go. Preachers are trained and sent. All kinds of people gather around the Word. What is God's comfort, our hope, and our assurance from generation to generation?

Prayer

Blessed Lord, You have caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning. Grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that, by patience and comfort of Your holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen (Grace to receive the Word, *LSB*, P. 308).

We Walk by Faith and Not by Sight

Lutheran Service Book 720 | study by Christopher I. Thoma

Introduction

Doubt is the blood flowing from the wound of uncertainty, resulting in the stain of worry. The dictionary defines it as being “unconvinced or uncertain.” With regard to a person, to doubt is “to suspect that someone is not true or genuine or trustworthy.” To be in doubt and therefore uncertain is a scary thing, especially when times are tough.

The hymn for this study speaks of the uncertainty of this world and the certainty of faith in Jesus Christ.

- Consider different times in your life when you have experienced doubt or uncertainty.
- How were those times collectively distinct and different? How were they similar?

Exploring the Scriptures

Read John 20:19–23.

- Consider and discuss the contextual details of the event. Consider and discuss the probable emotions of the disciples (fear, regret, doubt, apprehension) in relation to the Jewish leaders, to Jesus, to each other. Why are the disciples in hiding? What is certainly lurking at the center of their current condition?
- What are the first words from Jesus’ mouth when He greets them? Why are these words important?

Read John 20:24–29.

- Consider and discuss how the contextual details have changed. Which emotions are now being expressed?

Which emotion directly connected to unbelief takes center stage when Thomas is engaged?

- How does Jesus solve the problem of doubt for Thomas?

Read John 20:30–31.

- These verses are considered the purpose statement of John’s Gospel. Why do you think they come immediately following this event rather than at the beginning or end of the book?
- How are these words directly connected to the events of John 20:19–31?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Henry Alford (1810–1871), the son of an Anglican rector, was an ordained priest and scholar. Although skilled in hymnography, perhaps he is best known for his four-volume commentary on the Greek New Testament, a work that grew from a twenty-year effort and that became a standard resource for New Testament studies throughout most of the nineteenth century.

- Knowing this small bit of history, how important was the study of God’s Word to Alford?
- Skim the text of the hymn. How is Alford’s regular interaction with and trust in the Word made evident in “We Walk by Faith and Not by Sight”?

Text

Each stanza of “We Walk by Faith and Not by Sight” delivers to the readers just how similar to St. Thomas we really are. With each line, we continue to see that Jesus deals with us in our unbelief in a way similar to His way with Thomas.

In stanza 1, the course of walking by faith and not by human sight is found resting on the revealed Word of God, the Holy Scriptures. Lutherans clearly confess from the Holy Scriptures that we do not receive individual revelations from God, but rather He communicates to us by His Word.

- Read John 1:14. Who is the “Word”?
- Read Heb. 1:2. What does Alford mean when he writes, “No gracious words we hear / From Him who spoke as none e’er spoke, / But we believe Him near”?

Stanza 2 presents for us a poetic rendition of John 20:27–29.

- How does Alford faithfully proclaim and apply the Gospel to the individual believer singing the hymn?
- Read Gal. 3:22–29. What is the “promise” spoken of in stanza 2?

- Finish the sentence: According to Jesus' interaction with Thomas in John 14:5–7, when we know Jesus, we know _____.

As stanza 3 unfolds, the believer reads and sings familiar words of promise. Read Is. 55:6–13.

- Compare stanza 3 with the reading above from Isaiah. What similarities do they contain?
- How does the reading from Isaiah direct you to the Word?
- Consider again the text of John 1:14. If you consider Jesus to be the Word made flesh, how does that shed light on your reading of the text from Isaiah? What does the Word accomplish and what is the result?

As stanza 3 directs our attention to the “verbal” Word (written and proclaimed), so now stanza 4 directs us to the “visible” Word.

- Read John 14:15–23. How is the world's sight different from the sight of those who believe?
- How is the Word visible to believers? In other words, in what location do believers see Jesus while unbelievers cannot?
- Compare 1 John 5:6–10 with the promise of John 14:23. Who is present in the Sacraments?

Read stanza 5 in light of 2 Tim. 4:7–8 and 1 Cor. 13:12.

- Who will give to Paul his crown of righteousness?
- How is this a comfort for believers?

Making the Connection

This hymn calls the believer to trust firmly in the Lord Jesus Christ, not doubting but firmly believing the fullness of the Gospel promise. The promise is that Jesus lived, suffered, died and rose again for all.

- Choose five words from the hymn that bolster our confidence in the Gospel and reflect the “certainty” of faith.

In Closing

All throughout the Lord's Prayer (as the Small Catechism makes clear in its explanations of the Second, Third, Sixth and Seventh Petitions), we pray that our heavenly Father would strengthen us to believe His Word that we would be kept faithful to the end and be received into the glories of eternal life. Because we exist in a world that seeks to actively crush the confidence of faith, the believer, by the strength of the Holy Spirit in the Gospel, desires to remain connected to the means of grace that build and sustain such a sturdy faith in the Savior. The believer knows without doubt that in the Word and Sacraments, the Lord is present and makes His home with him.

- How are you like Thomas both before and after his encounter with Jesus in John 20?
- Sing or read aloud together the words of *LSB* 720.

Prayer

Almighty and ever-living God, You strengthened Your apostle Thomas with firm and certain faith in the resurrection of Your Son. Grant us such faith in Jesus Christ, our Lord and our God, that we may never be found wanting in Your sight; through the same Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Saint Thomas, Apostle, Dec. 21).

The Son of God Goes Forth to War

Lutheran Service Book 661 | study by Paul Gregory Alms

Introduction

Warfare is messy, hard, ugly and bloody. We do not often associate such things with the Christian life or with following Jesus who is our “Prince of Peace.” So we might be surprised how often such language occurs in Scripture to describe what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Christian history has also often looked to the image of armies and battles and enemies to proclaim the truth that we, as baptized Christians, are a part of the great struggle against sin and death and Satan. God in Christ wins the victory and gives us mercy, forgiveness and salvation in Christ.

Today’s hymn shows us Christ as a warrior who invites us to follow in His saving wake. It also bids us to follow St. Stephen and the apostles, martyrs and saints who have gone before us. They are our fellow soldiers, who through faith in Christ have attained that glorious heaven promised to God’s children.

- In what way do you think the Christian life is like warfare?
- How do we as Christians “follow” those who have gone before us?

Exploring the Scriptures

The Book of Revelation tells us of St. John’s vision of Jesus riding out to war with a bloody robe and a sword, surrounded by the armies of heaven. Read Rev. 19:11–16.

- List the ways Jesus is described in this passage and the actions He is taking. How would you describe the kind of portrait John is showing us?
- Why do you think Jesus is said to be clothed in a robe dipped in blood? Whose blood is it? What does this tell us of what kind of warfare and what kind of victory Jesus brings?

Read Luke 9:23–24, and notice in what ways Jesus tells us to follow Him.

- In what ways are we to follow Jesus?
- What does it mean to save our life by losing it?

Stanza 2 of our hymn is based on the story of St. Stephen and his death. Read Acts 7:54–60 to find out how St. Stephen was martyred.

- What did Stephen see as he was about to die? How is this vision a comfort to us Christians as we face our own death?
- List the ways the death of St. Stephen is similar to the death of Jesus.
- What do these similarities tell us about the Christian life and how we are to live (and die) as Christians?
- How do we as Christians “follow” those who have gone before us?

Read Rev. 7:13–14.

- What color of robes are these Christians wearing? How are they cleansed? How does this relate to the robe Jesus wore in Revelation 19?
- What is the great tribulation these saints have come out of?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Reginald Heber (1783–1826) was a prolific nineteenth-century Anglican hymn writer who wrote hymns for every Sunday in the church year as well as for many major festivals. Four of his hymns appear in *LSB*, including the very well known “Holy, Holy, Holy” (507). “The Son of God Goes Forth to War” was written for St. Stephen’s Day.

The aspects of this hymn that have drawn the most interest over the years are its call for Christians to imitate

their forebears in the faith, and the use of military imagery for the Christian life. The warfare language has long been controversial, and has led some to shy away from using the hymn.

- How do you feel about using words like *army*, *war* and *battle* to talk about being a Christian? Does it make you feel uneasy? Why or why not? Can you think of any other hymns that use the same kind of language?

- What parts of the Bible or Bible stories can you think of that use images and pictures of battle or warfare?

Text

This hymn repeatedly challenges the one who sings it to consider how it is we best follow Jesus and those saints who have gone before us. Stanza 1 first presents to us a picture of Jesus from Revelation 19 with a blood-red banner going forth to gain a crown, and asks who follows in His train.

- How does stanza 1 go on to answer that question?
- How is patiently bearing one's cross a form of battle and ultimately victory?

Stanza 2 focuses on Stephen's martyrdom.

- What was Stephen's eagle eye able to see beyond the grave?
- What actions in his dying moments are an example for us to imitate and to follow? Whom was Stephen himself imitating?

Christian tradition assigns martyr deaths to most of the twelve apostles (St. John lived to an old age in exile). The stories that come down to us say that they preached Jesus and died for it. They faced great suffering and pain and death.

- What attitude does the hymn writer say the apostles displayed toward "cross and flame" (st. 3)?
- Do you think you could have such an attitude?
- If so, where would such bravery come from?

The final stanza of the hymn ends with a prayer.

- How is such a prayer a good way to end a hymn that calls for us to imitate such great heroic Christians who have gone before us?
- Where do all our good works come from?
- How do we make it to heaven to join the "noble army" of saints?

Making the Connection

Being a Christian is not easy. We face many difficulties and many challenges, both physical and spiritual. The Bible and this hymn give us a picture of the Christian life as a sort of parade, a procession marching toward heaven.

- Who is at the head of the procession?

- Does it change how we think about our troubles to know that Christ is victorious over all and goes before us? In what way?
- How does it help to know that many, many others have walked in the same path, bearing the same crosses as we do?

In Closing

Our Christian warfare can be just like the real thing: messy, hard and ugly. But we do not fight alone.

Indeed, we do not fight in our own strength at all. The Son of God has fought for us, and all who follow Him are saved by Him and carried along by His cross even as they bear their own crosses following Him.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 661.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, in the midst of our sufferings for the sake of Christ grant us grace to follow the example of the first martyr, Stephen, that we also may look to the One who suffered and was crucified on our behalf and pray for those who do us wrong; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for St. Stephen, Martyr).

O Word of God Incarnate

Lutheran Service Book 523 | study by Bernard J. Schey

Introduction

Just north of downtown San Antonio, Texas, stands a college known as the University of the Incarnate Word. This school might just as well be called the University of Christ Jesus or the University of Immanuel (God with us) since “Incarnate Word” is another one of many names given in Holy Scripture for our Savior. The hymn is chosen for this day of St. John, Apostle and Evangelist, since he wrote beautifully in his Gospel of the fact that Jesus became flesh (incarnate) for our sake in the body of His mother, the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Exploring the Scriptures

To understand the use of “Word” in this hymn, read John 1, realizing that John’s readers knew that “Word” meant far more than the individual sounds we make regularly with our throats, mouths and lips.

- When God said, “Let there be light,” in Gen. 1:3, who was speaking? Was it Father, Son or Holy Spirit? Or all three?
- Why does John in the very first words of his Gospel make such a point of saying “the Word” was there at the creation?

- Read the first chapter of St. John’s Gospel. He uses “Word” three times in just the first verse. Does he refer to Christ Jesus each time?
- In John 1:14–17, St. John writes of the incarnation of the Word, that is, the eternal Word taking on human flesh as a man. In what way is this a glorious event in world history?

Today’s Gospel reading comes from the latter part of St. John, and in 21:24 he asserts that all he has written stands as a true testimony of what Jesus said and did.

- Why did John assert several times that he was an eyewitness reporting truthfully?

Several other names for our Lord Jesus come up in our hymn: Wisdom, Truth, Light, Master and Savior.

- How many other names can you find for Jesus?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Our author, William Walsham How (1823–1897), served as priest and bishop in England, laboring diligently in the Lord’s vineyard chosen for him. Yet he seemed to lack any personal ambition for glory or fame. In 1897 he was made Bishop of Bedford, a place that included some East London slums. He quickly endeared himself to the people there because he lived among them instead of in an outlying estate. They even called him “the omnibus bishop” because he rode in public transportation instead of a personal carriage.

- What does it mean for every person who has ever lived that Jesus moved to *our* “neighborhood?”
- St. John tells us in his Gospel (1:14) that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” The word “dwelt” used here means “to pitch a tent.” Does “tenting” with others imply equality?

In 1851 How became rector of Whittington, a farming village near the Welsh border, where he wrote all of his entire life’s output of 56 hymns.

- The Church of Jesus is manifested in all sizes of congregations. How do we know whether or not the Church is present in a group of people who call themselves believers in Christ?

Text

Another Bible passage that Bishop How no doubt had in mind for this hymn was Ps. 119:105, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” The use of “word” here, then, is also used to refer to the written Word of God. Note how the two references are featured in the first stanza: The first two lines refer clearly to Christ the Word, and the second two lines refer to the written Word of God.

- Is it easy to tell if “Word” refers to Christ Jesus or to the written Word of God?

The Word of God is a Means of Grace, a vehicle of forgiveness, for the Holy Spirit. He inspired that written Word to be put down (2 Tim. 3:16–17; 2 Peter 1:19–21), and by it He builds up the Church of Jesus (Eph. 2:19–21). Stanza 2 is devoted to praise of the Lord for this growth through the Word of God. Note the nautical imagery in this stanza (“chart and compass” and “life’s voyage” and “mists and rocks and quicksands”).

- How does a ship’s voyage remind us of life in Christ? See Genesis 6–9; Ps. 107:23–32; Luke 8:22–25; 1 Tim. 1:18–20.

Making the Connection

Holy Scripture convicts us of the intimate bond between Christ, the incarnate Word, the written Word of God and the Church. Jesus died for the life of His people, and we know the Church is His Body. See 1 Corinthians 12.

- Remember that the Holy Spirit caused the Holy Scriptures to be written (2 Tim. 3:16–17) and that He also brought about the incarnation of Jesus (Luke 1:35). How has the Holy Spirit instructed you through the Word of God?

In Closing

In the Book of Revelation, one of the final visions is of the new and perfect city of Jerusalem (Rev. 21). Adorned with precious stones, it is made of pure gold (v. 18). Bishop How looked forward to seeing this in person when he wrote this hymn, even as we do now. The written Word of God teaches us about the incarnate Word of God in Jesus, and in communion with the Body of Christ, we joyfully look forward to seeing the Lord face to face in heaven.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 523, “O Word of God Incarnate.”

Finally, stanza 3 shows another change of imagery wherein the Church is depicted as a “lamp of burnished gold.” Read about the lamps of Solomon’s temple in 1 Kings 7:48–50 and the ones in Rev. 1:12–20.

- What are these lamps according to St. John? Why is your congregation such a lamp?
- Why do we use candles in worship? See John 8:12.

- How do the Holy Scriptures serve as the only guide for faith and life? See 2 Tim. 3:16, where St. Paul describes how they can be used for our growth in Christ.

- Our congregations don’t always look or act like lamps of burnished gold, but never forget that the Word of Christ is more powerful than our weakness! See John 18:6.

Prayer

Merciful Lord, cast the bright beams of Your light upon Your Church that we, being instructed in the doctrine of Your blessed apostle and evangelist John, may come to the light of everlasting life; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for St. John, Apostle and Evangelist).

Sweet Flowerets of the Martyr Band

Found in *Lutheran Service Builder 969* | study by Marion Lars Hendrickson

1. Sweet flow'rets of the martyr band,
Plucked by the tyrant's ruthless hand
Upon the threshold of the morn,
Like rosebuds by a tempest torn;
2. First victims for the incarnate Lord,
A tender flock to feel the sword;
Beside the altar's ruddy ray,
With palm and crown, you seemed to play.
3. Ah, what availed King Herod's wrath?
He could not stop the Savior's path.
Alone, while others murdered lay,
In safety Christ is borne away.
4. O Lord, the virgin-born, we sing
Eternal praise to You, our King,
Whom with the Father we adore
And Holy Spirit evermore.

Introduction

When children suffer, their suffering almost defies the ability of words to express it. The violation of childhood innocence cries out for the avenging wrath of God. Yet the Christian knows that the cries of the innocent and the wrath of God's just judgment meet at the cross of the innocent Christ, who suffers and dies for the just and the unjust alike. Jesus is the Holy Innocent.

- Does naming the murdered children of Bethlehem "Holy Innocents" deny the doctrine of original sin? Why or why not?

Exploring the Scriptures

The Old Testament Reading for Holy Innocents portrays Rachel weeping from her grave over the bitter captivity of her children, Israel. Read Jer. 31:15.

- Was Israel innocent in suffering God's judgment of sending them into Babylonian captivity? Were they all guilty?
- Jeremiah 31 also includes the promise of the new covenant. Read verses 31–34. What hope do these words give to Israel while suffering captivity in Babylon?

The Gospel Reading records King Herod's vengeful act of slaughter following the secret departure of the Magi from Bethlehem to their homeland. Read Matt. 2:13–18.

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Marcus Aurelius Clemens Prudentius (348–c. 413), the author of today's hymn, was born after the Roman emperor Constantine had become Christian. He was appointed to a court office by the emperor Theodosius I, who had made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire in the

- Martin Luther spoke of two kinds of righteousness — the "alien" righteousness that belongs to Christ but becomes ours by grace through faith in Him, and the "proper" righteousness that belongs to us as a result of our own actions, inspired by faith in Christ. How does this distinction of the two kinds of righteousness aid in a discussion of "innocent suffering"?

- Here in the fourth day of Christmas festivity we hear how Jesus escapes death while the young boys of Bethlehem die. How is this different from the outcome of Good Friday? What comparison can be made between the sorrow that shatters Christmas joy, and the joy that brightens the darkness of Good Friday?
- In verses 14–15 the Holy Family goes down to Egypt. What was the final plague in Moses' day that set the Israelites free from Egyptian captivity (Ex. 12:29)? How does this foreshadow Jesus' sacrifice for us?

late fourth century AD. Thus Prudentius himself lived after the time of the persecutions.

Tertullian (c. 160–c. 220), who had lived in the time of Roman persecution of Christians, had said, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." So how could later generations of the faithful get a sense of that formative

era when they themselves did not live with persecutions? Prudentius' many hymns in honor of the saints and martyrs provided one possibility.

Henry Williams Baker (1821–1877), who translated into English Prudentius' hymn, "Sweet Flowerets of the Martyr Band," likewise desired to spotlight the martyrs of the Early Church. Although Baker too worked in a time and place of relative safety (mid-nineteenth-century England), he experienced intense conflict within the Church of England due to his support of the reforms advocated by the Oxford Movement.

- Do you think this hymn is easier to sing in a time of peace and prosperity for the Church, or in a time when martyrdom is likely? Why?
- If the hymn is easier to sing in a time of peace, what sorts of hymn texts could be sung to best serve in a time of conflict and martyrdom? Name two or three.

Text

The Victorian poetry in stanza 1 contrasts the innocence of the martyred children with the brutality of King Herod.

- How does the imagery of "sweet flowerets" and "rosebuds" express the youthful innocence of the murdered baby boys?

Making the Connection

In Holy Baptism a person becomes Christ's own possession. The old order has passed away and all things become new. In Holy Baptism a person dies together with his old world, and out of the gift of grace in Holy Baptism, the "new man" arises to live with Christ before God.

- In what ways are the children martyrs "more than conquerors" (Rom. 8:37)?

In Closing

"Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord" (Ps. 127:3), and they ought to be acknowledged as such. Through children God allows us human beings to share in His act of creation. Yet in God's blessed gift of children He also adds to their parents the burden of the care and nurture of these children. By both the burden and the blessing, God reminds parents and children that together they live and move and have their being in Him.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 969, "Sweet Flowerets of the Martyr Band."

- Is the "tempest" that tears these flowers limited only to Herod's vengeful storm?

Stanza 2 alludes to the 144,000 in the Book of Revelation. Read Rev. 14:1–4. In the hymn text the poet sees the children playing among that multitude around the throne of God, who hold palm branches in their hands. See also Rev. 7:9.

- How is the stanza, like the Book of Revelation itself, a word of encouragement and hope to us in this present life, especially in the face of the suffering of children?

Stanza 3 asks the larger question of what exactly was accomplished by Herod's foul crime.

- How is the safe escape of the infant Christ a word of hope to us that evil does not have the last word?
- In what ways does Jesus' escape foreshadow Easter?

The hymn closes with a doxology to God in stanza 4.

- For what do we praise God in this hymn?

- In the midst of death, how does the victory remain with life?
- What comfort can the observance of Holy Innocents' Day bring to parents who have lost a child in death?
- What is the Good News here for a mother who repents of aborting her child?

Prayer

Almighty God, the martyred innocents of Bethlehem showed forth Your praise not by speaking but by dying. Put to death in us all that is in conflict with Your will that our lives may bear witness to the faith we profess with our lips; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for the Holy Innocents, Martyrs).

When Aimless Violence Takes Those We Love

Lutheran Service Book 764 | study by Paul J. Cain

Introduction

Pearl Harbor. 9/11. These events are etched in history as well as the hearts and minds of those who lived through them or suffered the consequences of those attacks.

The Holy Gospel for the Holy Innocents, Martyrs, Matt. 2:13–18, speaks of a very specific act of violence in and around Bethlehem, aimed at our Lord Himself. Read this text and then answer:

- Who was the real target of Herod's attack?
- Who were the "Holy Innocents?"
- Of what other modern situations does this text remind you?

Exploring the Scriptures

Read 2 Cor. 1:3–11.

- What is the initial message of verses 3–5? How can we still bless God in the midst of afflictions? How do we comfort others?
- Why were Paul and the other apostles and pastors afflicted? How is short-term suffering beneficial for the long term?
- In what ways do we/can we support those suffering from persecution for being Christian or preaching Christ?

Read 1 Peter 2:21–24; 4:12–19.

- When we suffer we can identify more with Christ's sufferings. Why is it helpful to know that we are not alone in our suffering?
- How is Christ our example in enduring suffering?
- How is Christ completely unique in His suffering for us and our salvation?
- How is the suffering described in 1 Peter 4:12–14, 16 different from the suffering described in verse 15?
- Why are we given to rejoice when falsely accused or during another kind of trial or time of testing?

- How does the 1 Peter 4 text ground our temporal struggles in an eternal "big picture?"

Read Ps. 9:9–10, or the whole psalm if there is time.

- Why is it important that the Lord is dependable, unchangeable and trustworthy in times of trouble?

Now consider the appointed Psalm of the day, Ps. 54:1–7.

- Psalms are not always happy songs, but reflect a variety of human emotions. How could this help during a time of sorrow and loss?
- What can we do when we sometimes "don't have the words," when we are in emotional pain or when we don't know what to say to other hurting people?
- Where do we find hope, vindication, salvation and forgiveness?

Read the appointed Second Reading for Holy Innocents, Rev. 14:1–5.

- How does the joy of the redeemed contrast with our sometime sorrow in this "valley of the shadow?"

Exploring the Hymn

Background

This hymn on loss was occasioned by real-life loss. Joy F. Patterson (b. 1931) was struggling with her father's decline and death due to Alzheimer's disease as well as her own vision concerns due to macular degeneration.

She had recently received correspondence from two other hymn writers who were struggling with violence and shootings in their communities. "[Carl] Daw sent me [Patterson] a commentary on a hymn when God says, 'No,' and we have to struggle with what the answer is."

A version of the hymn was adapted for an Oklahoma City memorial service following the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in 1995.

- If God answers the prayer of His Christians, and He does, what does the author mean by "when God says, 'No'"?
- How is the physical suffering of disease different from emotional pain? War? Terrorism? A mine collapse? How are these consequences of living in a fallen world similar?

- After contemplating your own mortality, does the Lutheran theology of the cross make more biblical and practical sense to you?

Text

Focusing on both random violence, one of the many ills plaguing modern society and other times of loss, this hymn seeks to point the grieving individual to the steadfast mercy and all-sufficient grace of God.

Found in *LSB*'s section "Hope and Comfort," Patterson's hymn comforts the mourning and troubled with the presence of the Son of God. The hymn draws the singer in by evoking hard memories of "aimless violence," "random death," and "wrenching loss" affecting us, our loved ones, and especially young people, echoing, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Heb. 13:5).

The robbing of "sight and strength and mind" (st. 2) will evoke thoughts of blindness, Lou Gehrig's disease and dementia, as well as Jesus weeping before raising Lazarus and His compassion for the mute, deaf and blind in His earthly ministry.

- Why is it comforting that Jesus is true man in addition to being true God?
- How could familiar prayers, hymns and liturgical texts and songs be helpful in pastoral care to those with Alzheimer's disease or dementia?

Faith sustained during times of trial is the theme of stanza 3, reminding us of Jesus strengthening bruised reeds and igniting merely smoldering wicks. Weak or strong, faith is still faith, holding on to Christ for dear life and into eternal life.

Jesus Christ, our great High Priest, is able to sympathize with us in our weakness because He "knew agony and loss" (st. 4). He abides with us to the end of the age.

- When we suffer, why is it so comforting that Jesus is able to sympathize with us?
- Compare God's testing of our faith to the devil's temptation in times of "agony and loss."

Patterson wrote a four-stanza hymn on Jan. 22, 1992. A letter from the Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod encouraged Patterson to write a fifth, final stanza as a prayer to the Lord for help in time of need.

The new concluding stanza (5) is a prayer for strengthened faith. It is a lament-filled request to God for "help," "To trust Your grace," "To rest our souls," and to "find our hope within Your mercy sure."

- Why is this a more theologically satisfying conclusion to the hymn?
- What would singers have missed without stanza 5?

Making the Connection

Martin Luther contrasted the theologian of the cross with the theologian of glory, finding hope, comfort and solace in who Jesus is and what He has done for us instead of the hidden things of God.

- How is the theology of the cross more biblical than a theology of glory?
- How is the theology of the cross more realistic and practical than a theology of glory?

In Closing

This hymn for times of loss could well have been inspired by the historic problem of the high infant/childhood mortality rate, a medieval plague outbreak, or the "plague" of cancer or juvenile diabetes. A car accident today has much in common with the overturning of a Conestoga wagon on the Oregon Trail, as the sinking of a ship on an Atlantic crossing is comparable to an airline crash.

While inspired by the problems God's people face in the modern world, this hymn will remain relevant for centuries to come because of its generic, universal language, ready to be filled with specific challenges of disease and violence of each new day.

- Read or sing together *LSB* 764, "When Aimless Violence Takes Those We Love."

Prayer

Almighty God, the martyred innocents of Bethlehem showed forth Your praise not by speaking but by dying. Put to death in us all that is in conflict with Your will that our lives may bear witness to the faith we profess with our lips; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for the Holy Innocents, Martyrs).

Across the Sky the Shades of Night

Lutheran Service Book 899 | study by Gregory Just Wismar

Introduction

“Across the Sky the Shades of Night” is one of five hymns in the “New Year” section of *Lutheran Service Book*. A New Year’s Eve service that “sees out” the old year and “sees in” the new is a long and honored custom in some parishes. Having a text such as *LSB* 899, called “this solid hymn” in the *Handbook to the Lutheran Hymnal* ([CPH, 1958], 90), supports the inclusion of such an annual service and invites

its use in congregations that do not have a New Year’s Eve worship tradition.

- Why can worship as the old year closes and the new year begins be especially meaningful?
- How might a hymn text such as that of *LSB* 899 supply fitting themes for a New Year’s Eve service?

Exploring the Scriptures

Many people find themselves in settings other than church on New Year’s Eve. Technically, New Year’s Eve is not a historical festival of the Church, unless it is understood to be in conjunction with the Circumcision and Name of Jesus, the liturgical celebration on January 1. Yet, for God’s people, there never really is a specific reason needed for worship. All times are good times — especially that time when one calendar year ends and a new one begins. The Book of Psalms reflects that sense of belonging “at all times” in God’s house that is the privilege of His people. Read Ps. 48:9–10 and Ps. 134.

- Where is the special location that the steadfast love of God is remembered?
- What time of day is mentioned as being a time for the people of God to be at worship in the holy place?

The psalmist relates that God’s people turn to Him for ongoing support, comfort and love. Read Ps. 121:1–4 and Ps. 68:19–20.

- What sense of comfort comes from knowing that the Lord “will neither slumber nor sleep” (121:4)?
- God is a God of salvation. What is included in the salvation that our God grants us?

New Year’s Eve is a time to think not only of the passage of time but also of the ongoing sequence of changing generations. Read what the psalmist says about that progression of humanity from era to era in Ps. 100:4–5; 102:25–28; 136:1–3.

- For how long does the faithfulness of the Lord endure?
- How does the psalmist express the truth that God is everlasting?
- What does the psalm writer call for from God’s people in response to His never-ending love?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

The hymn “Across the Sky the Shades of Night” was written in the nineteenth century, an era when there was a greater sense of the sacred nature of the turn of the year in the general society — and perhaps in the Church as well. It is interesting to note that in *The Lutheran Hymnal* of 1941 there were four hymns devoted to the observance of New Year’s Eve. By the time of *Lutheran Worship* in 1982, that number had been reduced to just one “New Year’s Eve” hymn; by the time of *Lutheran Service Book* even that one hymn was challenged regarding its inclusion.

In medieval times the celebration of New Year’s Eve centered around the Church. In some areas it was called “Watch Night” — a time when people would “wait and

watch” as the old year closed and the new one began. It was considered to be a special blessing to be in church at the stroke of midnight. Rev. James Hamilton (1819–1896), an English clergyman, captured the sense of that devotional experience of New Year’s Eve in his text, which originally had six stanzas. Think of times when Jesus directed His people to “Watch.” Read Mark 13:32–37 and Matt. 25:1–13.

- Why is New Year’s Eve an especially appropriate time to be watching for the return of the Lord?
- Why might deciding to live with a greater sense of watchfulness for the Lord’s coming be a good New Year’s resolution to make?

The text of the hymn “Across the Sky the Shades of Night” has historically been paired with the melody attributed to German Lutheran composer Nicolaus Decius (c. 1485–after 1546). He had written the melody to go with the words of his grand hymn of praise “All Glory Be to God on High” (*LSB* 947). Read the words of that Reformation-era hymn by Decius and then the New Year’s Eve text by Hamilton, which comes from the Victorian era.

- How does knowing the original words to the melody that supports the text of *LSB* 899 enhance an appreciation of the later hymn?
- What thoughts do the two hymn texts have in common? How do they differ?

Text

The first stanza of *LSB* 899 speaks of decking the altar of the Lord with light. In some European towns and villages, each New Year’s Eve service was preceded by a candlelight parade that ended at the church. The theme of light is often

associated with the Lord and the Lord’s house. Read 2 Chron. 4:7 and Ps. 27:1.

- How can the image of light, prominent in the Christmas and Epiphany seasons, be a fitting feature for a Christian’s New Year’s Eve observance?

In stanzas 2 and 3 the mercies of the Lord are recalled and His blessing is invoked. Read the words of the apostle John in 1 John 1:5–9.

- What mercies of God are spoken of in this passage? What mercies we have experienced might be added to the list?

In some congregations the names of the faithful who have died in the past twelve months are read as part of the New Year’s Eve service. Stanza 4 reminds us of the ongoing lives of the blessed dead; stanza 5 reminds us of the end of our earthly lives. Read 1 Thess. 4:13 and Rev. 7:14–17.

- What hope-filled themes are found in a church celebration of New Year’s Eve?

Making the Connection

There are people in the British Isles who believe there are places on earth that are closer to heaven than other places. They are called the “thin places.” In its special way, New Year’s Eve is a “thin place” on the annual calendar. It is a time for remembering the mercies of God that have occurred in our lives in the past twelve months while also anticipating that blessed time when time is no more. Jesus spoke to the repentant thief from the cross about being “in Paradise” that day (Luke 23:43). Revelation shares a preview of God’s heavenly rewards planned for the faithful (Rev. 2:7).

- How might New Year’s Eve be considered an especially holy time for us as God’s people?
- What unique and singular perspective on time do we possess as believers in Christ?
- How does our Baptism assure us that each day brings the start of a new day/new year/new time for us as the forgiven people of God in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:17–21)?

In Closing

Although the text of “Across the Sky the Shades of Night” specifically mentions New Year’s Eve, its themes are appropriate for each and every day. New Year’s Eve is an artificial time construct that actually has been observed at different points on the calendar. At one time March 1 was the first day of the year; at another time Christmas Day and New Year’s Day were the same day. As you sing the hymn, think of its themes in the wider sense. Recalling the mercies of God and asking His blessing on the times still to come is appropriate for each and every day of our lives!

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 899.

Prayer

Eternal God, we commit to Your mercy and forgiveness the year now ending and commend to Your blessing and love the times yet to come. In the new year, abide among us with Your Holy Spirit that we may always trust in the saving name of our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for New Year’s Eve).

Jesus! Name of Wondrous Love

Lutheran Service Book 900 | study by Bruce E. Keseman

Introduction

So, all you parents of boys, do you celebrate your sons' birthdays? Yes? That is good. As you know, we celebrate the birth of Mary's son every December 25. Did you also know that one week later we celebrate the circumcision of Jesus? So, parents, do you have an annual celebration of your son's circumcision? Do you sing that old favorite, "Happy Circumcision Day to You," while he blows out the candles on his Circumcision Day cake and opens his Circumcision Day gifts? You're kidding — you don't do that for your son? Why not?

For centuries, the Church has set aside January 1 to remember the Circumcision and Name of Jesus.

- What is the typical reaction of people when they hear that the Church celebrates Jesus' circumcision? Why?
- Why did your parents pick the name that they chose for you? Why did you pick the names you chose for your children?
- Do you know anyone who really fits his or her name? What is it that makes that person's name so fitting?

Exploring the Scriptures

Read Gen. 17:1–14 to help you understand Luke 2:21. As a sign of His covenant, God tells His people to circumcise their sons when those sons are eight days old. (By the way, they counted the day of birth as the first day.) So Mary and Joseph made sure Jesus was circumcised when He was eight days old. If Jesus were born on December 25, that would mean He was circumcised January 1.

- What does it mean for you that Jesus placed Himself under God's Law? See Gal. 4:4.

At His circumcision, Jesus also received His name. My parents could have named me Herman, Fritz, Joe — just about anything except Maher-shalal-hash-baz — and my life would not have been much different. For us, names are just labels. But in ancient times, your name told who you were and what you were all about. That's one reason why God often changed the names of His people when He changed their relationship with Him.

- Eve's name means "living," since she is the mother of all the living (Gen. 3:20). What does Abraham's name mean (Gen. 17:5)? How about Maher-shalal-hash-baz (Is. 8:3)?
- Can you think of other people in the Bible with descriptive names? Matt. 16:13–19 and, my favorite,

1 Sam. 25:25, are two examples. Why are their names fitting?

God's personal name is YHWH (Ex. 3:1–17). To help us honor but not misuse God's name, most English translations write "LORD" (with small capital letters) anytime God's name YHWH appears in the Hebrew text. Look at Gen. 17:1 or today's Old Testament Reading, Num. 6:22–27, to see examples where "YHWH" is translated as "LORD." The name "Jesus" — "Yeshua" in Hebrew — means "YHWH saves," or "the LORD saves." The name fits Him perfectly: it tells who Jesus is and what He came to do.

- How does it affect your life to know that Mary's eight-day-old son is actually the LORD, YHWH? Would it matter that He is God, if He weren't also the one who saves? Why or why not?
- Jesus is just as human as any of us. Do you think that people could tell that little Jesus was different from other children in Nazareth? Why or why not?
- Why does it matter to you that Jesus is 100 percent YHWH and also 100 percent human? (Consider that only God can save and only a human can be our substitute.)

Exploring the Hymn

Background

As you might imagine, there haven't been a plethora of hymns written for the Circumcision and Name of Jesus. So in the mid-1800s, William W. How (1823–1897), an Anglican bishop, scholar and hymnist, penned "Jesus! Name of Wondrous Love." He was a humble bishop, living

among the people in a poverty-stricken part of London, declining appointments to more lucrative bishoprics and riding in buses rather than carriages.

How wrote more than fifty hymns, including five in *LSB* (523, 677, 781, 816 [st. 3] and 900). His hymns have a reputation not so much for poetic beauty as for expressing

powerful but sometimes unexpected theological truths in everyday language.

- Do you think “Jesus! Wondrous Name of Love” fits the reputation of How’s hymns? Why or why not?
- What is your favorite hymn by William How? What makes it special to you?
- Have you met Christians who remind you of Bishop How? What makes them admirable?

Text

Read stanza 1 of *LSB* 900 and Phil. 2:9–11.

- When will every knee bow to Jesus? Why?
- Why might the hymn call “Jesus” a name of love?

Read stanzas 2–3, along with Luke 1:26–33 and Matt. 1:18–21.

- What words in the hymn reflect the Bible passages?
- Why does stanza 3 call us “fallen”?
- What promises are given to Mary and Joseph about Jesus? How do those promises show that He will fulfill the meaning of His name (YHWH saves)?

Making the Connection

Look at the Second Commandment and its explanation (*LSB*, 321).

- What are some sinful ways that we might use God’s name? What are some ways Jesus wants you to use His name of wondrous love?

The Second Commandment shows that none of us obeys God’s commands. Still, if we want to be in heaven instead of hell, we must have a perfect record of commandment-keeping. That is why Jesus’ circumcision is so important. “In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead” (Col. 2:11–12).

In Closing

The circumcision and naming of Jesus don’t seem like a reason for celebration, but we’ve learned that His circumcision is essential to our salvation, and His name is a constant reminder of our salvation!

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 900, “Jesus! Name of Wondrous Love.”

Read stanza 4 of the hymn and recall Luke 2:21.

- How does the hymnist describe Jesus’ circumcision?
- At what might the hymnist be hinting when he uses the word “cup”? See Luke 22:39–42. John 18:10–11 describes what happened later that night.

Read stanzas 5 and 6 along with Acts 4:5–12. Some people claim that it is hateful and disrespectful to tell unbelievers that Jesus is the only way to heaven. But if you are with someone in a burning building and there is only one way out — and you know that way out — is it hateful or disrespectful to tell the other person he is headed the wrong direction? We know the only way out of this world that is being destroyed, so we tell!

- Why is Jesus the only way to be saved? Is there anyone else who has died and risen for sinners?
- At the end of his life, Martin Luther said, “We are all beggars.” How might the closing line of the hymn help us understand Luther’s words?

- Read Gal. 3:27. What are you wearing over your filthy life that causes God to consider you as sinless as Jesus?
- What could you do to remind yourself each day that you are baptized and so wear Jesus?
- How might the little bit of blood that Jesus shed at His circumcision be a hint of the saving work He would do for you on the cross?

Jesus’ name tells us who He is — YHWH — and what He does — saves. When we were sinfully slipping toward hell with no chance of stopping our slide, Jesus came to our rescue in a livestock trough and then on a cross. In short, YHWH saved us.

- From what — and for what — did Jesus save you?
- How will that be evident in your daily life?

Prayer

Lord God, You made Your beloved Son, our Savior, subject to the Law and caused Him to shed His blood on our behalf. Grant us the true circumcision of the Spirit that our hearts may be made pure from all sins; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Circumcision and Name of Jesus).

Now Greet the Swiftly Changing Year

Lutheran Service Book 896 | study by Shawn L. Kumm

Introduction

As the words of Robert Burns' "Auld Lang Syne" drift into the night, weary eyes and perhaps less-than-clear minds long to see into a new year, wondering what lies ahead. Promises will be fresh. Resolutions of many kinds will be written down or seriously uttered, some to be kept, some to be broken. Fear may lurk behind a curtain of uncertainty. After the confetti is swept up and the Times Square crystal ball is put back into place, a clean calendar opens up to the writing down of great possibilities.

Exploring the Scriptures

From the beginning of time, from the moment God created light and called the time from evening to morning "day" (Gen. 1:1–5), both God and man have been marking time as if time is very important. The length of days of the pre-flood biblical people catches one off guard — Methuselah saw 969 new years go by before his eyes closed in death (Gen. 5:27).

Important things happened at the beginning of a new year.

- Read Gen. 8:13–22. List the important events that happened on the first day of the first month of that new year. Which event is deemed the most important?
- The children of Israel are in the wilderness. In the chapters preceding this reading, Moses is instructed in the smallest details how the tabernacle — the holy tent of the Lord — should be made, should look and should be used. Read Ex. 40:1–3. What now enters the tabernacle? Note the date Moses records for this event.
- The circumcision of a newborn boy occurred eight days after his birth. See Gen. 17:9–14 for the institution of circumcision. The circumcision of Jesus falls on the first

Built into the fiber of humanity is the desire to start over, to have a fresh beginning, to turn over the twelfth month of the year and look hopefully at the first day of the first month of a new year. Every culture and religion has a special day when a new year starts. Yet something — someone — is missing in the New Year celebrations of all religions except one.

day of the first month of our secular calendar. Read Luke 2:21. What is the purpose of Jesus' circumcision? At what point does the sacrificial blood of Jesus stop flowing?

New Year's Day in our culture looks festive and relaxing. The day is offered to most people as a day off from work. Eight days after the celebration of Christ's birth, the Western Christian Church pauses to remember something more important than champagne and football. The Circumcision and Name of Jesus starts off the year just right for the child of God.

- What does a new year look like according to Psalm 65? Keeping in mind the gracious, sustaining hand of God, compare Psalm 65 with the First Article of the Apostles' Creed (*LSB*, 322) and the Fourth and Fifth Petitions of the Lord's Prayer (*LSB*, 324), all with explanations. According to Psalm 65, which comes first, food or forgiveness? Why might that be?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

A bowl of white lentil soup waits on the table to be joined by tender fried fish, while a bowl of white lentils sits next to potato salad. A bit of sauerkraut rounds out the main meal. Sitting patiently in the kitchen is the much desired *žemlovka*. Mouths water at the aroma of the cinnamon-spiced, apple-filled pastry waiting to be served on St. Sylvester's Day.

Later, with chairs pushed away from the table, the family gathers around the piano for the singing of hymns. In place of the traditional loud blowing, clanging noises of the wooden *řehtačka* (ratchet), the Lutheran Vajda (Vie-dah)

family opts for a final hymn from their father-pastor's home country. "Now Greet the Swiftly Changing Year" sings out just the right tone to ring in the beginning of a fresh year with words of Christ's protective care and guidance.

Perhaps this describes a typical 1920s New Year's Eve for the then-young and later prolific hymn writer, Jaroslav Vajda. The author of more than 225 hymn texts and translations that appear in more than 60 Christian hymnals and printed collections on five continents, Dr. Vajda also served as pastor, teacher, writer and worship consultant. With few hymns available to be sung for the new year, Vajda set

about translating a family favorite, a Slovak hymn from the seventeenth century. First appearing in the LCMS *Worship Supplement* (CPH, 1969), the hymn has undergone several revisions.

Text

Jaroslav Vajda places into our mouths joyous, biblically rich words that gladden our hearts at the end of one year and the beginning of another.

- Stanza 1: How do joy and penitence go hand in hand? Read Luke 5:29–32 and Heb. 12:1–2. Who and what are at the center of all penitence and joy? What is the work of the Law and of the Gospel in penitence and joy?
- Stanza 2: Read Luke 2:21. How does remembering the circumcision of our Lord Jesus, which comes eight days after Christmas and falls on Jan. 1, cause us to rejoice? The rite of circumcision is fulfilled by Jesus, but read Acts 7:51. According to Stephen’s caustic sermon, of what are all of us to be aware?
- Stanza 3: Continuing from Luke 2:21, Vajda takes us to the “Name of names.” Read Matt. 1:21; Luke 1:31; Psalm 138:2; and Phil. 2:9. How is sin’s war ended by the name our Savior bears?
- Stanza 4: Read Mal. 3:10 and Ps. 31:19. God loves to give — and give and give and give some more. Based on previous years, how do you know the Holy Trinity will keep His promise to give you “a whole year’s needs”?
- Stanza 5: Read Ps. 73:3. All may not seem fair in this life. The wicked gain in prosperity and the righteous do not. But in what are God’s people prosperous? See Ps. 128:5 and Mary’s song of praise, the “Magnificat,” in Luke 1:46–55. What does it mean to wish someone a “prosperous new year”?
- Stanza 6: Vajda returns our memories to the song the angels sang to shepherds, a song that we still sing to this very day, primarily in our liturgies. Read Luke 2:8–14. How does the refrain of this hymn reflect the words of Luke 2:20?
- Stanza 7: Read Ps. 17:6; Ps. 86:1; and Ps. 102:2. What is the psalmist’s repeated plea? Recall the liturgy for Holy Baptism on pages 268–71 of *LSB*. With what is the person traced? Does this expire in the Christian’s life? Go throughout the year marked by Jesus, your Savior!

Making the Connection

“Rejoice! Rejoice! With thanks embrace / Another year of grace.” As your year proceeds, recall each day the grace of Christ Jesus that has brought you this far and will see you through to heaven.

- Read 1 Peter 3:18–22. How does Noah’s “new year” become your “new year?”

In Closing

No matter what month of the year or day of the week today is in your life, now is another new day of grace under the watchful, loving eye of your Lord. You are carved in His nail-scarred hands and He holds you through the trying times and joyous moments alike. You are baptized in the stream of eternity, in the everlasting, ever-living name of Jesus. Rejoice! Rejoice! With thanks embrace another year of God’s grace.

- Read together or responsively Psalm 65.
- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 896.

- The Old Testament reading appointed for January 1 is Num. 6:22–27. Read these verses and think about how these words are the best way to both close the old year and enter the new.

Prayer

Lord God, You made Your beloved Son, our Savior, subject to the Law and caused Him to shed His blood on our behalf. Grant us the true circumcision of the Spirit that our hearts may be made pure from all sins; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for the Circumcision and Name of Jesus).

Prayer

Eternal God, we commit to Your mercy and forgiveness the year now ending and commend to Your blessing and love the times yet to come. In the new year, abide among us with Your Holy Spirit that we may always trust in the saving name of our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for New Year’s Eve).

At the Name of Jesus

Lutheran Service Book 512 | study by William M. Cwirla

Introduction

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never hurt me” goes the old playground rhyme. And in a sense, it’s true. Name-calling cannot hurt in the same way as sticks or stones can. And yet, name-calling does hurt, sometimes deeply. Perhaps that playground retort is really a feeble defense against a deeper fear. Names have power to hurt.

Names are important. We name our pets, we agonize over the names of our children. We develop pet names for each other to express affection.

Names are personal and signify personhood. God revealed His name to Moses in the burning bush, and He

fully reveals His name in the incarnation of His Son Jesus. Jesus’ name in Hebrew is *Y’shua*, the same as Joshua. It means “Yahweh saves” or “Yahweh is salvation.”

- What does your name mean? Were you named after someone, and if so, why? How did you come up with the names of your children?
- When you think of the name of Jesus, what impressions or images do you think of? What importance does the name of Jesus have to you in your life?

Exploring the Scriptures

Read Matt. 1:18–21.

- How did Jesus receive His name? What was the rationale for this name?

In Judaism at the time of Jesus, a boy received his name at the time of his circumcision. Read Luke 2:1–21. Notice how Luke does not name Jesus until the eighth day, the time of His circumcision.

- Why would this custom of naming a child at his circumcision be appropriate?

Read Acts 4:5–12.

- According to Peter and John’s testimony, what was the significance of Jesus’ name, and why were they compelled to proclaim it?

Read Phil. 2:5–11. This appears to be an ancient Christian hymn already known at the time that Paul is writing this letter.

- What are the three things that Christ did according to this passage? How do these three things perfectly summarize the entire work of Christ for our salvation?
- What is the “name that is above every name?”
- What will happen on the Last Day?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

The text of this hymn was written by Caroline Marie Noel (1817–1877), who wrote about a dozen hymns as a teenager and then later as an invalid during the last twenty years of her life. “At the Name of Jesus” was written in that later period. Many of her poems reflected her long years of suffering and the faith that was forged in her through her suffering. In a personal way, Miss Noel’s life and poetry reflect Rom. 5:3–5, in which the apostle Paul notes that suffering in the hands of God produces patient endurance, character, and hope.

- How might this hymn and the fact that it was written by someone who suffered chronically be an inspiration and witness?

- Have you ever written a devotion or poem in a time of suffering? How might this be a help both to you and to others?

Text

This hymn consists of seven stanzas, concluding with a Trinitarian doxology. While patterned on Phil. 2:5–11, the hymn moves beyond this Christian hymn to embrace the great works of creation, redemption, and sanctification. Stanza 1 begins with Phil. 2:10–11, but quickly moves to include John 1:1–4.

- What titles of Christ are used in this stanza?
- Why is it “the Father’s pleasure” that we should call Jesus “Lord”? What does it mean to call Jesus “Lord”?

Stanza 2 speaks of the work of creation. Read Gen. 1:1–3, Col. 1:16, and John 1:1–4.

- What role did the Son as the Word play in the work of creation?
- Why is it a source of comfort and strength to know that Jesus is the creative Word who made “All the heavenly orders / In their great array”?

Stanza 3 deals with Christ’s humbling for our salvation. See Phil. 2:8. The “it” in this stanza is the human name Jesus, which stands for Christ’s humanity.

- In what did Christ’s humbling “for a season” consist?
- Why is it important that the Son, the creative Word, receive an ordinary human name?
- At what point in Christ’s work did His humbling for our salvation come to an end?

Stanza 4 deals with Christ’s exaltation. Again, the “it” refers to the name that Christ bears as He brings our humanity through death to life and glory. Read Col. 3:1–3.

- What does Christ’s exaltation of His name mean for us?

Stanza 5 concerns Christ’s work of sanctification in us, as He dwells in us by His Spirit, just as we dwell in Him by faith. Read Gal. 2:20.

- Who actually lives — you or Christ?
- Who does the work of sanctification, that is, holiness?

Stanza 6 looks forward to Christ’s “return,” that is, His visible reappearing in glory. It addresses our fellow Christians and encourages them in their confession of Jesus’ name here and now, for their faith in Him will be vindicated. See Acts 1:10–11.

- What comfort and strength do you draw from Christ’s reappearing?

Stanza 7 is a doxology, focusing on the Son as “the Prince of light” (John 8:12; 12:46), along with the Father and the Spirit.

- How does the world remain in darkness in our day? How does Jesus and the proclamation of His name bring light to this present darkness?

Making the Connection

This hymn would lead us to consider what Jesus has done in His incarnation, that is, in becoming man and being born of the Virgin. The one who is the eternal, creative Word took on our humanity and a human name, and took our humanity through death and the grave to the right hand of the Father.

- What does the fact that the Son is still named Jesus tell you about His humanity and your humanity?
- The Jehovah’s Witnesses, who deny that Christ is God, claim that “Jehovah” is the only proper name of God. How might you respond to this claim in view of Phil. 2:9 and this hymn?

In Closing

Names are terribly important. And the most important name is the name by which we are saved, the name of Jesus. In the most ancient of confessions — “Jesus Christ is Lord”— the man named Jesus (Joshua) is confessed to be the Christ (Messiah) and the Lord (Yahweh). Jesus brings God and man together in His own person. In humbling Himself in our humanity, He lifts our humanity up from sin, death and hell, and glorifies it at that right hand of God. All of this comes with the wonderful name Jesus, the name above every name, the only name by which we must be saved.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 512, “At the Name of Jesus.”

Prayer

Heavenly Father, You revealed to the apostle Peter the blessed truth that Your Son Jesus is the Christ. Strengthen us by the proclamation of this truth that we too may joyfully confess that there is salvation in no one else; 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 Confession of St. Peter).

God of the Prophets, Bless the Prophets' Sons

Lutheran Service Book 682 | study by Shawn L. Kumm

Introduction

Robed. Red stole around the neck. Kneeling. Shaking inside. Here is one about to begin something done by countless men through the ages, yet never done by this man before. This seminary-trained graduate submits himself to his Lord Jesus and promises to be a faithful undershepherd to the Lord's dear sheep. Surrounded by family, friends, church dignitaries and, especially, his flock, this pastor is well prayed for at this moment in his life. It is a good start to many years of ministry.

But there is one more in attendance, unseen to all. Satan is there, wearing both a worried look on his brow and a smirk on his face. Knowing that the Word of God is "the sword of the Spirit," Satan has to plan his attack prudently, carefully looking for any chinks in this man's armor.

The deceiver wants nothing more than to derail a pastor's ministry — through false teaching, through immoral

lifestyle, through lethargy and carelessness. To destroy the undershepherd hurts not just one but many more cross-purchased souls. It will take the protection of God's holy angels, diligent attention to the Word of God, gasps and litanies of prayer, and the blood-bought forgiveness of Jesus to keep this man in the ministry. Yes, God of the prophets, bless the prophets' sons, bless *this son* to be a prophet to generations of people.

- If you have been to the ordination or installation of a pastor, which hymns or spoken words caught your attention?
- It is difficult for the pastor to publicly pray from the church's altar for his own family or himself. How might you better remember to pray for your pastor and his family?

Exploring the Scriptures

As the chariots of fire and the horses sped along with the whirlwind, one prophet watched the other leave. A lump must have formed in his throat as he saw the man of God depart in a most spectacular way. What would he do now without his mentor, his senior guide, his friend?

- Read 2 Kings 2:1–15. What does the way in which he departs tell us about Elijah? What does it tell us about Elisha's handed-down ministry and his role in God's kingdom that one object is left behind for him as Elijah is carried away?
- Read Matt. 16:13–16. What was it about Jesus' ministry that made some think He was Elijah? Does Peter's answer take away from the fact that Jesus did indeed prophesy?

As joyful as the ordination or installation of a new pastor is for himself, the actual event may be tough on well-seasoned pastors. Just as long-married couples may wince at the vows exchanged at a wedding, remembering sins and failings from past years, so also pastors with a few more years

under their belts may feel quite despondent when hearing again the requirements of the Office of the Holy Ministry. Apparitions of missed opportunities, misspoken words, and other failures arise before pastors — pastors in need of the blood-bought forgiveness of Jesus.

- Read 1 Tim. 3:1–7. Through the Holy Spirit, Paul wrote these words to a young pastor. Consider these words and the pastors you have known throughout your life. Some may have been closer to the mark of being the imagined perfect pastor, some farther away, but all failed along the way. Think of a gracious way to encourage your pastor this week in the high calling that has been given to him in the congregation he serves.
- Included in the Small Catechism is the "Table of Duties." Along with the duties of bishops, pastors, and preachers, it includes Bible passages under the heading, "What the Hearers Owe Their Pastors." Read 1 Thess. 5:12–13 and Heb. 13:17. How are pastor and people to interact with one another? For what purpose?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

The year 1860 was a difficult time in which to graduate from seminary. With the Civil War soon to be staring him

in the face, Denis Wortman (1835–1922) set out as a pastor in what would become a war-torn nation. Coming from the Dutch Reformed confession of faith, Wortman served out

his ministry where such parishes could be found, particularly in New York and Pennsylvania.

When his seminary alma mater celebrated its centennial in 1884, Wortman, who was unable to attend the festivities, sent his warm greetings. Included in Wortman's letter is a seven-stanza hymn entitled "A Prayer for Young Ministers." From those published greetings of all who could not attend, Wortman's words quickly found a place in American hymnody, soon known by the first line of the hymn, "God of the Prophets, Bless the Prophets' Sons."

- "Each age its solemn task may claim but once; / Make each one nobler, stronger than the last" (st. 1). What are some of the "tasks" or challenges facing today's new pastors?
- Is there a young man in your congregation or Lutheran circle whom you think would be up for the solemn task of serving God's people as a pastor? Gently encourage him and boldly pray for him!

Text

Condensed from seven stanzas to five, Wortman's hymn lays before the singer a three-part task of the pastor, taken from the ministry of the only perfect pastor — Jesus Christ! See questions 116 and 125 of "An Explanation of the Small Catechism" (CPH, 1991) for a summary of the three offices of Christ — and, by extension, of the pastor.

Making the Connection

- Ask your pastor to show you the Rite of Ordination and the Rite of Installation of a Pastor from *Lutheran Service Book Agenda*. Look both for requirements and promises of him and of your congregation. Study Eph. 4:1–16 in light of your own congregation.
- Find and read these two prayers on *LSB*, 306, "Seminaries and colleges" and "Increase of the holy ministry." Consider congregational and individual support for our seminaries and seminarians. Pray for men to enter the Office of the Holy Ministry.

In Closing

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 682.

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, You have always given to Your Church on earth faithful shepherds such as Timothy to guide and feed Your flock. Make all pastors diligent to preach Your holy Word and administer Your means of grace, and grant Your people wisdom to follow in the way that leads to life eternal; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for St. Timothy).

- First is the office of prophet. Read or sing stanza 2. The foretelling work of the prophets is complete. All has been fulfilled by Jesus except the waiting for the fulfillment of the final prophecy — the Last Day. Until then, a pastor's work is "forthtelling," that is, telling forth the saving work of Jesus. Read 2 Tim. 4:1–5. What does the prophetic work of the pastor look like?
- Second is the office of priest. Read or sing stanza 3. Jesus made the full and final sacrifice upon the cross, appeasing God's anger and holy judgment. The pastor now proclaims to the people of God that priestly sacrifice made for them. The pastor, on behalf of the congregation, offers prayers from the altar to the throne of God. From the pulpit the pastor encourages the people of God to offer their sacrificial, Spirit-stirred gifts. Lay people also have priestly work. Read 1 Peter 2:9 and Heb. 10:9–25 and connect these passages with the three offices of Christ and the work of the Christian.
- Third is the office of king. Read or sing stanza 4. This may seem like a bit of a stretch at first — my pastor a king? But a pastor is an ambassador of King Jesus. When an ambassador is sent and speaks, it is as if the king is present and is speaking. The ambassador only says what the king gives him to speak. Read 2 Cor. 5:20 to see the role of an ambassador for Christ. Read 1 Tim. 6:11–16 to see the royal task of a pastor and how this is to reflect King Jesus. You, too, are royalty. Read 1 Peter 2:9 for a description of your place before the throne of God.

Chief of Sinners Though I Be

Lutheran Service Book 611 | study by Aaron A. Koch

Introduction

Most of us like to attain titles that show that we're in charge, that we're the one taking the lead and the responsibility for getting a certain job done. Managing editor, chief engineer, head chef — there's honor in having titles such as those. They show that we've risen to the top in whatever it is that we're doing.

But in this week's Hymn of the Day, we begin by singing of a title that most people wouldn't seek, and that we may hesitate to claim for ourselves: chief of sinners. While this is not something we would want to include on a resume, it is something that is central to our Christian confession of faith. For only those who know themselves to be wretched

sinners will trust completely and wholeheartedly in Christ as their Savior. He even rescues the worst of sinners from the judgment that we deserve by His all-atoning death on the cross.

- If someone resists applying the term “chief of sinners” as a potential title for himself or herself, might that be a sign of a spiritual problem? Why or why not?
- How is confessing one's sins connected to confessing faith in Christ?

Exploring the Scriptures

The theme of today's hymn is based on Paul's words to Timothy. Read 1 Tim. 1:12–17.

- Paul said that he was formerly a “blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent.” In what specific ways had he blasphemed God and persecuted Christ's Church? See Acts 7:59–8:3; 9:1–2.
- Why would Saul/Paul have thought at first that what he was doing was good and righteous?
- We could probably think of certain crimes today that seem even more heinous than what Paul did. What was it, then, about his deeds that caused him to categorize himself as the chief and foremost of sinners?

- In what ways can we identify with Paul's great confession of sin?
- Why did Christ Jesus come into the world? How is that simple truth an incredibly deep and precious one for us?
- What was one of the reasons that Paul received mercy?
- The argument is from the greater to the lesser: If the “foremost” sinner can be forgiven, then can “lesser” sinners like us be forgiven? Who is glorified by this?
- According to the Gospel for Trinity 22, Matt. 18:21–35, what does God's completely undeserved mercy and forgiveness toward us mean for our relationships toward others?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

This hymn text was written by William McComb (1793–1873) in the 1860s. Two slight changes were made to his original words for the sake of doctrinal clarity. In stanza 1, McComb originally used the past tense “lived.” But now the hymn reads that Jesus “lives that I might never die,” to make clear that our Lord is still alive to give us His life. And in the third stanza, “Jesus only can impart” was changed to the current “Only Jesus can impart,” to make clear that the power of our Savior isn't limited.

- The above changes were fairly minor; some may say they weren't really necessary. Why, however, is it spiritually important for there to be precision in the language of hymns and in doctrinal statements in general?

Text

The primary focus of this hymn is not on the sinner or the ranking of sinners — as if that were necessary or even possible. It's on the saving work of Christ Jesus. The first stanza weaves together several scriptural thoughts to help us meditate on this theme.

- Read Matt. 27:50–52. The hymn sings, “Died that I might live on high” How does Jesus' death bring us life? See also 1 John 1:7.
- Read John 15:4–5. “As the branch is to the vine, / I am His, and He is mine.” How does the relationship of a branch to a vine illustrate our relationship to Christ?

Stanza 2 sings in praise of Jesus' love and how that love is everything for the Christian. "Oh, the height of Jesus' love ...! / Love that found me—wondrous thought!" Read Ps. 103:11, 17 and 1 John 4:10.

- Did Paul (Saul) choose Christ, or vice versa? See Acts 9:1–16; also see John 15:16.
- Who initiates the relationship between God and man? Who finds whom? Who "gives His life" to whom? Who receives the glory for the fact that we're believers?

Stanza 3 emphasizes that forgiveness and salvation come through Christ alone. "Only Jesus can impart" all of the things that are mentioned here. Read Rom. 5:1; John 14:6.

- How is the forgiveness Jesus brings like a balm or medicine to heal a sin-wounded heart?
- Why is Jesus the only way to the Father and the only one who can impart all of these gifts?
- Who was Enoch? See Heb. 11:5–6; Gen. 5:18–30. What does it mean to "walk with God"?

Making the Connection

Stanza 2 speaks in a very personal way about the "Love that found me." God's love may have found you at a very young age — even as an infant — or when you were older.

- In what way, specifically and concretely, did Jesus' love find you and save you, even "when you sought Him not"? Be sure to refer to the external means or instruments that He used.

In Closing

We may not like to apply the title "sinner" to ourselves, much less "chief of sinners." But the truth is that such are the only ones our Lord deals with. "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15). And so in humble repentance we confess that this is the truth about ourselves. And in confident faith we trust in Him, whose redeeming love has given us the new title of "children of God," purely out of His abundant grace and mercy. "To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen" (1 Tim. 1:17).

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 611, "Chief of Sinners Though I Be."

Stanza 4 again weaves several scriptural images to show how the life of Christ and His people are intimately tied together.

- How is it that "All my wants to Him are known"? See John 21:17; Matt. 6:8. Should we still pray anyway?
- How is it that "All my sorrows are His own"? See Is. 53:4.
- How is your life "hidden," "Safe with Him from earthly strife"? See Col. 3:3–4; 11.

Stanza 5 moves the hymn from being a meditation on Christ's redemptive work to a prayer. Read Matt. 7:13–14.

- "When my wayward heart would stray" What sort of things tempt us off the narrow way? Why is it that the path of eternal life is a narrow way?
- Why especially do we need God's grace in the face of death? What certainty can we draw from Heb. 4:15–16?

According to stanza 5, our Savior affords help to us "By [His] Spirit and [His] Word."

- What specific things in the Church or in Divine Service might that be that a reference to?

Prayer

Almighty God, You turned the heart of him who persecuted the Church and by his preaching caused the light of the Gospel to shine throughout the world. Grant us ever to rejoice in the saving light of Your Gospel and, following the example of the apostle Paul, to spread it to the ends of the earth; 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 Conversion of St. Paul).

O God, O Lord of Heaven and Earth

Lutheran Service Book 834 | study by Paul F. Becker

Introduction

The first of the Ninety-Five Theses states: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, “Repent” [Mt 4:17], he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance” (*Luther’s Works*, American Edition, [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1957], 31:25). As Martin Luther nailed the Ninety-Five Theses to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany, on Oct. 31, 1517, he inadvertently began what today we call the Protestant Reformation. One of his primary concerns was with the sale of indulgences, which in his mind cheapened the grace of God and trivialized the treasure of Confession and Absolution, thus distorting the Church’s Gospel mission and witness. The good news of God’s grace held such importance for Luther that he was willing to defy the Emperor

at the Diet of Worms in 1521 with his statement, “Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me, Amen!”

Such a confession and prayer echoes in the lines of this Reformation hymn, “O God, O Lord of Heaven and Earth,” which points out the path for our continuing bold mission and witness to Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

- Discuss how the meaning of repentance — turning to God and changing the way you think and act — determines the nature of our mission and witness to Jesus.
- Are there any areas you can think of in which the Church today stands in need of reformation?

Exploring the Scriptures

Martin Franzmann’s text makes use of the work of each person of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, to draw out what each divine person has done and continues to do for our good. Read John 1:1–7.

- How does the phrase “All things were made through him” (v. 3) shape your thinking about life and creation?
- If darkness cannot overcome the light (v. 5), what prevents people from seeing the truth? Hint: What do we love more?

Who can fathom the depths of God’s love in becoming one of us (Rom. 11:33)? By sharing our flesh and blood, Christ did what we were unable to do. Read Heb. 2:14–15.

- How was the author of our salvation able to “destroy the one who [had] the power of death” (Heb. 2:14)?

- Describe the bondage from which we have been set free by His death.

Ultimately, only the Holy Spirit’s work of restoration will allow the Church to fulfill its task of bringing good news to a sick and dying world. Without His presence, “the way of peace they have not known” (Rom. 3:17). Read Rom. 15:5–6.

- What Scriptures in particular give you endurance and encouragement?
- What kind of thoughts and words glorify God and advance the Church’s mission and witness?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Martin H. Franzmann (1907–1976) was called in 1946 to teach at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri. In 1955, he joined the department of Exegetical Theology there. He was known for his traditional stance on biblical inerrancy and inspiration over against historical criticism, as well as his commentaries on Romans and Revelation. Five of his original hymns and one of his translations are found in *Lutheran Service Book*. Today’s hymn was written for the 450th anniversary of the Reformation in 1967.

- What uniquely qualifies a student and teacher of the Scriptures to compose new hymns for the Church?
- The 500th anniversary of the Reformation is Oct. 31, 2017. Discuss two or three Reformation themes that still energize us today.

Text

Even as the first stanza expresses the aimlessness, futility, and brokenness of life, consequences of the fall, it offers a powerful refutation of the false claim that would lay responsibility for sin and death on God. Call to mind

Michelangelo's well-known painting of the creation, in which the "living finger" of God the Father gives life to the yet lifeless figure of Adam.

- Discuss the phrases and word pictures that demonstrate God's design and intention for mankind.
- In stanza 2, we discover the results of insisting on our "fatal" and "rebel will." What evidence do you see today that man's rebellion is still fatal?

Stanzas 3 and 4 capture in vivid terms how God spared no expense to win us back to Himself. He breathed our poisoned air, and drank the dark despair that strangle our "reluctant breath."

The hymn was written during the height of both the Vietnam conflict and the arms race of the Cold War. How

does repeating the phrase "how beautiful the feet" (st. 3) — a direct reference to Is. 52:7 — bring a sense of hope and promise?

The final stanza evokes the "high doxology" of heaven heard in Rev. 5:12-13: "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing! ... To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!" To this our lives aspire even now in "these grey and latter days" by virtue of the Spirit's breath.

- What are some things that would characterize your personal, family, and church life if these were among "those whose life is praise"?

Making the Connection

As we give thanks to God for restoring His Church, there are many gifts for us to rejoice in.

- What means does the Spirit use to make the Church once again "the bringer of good news to men" (st. 4) today?

- How does God bring comfort and hope to us who still inhabit our "hall of death" (st. 3) and "house of doom" (st. 2)?

In Closing

Every Lord's Day in each Divine Service, whether we feel it or not, God the Holy Spirit breathes afresh and anew on humble and repentant hearts through Word and Sacrament the very life and love that God desires for us to experience and share with our neighbors. God's people gather where He has promised to bring us back to Himself.

- Read aloud or sing together *LSB* 834, "O God, O Lord of Heaven and Earth."

Prayer

O God, the strength of all who put their trust in You, mercifully grant that by Your power we may be defended against all adversity; 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 Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany).

In His Temple Now Behold Him

Lutheran Service Book 519 | study by Tim Pauls

Introduction

You gonna let a kid do the fighting for you?

In times of war and disaster, the traditional procedure is to protect the women and children, while the men risk their lives and do the fighting. Especially in the case of the children, this is a matter of protecting the most helpless and vulnerable. It would be a matter of shame for the men to take shelter and let a child do the fighting. It's happened before, though: look no further than David versus Goliath in 1 Samuel 17.

The Feast of the Purification of Mary and the Presentation of Our Lord presents a less likely-looking hero than young David: a forty-day-old baby. But this is no

ordinary baby. He is the infant Jesus. And at the age of forty days, He's doing the fighting for you.

To set up this hymn, it might be helpful to go back to one of the final prophecies of the Old Testament, Mal. 3:1: "And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts." With these words, God promised that He Himself would come as the Savior; 400 years later, He would keep His promise.

- Since kings routinely traveled with an entourage and pomp, how might one expect the LORD of hosts to arrive at the temple?

Exploring the Scriptures

The infant Lord is brought to the temple because two Old Testament laws must be kept.

For one, Mary must be purified. Read Leviticus 12 about childbirth and purification.

- Although childbirth wasn't sinful, a new mother was no longer ceremonially clean. According to verses 2 and 4, how long was the woman unclean if she gave birth to a boy? Can you think of other times in the Bible when the Lord preserved His people through that number of days or years before He delivered them?
- To be purified, the mother had to go to the "tent of meeting" (v. 6), the temporary dwelling place of God until the tabernacle was constructed in the wilderness. According to verse 6, what had to happen for her to be cleansed? What were the options for a poor mother (v. 8)?
- This ritual was given by God to point to Christ. How?

Along with the purification of Mary, it was necessary that Jesus be presented at the temple. Read Ex. 13:11–16.

- Because God was the giver of all good things in the Old Testament, He received a tithe of thanks from His people.

Because He is the giver of life, what did He command in verse 12?

- Rather than sacrifice their firstborn sons, what were the people of God commanded to do in verse 13?
- To what great historical event did this ceremony point back (vv. 14–16)?

The purification of Mary and the presentation of our Lord is recorded in Luke 2:22–40.

- What is offered for Mary's purification, and what does this tell you about the social status of Jesus' family (v. 24)? Suppose for a moment that the temple grounds are crowded with both rich and poor worshipers in need of various rites and sacrifices: how much attention would this family draw?
- Mary and Joseph do not go unnoticed: they are met by Simeon. Why is Simeon there (vv. 25–26)?
- Having taken Jesus in his arms, what does Simeon say about Jesus (vv. 29–32)?
- Anna also appears. What does she call Jesus (v. 38)?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Henry John Pye (1825–1903) wrote this hymn at the age of 26, while serving as the young rector of a parish in the small rural town of Staffordshire, England; and, it seems, he led a relatively ordinary life there as a parish pastor.

- In the ordinary life of a congregation, when might you see a sight similar to that of Luke 2:22–40, a couple holding a young infant in church before the pastor, while another couple stands nearby?

- Read Rom. 6:3–4. What is the connection between that infant and the infant Jesus presented in the temple? How does Holy Baptism compare to the sacrifice of a lamb when Jesus is presented to God at the temple?
- We hinted before that this arrival of the LORD of Hosts in the temple lacked the pomp and glory that the world might expect from God appearing on earth. How is the appearance and God’s work in Holy Baptism consistent with this?

Text

Although this hymn is only three short stanzas, each stanza provides a specific message for meditation.

The first stanza is all about Jesus and His arrival at the temple for His presentation.

- He is called the “long-expected Lord.” According to stanza 1, how did they know to expect Him?

- What is the response of Simeon and Anna when they see Jesus?

The second stanza speaks of the “supporting cast” of the text, the believers who recognized Him to be the long-awaited Christ.

- Who is Mary holding? But how does He appear?
- How are Mary, Simeon and Anna described, and what makes them so?
- The final line explains the miraculous paradox of Christ, your Savior. What is it?

The third stanza is a prayer for the faithful to pray today.

- How is Jesus’ appearance described at the time of His presentation?
- What do we pray for in stanza 3? Where and how is this accomplished?

Making the Connection

Though separated by many years from Simeon and Anna, you share some commonalities. For one, you have the need for the same long-expected Lord.

- What circumstances in your life would have you especially eager for the Lord’s presence and help?

For another, Jesus is just as present with you: not in the form of a newborn, but just as present in His Word and His Sacraments.

- The “incarnate God Most High” is present with you. But as He appeared “weak and poor” then, how does He appear now?
- How does this often comfort you when you’re tempted to believe that God’s means of grace are too humble to help you?
- Simeon’s praise of Jesus in Luke 2:29–32 is often sung in Christian worship right after the Lord’s Supper. Why?

In Closing

Normally, you wouldn’t let a kid do the fighting for you; but the child who was presented at the temple in this hymn is the almighty Son of God. Despite appearances, the Lord is at work there for your salvation; and that is also certainly true when He dies for you on the cross. Just as humbly, He comes to you in His means of grace to give you forgiveness of sins, life and salvation; and since He’s already won the victory over sin, death and the devil, you can rejoice that He’s already done the fighting for you.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 519, “In His Temple Now Behold Him.”

Prayer

Almighty and ever-living God, as Your only-begotten Son was this day presented in the temple in the substance of our flesh, grant that we may be presented to You with pure and clean hearts; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for the Purification of Mary and the Presentation of Our Lord).

"How Shall They Hear," Who Have Not Heard

Lutheran Service Book 831 | study by Paul F. Becker

Introduction

From the very beginning, the Church's primary concern has been to bear witness to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. As the faithful 11 apostles met in the upper room during the 10 days between Jesus' ascension and the Day of Pentecost, they were with one accord in prayer and supplication with the women and Mary, the mother of Jesus, and His brothers.

In this context, Peter gave voice to their concern that "one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection" (Acts 1:22). After asking God to show them which of the two candidates He had chosen, "the lot fell on Matthias, and he was numbered with the eleven apostles" (Acts 1:26). Mindful of the apostolic example, the Lutheran Confessions say, "So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering

the Sacraments was instituted" (AC V 1) and "that no one should publicly teach in the Church, or administer the Sacraments, without a rightly ordered call (AC XIV).

All believers, St. Peter reminds us, are to be ready to give a reason for the hope that is in them (1 Peter 3:15). This hymn reminds us that all our prayers and works combine to facilitate the hearing of the Good News of Jesus in every tribe, nation, language and people.

- Discuss what your congregation does to support seminarians, missionaries, Bible translation, etc.
- Many have found that personally supporting missionaries (through a congregation) enhances their own awareness of and participation in that work. Reflect together on this possibility.

Exploring the Scriptures

When God first appeared to Abram, He promised that all the families of the earth would be blessed through him (Gen. 12:3). In Jesus, God has fulfilled His promise in that "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). St. Paul became personally aware of this on the road to Damascus, and in his inspired letters he reveals the secret and pattern of spreading the Gospel. Read Rom. 10:9–17.

- What does St. Paul say are the evidences of saving faith? How does the "Rite of Confirmation" (*LSB*, pp. 272–4) help make this evidence known?
- God wants everyone to know the blessing of calling on the name of the Lord. Discuss the four questions and answers Paul gives (call, believe, hear, preach [vv. 14–15]) that lead to delivering the "gospel of peace" (Eph. 6:15).

In each of the four Gospels, Jesus commissions His disciples to bear witness to the Good News. Read Matt. 28:18–20.

- In the original Greek, the phrase "all nations" sounds like our word "ethnic," referring to every specific, unique people group and language. How has God in unexpected ways given us new opportunities to do this?
- Discuss the two components that go into making disciples. Note that the mission task is sandwiched between the promise of Jesus' authority and presence!

In Is. 6:1–8, we are given a glimpse of the prophet's divine call and his response.

- What parallels can you see in the life of every baptized believer?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Timothy Dudley-Smith (b. 1926), a retired bishop in the Church of England, is the author of over 400 hymn texts. This text was written on Dec. 27, 1979, at the request of the Rev. John Stott, to be sung at the Consultation on World Evangelization held in Thailand in June 1980.

He relates that Romans 10, Matthew 28 and Isaiah 6 provided the questions that begin each of the first four stanzas.

The suggested themes of prayer and costly incarnational evangelism provide substance and focus for this modern mission hymn.

Text

"How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?" (Rom. 10:14). These questions are

antecedents to the compelling query of our text: “How shall they hear?” This quest for all our fellow men to call and believe on the Lord Jesus depends on whether or not they will hear the Good News of God sending His Son to find us and bring us home.

- What are some of the ways we talk about “His reconciling word” (LSB 831:1) by which we learn to trust the name of Jesus?

Jesus said we would be His witnesses beginning in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Mission and witness begin at home, with family, friends and neighbors — our Jerusalem.

- Discuss what your home church does to share the “good news of saving grace” (st. 2) with the local community.
- Ask your pastor to pray by name for missionaries in “far-off lands” (st. 2).

Making the Connection

Earnest, fervent, heartfelt prayer underlies every mighty mission of the Good News. When the apostles had been threatened and warned not to speak at all in the name of Jesus, they prayed: “And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” And when they had prayed, the

“Costly and incarnational” well describe the price to be paid. “Constant in prayer, through toil and pain” (st. 3) doesn’t sound like a popular marketing campaign, but it reflects the path taken by our Savior and those who respond to His call.

- In the “telling of One who died for all” (st. 3), we may suffer mistreatment, injustice and abuse. Discuss how persecution and sufferings can help reach the lost.

The final two stanzas recognize that even when we say, “Here am I! Send me!” we need Jesus’ life to change “this poor cold self-centered soul” (st. 4). We need Him to touch our lips, hands and heart just as Isaiah was cleansed by the coal from the heavenly altar. Like the 120 disciples awaiting the promise of the Father on the Day of Pentecost, we need the Holy Spirit to come down and move within us in order for us to be effective tellers of the Good News.

place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4:29–31).

- How do we think the task of making disciples will ever be accomplished? Do we dare pray in this way today? Why or why not? We don’t convert anyone — that’s what the Holy Spirit does.

In Closing

For reasons known only to Himself, God chooses to work through ordinary, otherwise unremarkable folks like you and me to let others in on what we know: Christ is our life, our joy and our crown.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 831.

Prayer

Almighty and everlasting God, You desire not the death of a sinner but that all would repent and live. Hear our prayers for those outside the Church. Take away their iniquity and turn them from their false gods to You, the living and true God. Gather them into Your holy Church to the glory of Your name; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen (For those outside the Church, *LSB*, p. 305).

Our Father, by Whose Name

Lutheran Service Book 863 | study by Shawn L. Kumm

Introduction

“It is not flesh and blood but the heart which makes us fathers and sons.” So wrote the German poet and philosopher Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805).

It goes without saying that fatherhood has fallen on hard times. Oh, it’s never been easy for men to be fathers. Going all the way back to Adam and Cain and Abel and the descendants who follow shows us just that (see Genesis 4).

Men given the wonderful opportunity and privilege of fatherhood fail and fall short of the task every day.

- What things have led to the demise of fatherhood?
- Consider Schiller’s quote above. How is this true or not true for earthly fathers? How is this true or not true when we consider our heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus?

Exploring the Scriptures

LSB 863 serves as the Hymn of the Day for two days in the Church Year. Read Mark 10:2–16, the Gospel appointed for Proper 22B, which falls on a Sunday in early October.

- What indication from the text tells you this was a tough topic in Jesus’ day?

- The Pharisees started with the topic of divorce. Where does Jesus instead lead them in their testing of Him?
- What indication in the text tells you the parents knew they needed Jesus in their children’s lives?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Francis Bland Tucker (1895–1984) grew up knowing something about family and church families. He was the youngest of 13 children. His own father and two brothers served as bishops in the Episcopal Church; several nephews served as clergymen. Tucker also was a collateral descendent (a relative descended from a brother or sister of an ancestor and, therefore, a niece or nephew) of George Washington. His mother was one of the last children to be born at Mount Vernon. Tucker’s family was illustrious in both church and state lineage.

Known for his skills as a poet and hymn writer, Tucker served on the committees that produced the 1940 and 1982 hymnals of the Episcopal Church. In preparing the topical index for the 1940 hymnal, Tucker noted there were no hymns for the “Home and Family” section — and so he wrote one.

- Why do you think there were no hymns in 1939 concerning home and family for Tucker’s consideration? (*The Lutheran Hymnal* [1941] did have a section on “The Christian Home” with four hymns in “The Family” section.)
- If you have a copy of *Lutheran Service Book*, turn to Page 995 and find the “Home and Education, Christian” category.

Tucker wrote that he started with Eph. 3:14–15 as the basis for his hymn. He also noted that the Trinity — Father, Son and Holy Spirit — paralleled the family — parents, children and the spirit of the family.

- Let’s expand Tucker’s reading of Ephesians. Read Eph. 3:14–19. What does St. Paul have to teach us about each person of the Holy Trinity?

Text

In stanza 1, the words “Our Father” immediately make all kinds of liturgical and worship connections for us.

- In what ways does stanza 1 reflect the following Scripture passages: Is. 63:16; Is. 64:8; Rom. 8:15; 1 John 3:1?
- In what ways does Tucker take the Invocation, the First Article of the Apostles’ Creed, and the Introduction to the Lord’s Prayer and bring them together in stanza 1 (see *LSB*, pp. 322–3)?

Stanza 2 moves us to the second person of the Holy Trinity, Jesus, the Son of God, the Son of Mary.

- What comfort is yours that Jesus left His heavenly home in order to grow up “within an earthly home”?
- What are the benefits of having the Lord Jesus in your home? Consider the lives of these biblical people: Mark 10:14–16; Luke 19:5–9; Acts 16:25–34.

Stanza 3 has us sing of the Christian home as a place where unity, love and peace are to be found.

- What have been some of the best times in your Christian home life?

Original sin, the sin we have inherited from our first parents, Adam and Eve, and actual sin, the sins we commit against one another, break the unity, love and peace of Christian home life.

Making the Connection

In the Large Catechism, Martin Luther has this to say about the Fourth Commandment, “Honor your father and your mother”:

Honor requires not only that parents be addressed kindly and with reverence, but also that, both in the heart and with the body, we demonstrate that we value them very highly, and that, next to God, we regard them as the very highest. For someone we honor from the heart we must also truly regard as high and great.

We must, therefore, impress this truth upon the young [Deuteronomy 6:7] that they should think of their parents as standing in God’s place. They should remember that however lowly, poor, frail, and strange their parents may be, nevertheless, they are the father and the mother given to them by God... . Therefore,

- What is the one thing necessary to restore unity, love and peace?
- Consider the following Scripture passages in light of the homes of Christians, forgiveness and the restoration of peace: Psalm 133 and Eph. 4:1–6.
- In what ways do Holy Baptism, Holy Absolution and Holy Communion reestablish and strengthen Christ’s peace in your home?

we are not to consider who they are or how they may be, but the will of God, who has created and ordained parenthood. (LC I 107–108)

When the Church remembers St. Joseph, guardian of Jesus, on March 19, the day really becomes the Church’s “Father’s Day.” Once Joseph’s shock and disbelief are answered by God’s Word proclaimed by the angel, we see in Joseph true love, faith, diligence and quick action. He carries out his vocation as provider, protector and teacher of Jesus.

- What do the words and actions of Joseph have to say to today’s “blended” families, that is, stepfamilies, adoptive families and foster families? See Matt. 1:18–25; Matt. 2:13–23; and Luke 2:41–52 if your memory needs refreshing.

In Closing

Jesus shows us the Father’s heart and His great love for all of humanity through His sacrificial love upon the cross. The true family of God is baptized into the Body of Christ and is fed with His body and blood. It is the heart of the Father and the flesh and blood of the Son and the work of the Holy Spirit that make us God’s family.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 863, and then read Psalm 128.

Prayer

Almighty God, from the house of Your servant David You raised up Joseph to be the guardian of Your incarnate Son and the husband of His mother, Mary. Grant us grace to follow the example of this faithful workman in heeding Your counsel and obeying Your commands; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for St. Joseph, Guardian of Jesus).

The Angel Gabriel from Heaven Came

Lutheran Service Book 356 | study by Kim L. Scharff

Introduction

Is it even possible to imagine how Mary felt? The angel Gabriel, the same angel who came to the prophet Daniel to help him understand the vision God had given him (Dan. 8:16), was sent by God, once again, on a holy mission. Without dispute, this was among the most momentous missions ever given to an angel of God. Mary, no doubt barely a teenager, was the favored one of the Lord, the chosen vessel for delivering the eternal Son of God into this world in human flesh. Was she surprised? Was she afraid? Was she shocked? Was she all three? Whether or not we can understand how she felt at that moment, we know how she ultimately responded to this most unique call of God. “Behold,

I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38).

This hymn celebrates the Annunciation of Our Lord, the announcement of the impending conception of the Son of God in Mary’s virginal womb, by the power of the Holy Spirit; indeed, a great and profound mystery.

- While we have no reason to expect a similar visit from an angel of God, what can we learn from Mary’s response to the angel’s bidding? What is important about the fact that Mary’s finding favor with God is not described as something that Mary merited because of sinlessness or some work of holiness she had done?

Exploring the Scriptures

The Old Testament Reading for this day is Isaiah’s prophecy of the birth of a son to a virgin, a son whose name would be Immanuel. Read Is. 7:10–14.

- Why do you think Ahaz refused to ask God for a sign? What does it tell us about God that He gave Ahaz a sign even after the king had refused to ask?
- What was the sign given to Ahaz? What is the significance of the name “Immanuel” (Matt. 1:23) from the perspective of both Law and Gospel?

The Epistle Reading is from Hebrews 10. The theme of Hebrews 10 is the sacrifice of Christ, once for all. Read Heb. 10:4–10.

- Especially in keeping with the theme of Hebrews 10, what is important about what is said in verse 5: “but a body you have prepared for me”?

Compare this verse to its Old Testament source in Ps. 40:6. Notice how the writer to the Hebrews has interpreted that text. Christ is said to have an “open ear.”

- How does that help us understand His coming to do the will of God?

The Gospel Reading is Luke’s account of Gabriel being sent to Mary to tell her about what God is going to do through her for the salvation of the world. Read Luke 1:26–38.

- Is there any significance to the Gospel story that Nazareth, Mary’s home and the village where Jesus would eventually grow up, was an obscure and inconsequential place? In light of this, read and apply 1 Cor. 1:26–29 and Is. 55:8–9.
- After Gabriel told Mary everything, how did Mary respond to the message? How did her response to God’s Word compare to King Ahaz in the Old Testament reading?

Luther said that when Gabriel speaks to Mary, “Christ comes not only into her heart, but also into her womb, as she hears, grasps, and believes it. No one can say otherwise, than that the power comes through the Word. As one cannot deny the fact that she thus becomes pregnant through the Word, and no one knows how it comes about, so it is in the sacrament also. For as soon as Christ says: ‘This is my body,’ his body is present through the Word and the power of the Holy Spirit” (AE 36:341).

- What did he mean by that? How is that truth important to you?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

This carol had its origin, perhaps in the 18th century, in the Basque region of northeastern Spain and southwestern France. The English translation of the text that appears in

LSB, and numerous other hymnals, is a paraphrase done by Sabine Baring-Gould in 1922. The carol had appeared at the end of the 19th century in a Paris publication of a collection of Basque carols edited by Charles Bordes (1863–1909).

Bordes printed the original eight stanzas of the Basque text along with his own French paraphrase. Much more than this, unfortunately, cannot be said. Baring-Gould's archive, from which we might have learned more about this carol and other Basque carols, was destroyed by fire.

Text

The primary biblical source for this hymn is Luke's account of the angel Gabriel's visit to Mary. Again, read Luke 1:26–38.

- Luke does not tell us in what way or form Gabriel appeared. The language of stanza 1 assumes that the angel appeared in a visible form. What does Luke tell us that does give credence to the idea that Gabriel appeared physically to Mary?
- The concept of favor is prominent in both the Lukan text and the hymn text. What does it mean to have the favor of God? What other important biblical teachings are closely related to this “favor”?

Stanza 2 incorporates some of what is said in those words we call the Magnificat. Read Luke 1:46–55.

- How will future generations regard Mary? Lutherans have always held Mary in high esteem because of the

irreplaceable role she played in the incarnation. With the whole Church, we confess that she is the “Theotokos,” the “Mother of God” (FC Ep VIII 12). Why are we correct in seeing Mary in that way? When, however, might that honor enter a “danger zone”?

- Even with the honor rightly given to Mary, what is the most important point made in stanza 2? How does Is. 9:6–7 enlarge and clarify the meaning of Immanuel, “God with us”?
- How would you characterize Mary's response, as described in stanza 3? Does Mary see herself as great or humble? Master or servant? What is there for you to learn from Mary about being in the presence of the holy God?

Stanza 4 tells us why this event is important to Christian faith.

- The Christ was born *to Mary*. What does such a birth give to Christ? The place of the Savior's birth is identified. What is the importance of place to the story and to our faith? How shall we now respond to the promise given to Mary and then fulfilled in Christ? By extending glory to Mary, the favored one, to whom are we really extending glory?

Making the Connection

While this carol tells us the story of the angel Gabriel announcing that Mary was the one chosen by God to be the earthly vessel through which His Son would be born into this world, the real heart of the story is the Son of God Himself, our Lord, Jesus Christ.

- How does the account of the Annunciation relate to the creeds of the Church, for example: “And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God ... 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” (Nicene Creed, *LSB*, p. 191)?

- On a related note, why is it essential that we believe in the virgin birth? Believing, however, is not explaining. Believing is trusting God's Word. How was Mary a most admirable example of just such a faith? How is that same faith created and sustained in us?

In Closing

The Annunciation of Our Lord is a celebration in the Church Year that likely doesn't get a lot of attention. But shouldn't it? In our hurried and hasty world, the celebration of the Annunciation is one of those events, filled with mystery, that we should stop and savor each year because it is an essential moment in the accomplishment of our salvation.

- Sing or read together *LSB* 356.

Prayer

O Lord, as we have known the incarnation of Your Son, Jesus Christ, by the message of the angel to the virgin Mary, so by the message of His cross and Passion bring us to the glory of His resurrection; 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 Annunciation of our Lord).

O God of Light

Lutheran Service Book 836 | study by Paul Robert Sauer

Introduction

St. Mark is perhaps best remembered as the God-inspired author of the Gospel that bears his name. But the Scriptures present a picture of this same John Mark as one who also faltered at times in the face of great decision. Tradition tells us that St. Mark writes autobiographically about the young man who drops his linen cloth and flees from the Garden of Gethsemane during Jesus' darkest hour (Mark 14:51–52).

Likewise, St. Mark lets St. Paul down on one of his missionary journeys by withdrawing from him at Pamphylia. This in turn led to a parting of ways between St. Paul and St. Mark's cousin, Barnabas.

And yet John Mark, by God's grace, stops his faltering and becomes the instrument by which God records one of the four Gospels; he even reconciles with St. Paul, who begged Timothy to bring Mark to him in prison in Rome because "he is very useful to me for ministry" (2 Tim. 4:11).

- Who are saints? Are they perfect? What makes them saints?
- Does knowing about the weaknesses of "saints" diminish their prestige in your eyes, or does it make them more inspiring for what, by God's grace, they overcame?

Exploring the Scriptures

In today's Epistle, 2 Tim. 4:5–18, St. Paul provides a list of individuals who were working both with him and against him in the spread of the Gospel. Read 2 Tim. 4:14–18.

- What is Paul's reaction to Alexander, who did him great harm? Who will "repay him according to his deeds"? Is this different from the reaction he had for Mark, who had betrayed him at Pamphylia? Why?
- Who stands by Paul when all else desert him? Does he hold it against those who deserted him? Is desertion the same as opposition? Is doubt in the life of the believer the same as opposition?

The so-called "longer ending" of Mark serves as the Gospel text for today. Read Mark 16:14–20.

- How does this ending parallel the life of St. Mark? What does that tell us about the kind of people that God can use to "proclaim the gospel to the whole creation" (v. 15)?
- Who ultimately "[confirms] the message" (v. 20) of those who proclaim?

The Old Testament lesson for today speaks about the beauty and power of the messengers of God. Read Is. 52:7–10.

- What is the response of both the "watchmen" (v. 8) and the "waste places of Jerusalem" (v. 9) upon hearing the good news?
- Although it is a messenger who brings the good news and "publishes salvation" (v. 7), who does Isaiah credit with salvation?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Sarah Ellen Taylor (1883–1954) was born to a British lay preacher. At age 9, she traveled with him to the United States when he became the pastor of a Methodist Church in Rhode Island. Taylor would later become a teacher of English, Latin and history. The original title for this hymn was "The Divine Gift."

- What is the "gift" which "O God of Light" extols?
- What makes it "Divine"?

"O God of Light" was written in 1952 and submitted to a competition held by the Hymn Society of America for their collection of Ten New Hymns on the Bible, which

sought to express the spiritual significance of the Bible. Out of the 550 hymns submitted, it was one of 10 selected for inclusion.

- If you were to write a hymn extolling the spiritual significance of the Bible, what would you highlight?
- What are the most important messages of "The Divine Gift"? What is the purpose of "The Divine Gift"?

Text

This hymn begins with the praise of God, who enlightens His people with His Word.

- Why is “Word” capitalized in stanza 1? (Read John 1:14.) Is it different from the “words” (not capitalized) which are “still revealing” in stanza 3?
- What is the relationship between the “Word of God” and the “word(s) of God”?

There is a constancy to the “God of Light.” Throughout time, God is not content to allow His people to live in darkness. Read 1 Peter 1:10–12.

- What is the message of a prophet? How can you tell if a prophet is from God?
- Is the success of the prophet dependent upon himself? Read Ezek. 2:2–5.

The third stanza proclaims that the words of God are “Undimmed by time” and are “still revealing.” Read John 1:1–3.

- Do the “words of God” change through time? Does the way that God speaks to His people change? Does the content of the message change?
- What does the third stanza of “O God of Light” say is the purpose of these “words of God”?

The hymn concludes with a picture of the family of God that is gathered from “all the world,” from “ev’ry land and race” and from “myriad tongues.” Read Rev. 21:22–25.

- Where does the final gathering of the children of God from all the nations throughout the world find its fulfillment? Who is at the center of the gathering?
- Can you think of another time in the Scriptures when “myriad tongues” gathered together and yet understood each other? (See Acts 2:5–11.) Who is the source of the gathering together of these diverse peoples?

Making the Connection

Stanza 2 sings about “saints, apostles, prophets, sages” who “wrote with eager or reluctant pen.”

- What does this stanza say about the power of the message of God? Is there such a thing as a “reluctant saint”?
- How might this speak to those times when we don’t “feel” like praying or going to church?

The fourth stanza speaks of the summons of God being sent to “ev’ry land and race” with “myriad tongues.”

- How might you support the spread of the Gospel? As a church? As an individual?
- Are there “myriad tongues” in your community? How might you translate the Gospel to their life and culture? By your words? By your actions?

In Closing

The Word of God (Jesus) has spoken through the ages through the words of God (the Scriptures). God continues to speak to all nations, races and tongues by the power of His Holy Spirit, who gives people understanding as it comes to us through the Scriptures. It is a power that emboldened men like St. Mark to proclaim the Gospel. It is a power that emboldens people like you, whether you are “eager or reluctant,” to share the Gospel so that others may know the justice and grace of a God who will one day gather us all together to sing with one great anthem blending before the throne of God.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 836.

Prayer

Almighty God, You have enriched Your Church with the proclamation of the Gospel through the evangelist Mark. Grant that we may firmly believe these glad tidings and daily walk according to Your Word; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for St. Mark, Evangelist).

Christ Be My Leader

Lutheran Service Book 861 | study by Allen D. Lunneberg

Introduction

Philip and James the Less are numbered among the 12 disciples of Jesus. May 1 was chosen as the day of their commemoration because it is the anniversary of the dedication of the church in Rome originally named for them but now called the Church of the 12 Apostles. As you will see, we know quite a lot about Philip but almost nothing about this James, son of Alphaeus. The hymn “Christ Be My Leader” was chosen as the Hymn of the Day because of its reference to and meditation on today’s Gospel, where Jesus says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

With Philip and James, we remember all the apostles of the Lord as the foundation of the Church, “Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone” (Eph. 2:20). As members and representatives of Jesus ourselves, we reflect first on our faithful following of our Lord and then on our witness or testimony concerning the Savior.

- Why should we remember this apostle James when we know practically nothing about him?
- What is the most memorable story about Philip in Acts 8?
- According to the hymn, how is Jesus our cornerstone?

Exploring the Scriptures

Our hymn is based on John 14:1–14, the Gospel appointed for St. Philip and St. James, Apostles.

- When did this take place?
- How many chapters of John’s Gospel relate the entire narrative of that night?
- Thomas was confused. What was Jesus’ intended destination (v. 2)?
- Jesus says He is “the way.” The way to what?
- What does He mean by saying He is “the truth”?

- What is “the life” to which He refers?
- What was wrong with Philip’s request to “show us the Father” (v. 8)?
- According to John 1:4–5, what does it mean when the hymn says, “Darkness is daylight when Jesus is there”?
- In John 1:13–14, in what does the glory of Jesus consist?
- What else came when Jesus appeared, according to John 1:16–17?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

In *Lutheran Service Book*, we are blessed with 16 new hymn texts by Timothy Dudley-Smith (b. 1926). Only one appeared in *Lutheran Worship*, while six appeared in *Hymnal Supplement 98*. Only Martin Luther (27), Stephen P. Starke (27) and Paul Gerhardt (17) have more hymns included in our hymnal than Dudley-Smith.

- How many of his hymns are listed on page 999 of *LSB*?

The author/poet has written much about his craft of writing and producing poems and hymns. One seems never to be completely finished with a particular work. There are always many improvements possible. Interestingly, Dudley-Smith believed that once a work is *published*, one should never change it.

“Christ Be My Leader” was among his earliest hymns, written in 1961. He says the theme of the hymn is “youth” and “Christian living.”

- Have you ever written a poem or hymn?
- What is it, do you think, that qualifies a hymn to be included in a hymnal?

Text

What does it mean that Christ is your leader, your teacher and your Savior? Each stanza meditates on Jesus’ claim in today’s Gospel to be “the way” (st. 1), “the truth” (st. 2) and “the life” (st. 3). The author delves deeper into the meaning and uses alliteration as he refers to Christ as victor over three forces whose names begin with “d”:

- Jesus is “leader” in the “way” through “d.”
- Jesus is “teacher” of the “truth” in the face of all “d.”
- Jesus is “Savior” of “life” in the face of “d.”
- Read John 8:12 and 1:4–5. How many times is “darkness” mentioned in the hymn? What is that darkness?
- Read John 1:14 and 17. What is “truth”?

Making the Connection

As we commemorate St. Philip and St. James the Less, we can take great comfort from their examples of faith. With them, we learn what it means to live by faith in Jesus as our only way to the Father, our only source of truth and wisdom, and our fountain of life both for now and for eternity.

Philip wasn't afraid to ask to see the Father. In reply, we have the great teaching that Jesus Himself is the only way to "see" God the Father (John 14:8-9).

- What did the Father's voice from heaven say about Jesus at His transfiguration (Matt. 17:5)?
- What did Philip do when he was first called to follow Jesus (John 1:43-48)?
- Why did "the Greeks" come to tell Philip that they wanted to see Jesus (John 12:21-22)?
- How did Philip proceed to tell the Ethiopian eunuch about Jesus (Acts 8:26-40)?

In Closing

Today we thank God for all the apostles and especially for Philip, who helps us discover that the way, the truth and the life of God are to be discovered, seen and believed only through God's Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord; and also for James the Less, whose humble service we do well to remember and imitate.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 861.

Prayer

Almighty God, Your Son revealed Himself to Philip and James and gave them the knowledge of everlasting life. Grant us perfectly to know Your Son, Jesus Christ, to be

James, son of Alphaeus, not son of Zebedee, is mentioned only four times in the New Testament: in the lists of the apostles in Matt. 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; and Acts 1:13. He could be called the apostle of the humble or unknown Christian. Similarly, the apostle Paul emphasized the value and worth of every Christian when he wrote of the Church as a body, saying, "God has so composed the body ... that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. ... Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (1 Cor. 12:24-27).

- List various abilities, talents or "gifts" that Christians are given to serve God and one another in the body.
- What are some of your abilities or interests?

the way, the truth, and the life, and steadfastly to walk in the way that leads to eternal 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 St. Philip and St. James, Apostles).

Prayer

O God, You resist the proud and give grace to the humble. Grant us true humility after the likeness of Your only Son that we may never be arrogant and prideful and thus provoke Your wrath but in all lowliness be made partakers of the gifts of Your grace; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen (For humility, *LSB*, p. 312).

Lift High the Cross

Lutheran Service Book 837 | study by Paul J. Cain

Introduction

L God forbid that I should glory,
C save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

One of the authors of this hymn, Michael Newbolt (1874–1956), intended that “Lift High the Cross” be used as a processional hymn. The 1916 version of the text calls for the versicle and response above to be said when first entering the chancel at the beginning of Divine Service.

Exploring the Scriptures

Read John 12:27–36 and John 3:14–21.

- What is the purpose of Jesus’ death?
- What kind of death was He going to die under Jewish law (cf. Acts 7:54–60)? Under Roman law?
- What do these two texts have in common? What is the Old Testament connection here?

Read Heb. 13:10–21.

- “Sacrifices Pleasing to God” is the description of this section of Scripture in the English Standard Version. How were sacrifices done before? Why is Jesus the end to those sacrifices? How is His sacrifice acceptable to God? How are we acceptable to God?
- What sacrifice of sanctification do Christians offer in thanks to God?

Read Is. 11:1–16.

- Why is David’s father Jesse mentioned in verse 1?
- What parts of this chapter speak to Jesus’ earthly ministry? Which sections speak to Jesus’ return on the Last Day and what life will be like then?

- Does your congregation have a processional cross? If so, how is it used?
- What crosses are visible in your congregation’s sanctuary?
- What does it mean to “lift high the cross?”

- What is the importance of a signal, ensign or flag on a battlefield (cf. v. 10)? How does the cross have a similar function for Christians?
- Reconsider verses 12–16. What is the gathering mission focus in these verses?

Read Matt. 16:24–28.

- What *would* it profit a man if he gained the whole world for the price of his soul?
- Where does Jesus of Nazareth reign as King of the Jews?
- How does the dialog in Matt. 16:21–23 put Jesus’ later words here in context?
- Why was the cross offensive to Peter? Why is it offensive to the world? Why is it sometimes offensive to us?

Read Acts 11:19–30; 13:1–3, the appointed Second Reading for St. Barnabas.

- How did Barnabas lift high the cross?
- What challenges and opportunities did he and the early Christians face?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

“Lift High the Cross” in its current form in *LSB* is the work of both George W. Kitchin (1827–1912) and Michael R. Newbolt.

Kitchin wrote a four-stanza hymn (now used as the refrain and stanzas 1, 2 and 6) for use at a Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Festival in Winchester Cathedral in June 1887.

Newbolt’s revision first appeared in the 1916 *Supplement of Hymns Ancient and Modern* with an original tune. The revision turned Kitchin’s first stanza into the refrain. Several of Newbolt’s twelve stanzas survive as stanzas 3, 4 and 5 in *LSB* (they were stanzas 4, 8 and 9 respectively in Newbolt’s revision).

- Does this hymn’s text remind you of “Onward Christian Soldiers”? Why?

- Do you think the author(s) had in mind Roman Emperor Constantine's vision as recorded in *Life of Constantine* by Eusebius, *In hoc signo vinces* (In this sign you shall conquer)?

Lutheran Service Book provides Leopoldo Gros' (b. 1925) Spanish translation of a five-stanza version of the text with refrain.

- How does the inclusion of a Spanish translation return the hymn to its original 1887 purpose?
- How does the hymn anticipate on earth the song of the whole Church in heaven?

Text

Stanza 1 echoes the militarism of "Onward, Christian Soldiers" and the Church Militant. The Church is at war with the devil, the world and the sinful human flesh of Christian sinners/saints. This stanza, due to a current bias against male, royal or military imagery, is often omitted in other hymnals.

- What is lost if this stanza is omitted or reworded?
- Why is victory important in the battle against the devil, the world and our own sinful flesh?

The vision of Constantine is clearest in stanza 2. "The hosts of God" can refer to angels and archangels and all the company of heaven as well as singers here on earth.

Making the Connection

The cross is an ideal image to communicate the love of Christ, for Calvary is where the forgiveness of sins was won. This hymn is sung in the context of the Divine Service, where the forgiveness of sins is delivered in Holy Baptism, Holy Absolution, the Holy Gospel and Holy Communion through the Office of the Holy Ministry. Forgiven by Christ,

In Closing

Some congregations may have a sign that reads "You are now entering the mission field" that is visible when leaving the church parking lot. In addition to being an ideal processional hymn, "Lift High the Cross" is a natural recessional hymn, sending a congregation off to enter the mission field.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 837.

"All newborn soldiers of the Crucified" (st. 3) is rich with the language of the rebirth of Holy Baptism, including "the seal of Him who died" "on their brows."

- Who are the hosts of God?
- What is the "seal" of "All newborn soldiers of the Crucified"?

In stanza 4, Jesus draws believers to Himself as He is lifted up. Salvation is as narrow as the cross alone, but also as wide as His arms open in welcome.

Stanza 5 presents the salvific worldview of the entire Scriptures, including Isaiah, Matthew and Revelation, of God blessing Israel so that Israel would be a blessing to people of all tribes, nations and languages for the sake of their salvation. The Christian Church, the new Israel of the Lord, proclaims salvation in Christ to the Jew first and also to the Gentile, "all nations" (Matt. 28:19), "everyone whom the Lord our God calls to Himself" (Acts 2:39).

- How is the cross exclusive? How is the cross inclusive?

Stanza 6 concludes "our song of triumph" with praise to Christ alone for victory because of the cross, lifted high in thanksgiving and witness.

- How is the cross both the source of our triumph and our song of triumph?
- *LSB* recommends that the refrain be sung in unison and the stanzas in harmony. How does this musical arrangement amplify the hymn's message?

Christians return to their vocations and tell the good news about Jesus. The name of Jesus is important, because there is no other name under heaven that saves.

- Where was forgiveness won? Instead of returning there and then, where is forgiveness delivered?

Prayer

Almighty God, Your faithful servant Barnabas sought not his own renown but gave generously of his life and substance for the encouragement of the apostles and their ministry. Grant that we may follow his example in lives given to charity and the proclamation of the Gospel; through Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for St. Barnabas, Apostle).

When All the World Was Cursed

Lutheran Service Book 346 | study by Steven P. Mueller

Introduction

On a cross-country driving trip, a tourist decided to venture off the main highway to drive through the countryside for awhile. He thought he knew where he was and he was definitely enjoying the change of scene. After an hour or so, he began driving back toward where he thought the highway should be, but after driving awhile, he grew concerned. Not wanting to drive around randomly, he stopped when he saw a farmer working close to the side of the road. “Excuse me, sir. Can you give me directions to the highway?” The farmer gladly answered. “Sure. Just drive up this road for a couple miles. Make a right at the Johnson’s farm. Then take a left where their barn used to be. After that it’s just past the big field of sorghum. That will take you right to the highway.”

The driver thanked the farmer and, hoping he could figure it out, drove down the road muttering, “Johnson’s farm ... where the barn used to be. They could really use some signs around here.”

- What is the purpose of a sign?
- What “signs” pointed people to Jesus as the Messiah?

Today’s hymn focuses on one of the signs that directed people to Jesus the Messiah: John the Baptist. His work prepared others to meet their Savior when He first appeared, and his words help prepare us to see Jesus today.

Exploring the Scriptures

John the Baptist is an important figure in the Gospels, and an important figure in our Advent preparations. Read part of the story of John the Baptist in John 1:6–9, 15–17, 23–31.

- Why did God send John the Baptist? What did John say about Jesus? What do we receive from Jesus that we receive from no one else?
- How does John describe himself?

Read about the Baptism of Jesus in Matt. 3:1–17.

- What did John call the crowds to do?

- Why did John not want to baptize Jesus? Why was Jesus baptized? What happened after His Baptism? What does this signify?

John’s story does not end with this amazing Baptism. Read what happened next in John 1:29, 35–37.

- What did John call Jesus? What does this mean? What effect did this have on his disciples?

Read Luke 1:41–44.

- When did John first meet Jesus? What does this tell us about faith?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Pastor Johann Gottfried Olearius (1635–1711) wrote and published this hymn while serving at St. Mary’s Church in Halle, Germany. He wrote it specifically for the Nativity of St. John the Baptist (June 24). While this hymn summarizes themes from John the Baptist, Olearius demonstrated a pastoral concern by putting those who sing this hymn into the story. We are invited to hear the Baptist’s message and we pray that we hear John’s invitation to follow the Savior.

- How important is it that we consider how a biblical story applies to us? When we do this, do you think we are honest about what we really might have done in a similar situation?

Later in life, Pastor Olearius was called to positions of leadership in the regional church. He also served as a theology teacher. In the last years of his life, he faced challenges when he became completely blind.

- How might John the Baptist’s message have helped Pastor Olearius endure affliction? How can it help people who struggle with challenging situations today?

Text

At first glance, this hymn may seem to simply summarize the story of John the Baptist. But it really does much more than that. It places the story in its historical and theological context and reveals some of the deeper meaning of these events. It invites us into the Gospel narrative.

- What is “Moses’ condemnation” that is spoken of in stanza 1? In what sense was Moses’ message a blessing? In what sense was it a curse (see also Gal. 3:10)? How is John’s message different from Moses’ message?

Following the Gospels, this hymn tells us some details of John’s life. Read Luke 1:13–17, 39–45.

- How is John like Elijah? How is he different?
- How was John able to recognize Jesus while both were still in the womb?

Making the Connection

In the first of his Ninety-Five Theses, Martin Luther writes, “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’ [Matt. 4:17], he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance” (AE 31:25). This hymn invites us to hear John’s message and, like his disciples, respond by following Christ.

In Closing

By our Savior’s invitation, we come to His table in repentant joy to receive His body and blood. As we come, we prepare to receive our Lord by singing John’s words: “Lamb of God, You take away the sin of the world” (*LSB*, p. 163). At the table we receive the very thing that John showed his disciples — Jesus, the Lamb of God, the world’s Redeemer.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 346.

While John is often remembered for baptizing people in the Jordan River, this is not the most significant thing in his ministry. Read John 1:29–36.

- Why are John’s words about Jesus more important than his baptizing?
- Whose sins does Jesus’ work take away? Why is this a critical point for us to understand? Is there anyone not included in Jesus’ work?
- How does John model discipleship and humility in dealing with those who were following him?

- Is John’s message really something “That we receive, rejoicing” (st. 4)? What should we do when we hear John’s message?
- John the Baptist faithfully focused attention away from himself and onto Jesus. How can we do the same?

Prayer

Almighty God, through John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ, You once proclaimed salvation. Now grant that we may know this salvation and serve You in holiness and righteousness all the days of our life; through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for the Nativity of St. John the Baptist).

Lord Jesus Christ, the Church's Head

Lutheran Service Book 647 | study by John T. Pless

Introduction

This post-Reformation hymn breathes the confidence of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, that “This Church alone is called Christ’s body, which Christ renews, sanctifies, and governs by His Spirit. Paul testifies about this when he says, ‘And gave Him as head over all things to the Church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all’ (Ephesians 1:22–23)” (Ap VII and VIII 5). From her divine Head, the Body of Christ has life through the forgiveness of sins. Luther was bold to assert the fact of Christ’s headship against the false claim of the papacy: “The pope is not, according to divine law or God’s Word, the

head of all Christendom. This name belongs to One only, whose name is Jesus Christ [Colossians 1:18]” (SA IV 1).

Today’s hymn calls upon Jesus as “the Church’s head,” confessing Him to be the “foundation” and “rock,” which provide security for our life in the world.

- When we discuss the Church, why must we always begin and end with Christ?
- What do you pray for when you pray for the Church? How does this hymn guide and shape our prayers for the well-being of the Church?

Exploring the Scriptures

The key text behind this hymn is Eph. 2:19–21.

- How does Paul describe what God has worked in Christ in verses 19–20?
- What is the nature of Christ’s authority and dominion in verse 21? Also see Matt. 28:18.
- Who made Christ “head over all things to the church” (Eph. 1:22)?
- What does this passage say about the future of the Church?

Read Matt. 16:13–19. This text is the Holy Gospel appointed for St. Peter and St. Paul, Apostles. It is the account of Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi and Jesus’ promise to the Church.

- How do the disciples respond to Jesus’ question regarding the identity of the Son of Man?

- Jesus makes the question more pointed: “Who do you say that I am?” (v. 15). How does Peter answer? Hermann Sasse once said something to the effect that every true creed in Christendom is simply an expansion of Peter’s confession. How does the Apostles’ Creed unpack Peter’s confession of Jesus?
- What is “this rock” of verse 18? What does Christ promise to do with this rock? How do the words of Jesus comfort struggling believers faced with what appears to be a failing Church?

Read Eph. 4:3–6, 15–16. The letter to the Ephesians is the great epistle on the Church’s unity.

- List the “ones” in verses 4–6. How do we confess the oneness of the Church in the Nicene Creed?
- According to verses 15–16, how is the oneness of the Church expressed?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

This hymn was written by a Lutheran pastor and poet, Johann Mentzer (1658–1734). Mentzer was born in Jahmen in Silesia. After completing his theological studies at Wittenberg, he was appointed pastor at Merzdorf in 1691, where he served until being called to Hauswalde in 1693. In 1696, he was called to Kemnitz in Saxony, where he remained until his death in 1734. His life was marked by suffering and affliction. Mentzer’s contemporaries commented favorably on the consoling power of this hymn.

- This hymn embraces both praise and supplication. How is Christ praised in this hymn? What does the hymn implore Christ to do for the Church?
- What are the most consoling aspects of this hymn for Christians under persecution or stress?

Text

Confessing the Lord Jesus to be the Head of the Church and her only foundation, the hymn describes the posture of God’s faithful people as bowing in trust and waiting for salvation. This trust is well founded, for it is built on Christ’s

Word, the “rock secure” (st. 1), which will not pass away. It is a characteristic of Mentzer’s poetry that he draws together numerous biblical images.

- Which images in stanza 1 are drawn from these texts: Ps. 95:6; Gen. 49:18; Matt. 7:24–27; Matt. 16:18?
- Why will the Church endure? See 1 Tim. 3:15.

In stanza 2, the hymn writer pictures the Church as a “little flock” confessing Christ’s name, and so implores Him to continue to guard and keep His people in unity with Himself.

- How does stanza 2 reflect the promise of Jesus in Luke 12:32?
- Read John 10:1–16. How do the sheep have unity with the Shepherd?
- There is urgency in the supplication that God would preserve in purity His Word and Sacraments, for these gifts “remain our only strength and comfort.” How does false teaching destroy the strength and comfort of the means of grace?

Making the Connection

Luther characterized his evangelical theology as a “theology of the cross” in contrast to the ever-prevailing “theology of glory.” The theology of the cross finds God in the suffering of Christ, in His lowliness to be our Savior. A theology of glory attempts to discover God in human strength and achievement.

In Closing

In light of our study of this hymn, reflect on Luther’s words in his 1533 treatise on “The Private Mass and the Consecration of Priests”: “For the church confesses in the Lord’s Prayer that it sins and errs; but it is forgiven everything. ... It remains a submissive sinner before God until the day of judgment and is holy alone in Christ its Savior by grace and the forgiveness of sins” (AE 38:171).

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 647.

Stanzas 3 and 4 speak of the Christian’s life — a life hallowed by the radiance of God’s Word (see Ps. 119:105) and lived in the humility of repentance and faith under the cross and in the hope of heaven.

- How do stanzas 3 and 4 echo the Small Catechism’s explanation of the first three petitions of the Lord’s Prayer?

In his treatment of the Third Petition in the Large Catechism, Luther writes, “For where God’s Word is preached, accepted, or believed and produces fruit, there the holy cross cannot be missing [Acts 14:22]. And let no one think that he shall have peace [Matthew 10:34]. He must risk whatever he has upon earth — possessions, honor, house and estate, wife and children, body and life. Now, this hurts our flesh and the old Adam [Ephesians 4:22]. The test is to be steadfast and to suffer with patience [James 5:7–8] in whatever way we are assaulted, and to let go whatever is taken from us [1 Peter 2:20–21]” (LC III 65–66).

- How is this thought reflected in stanzas 3 and 4?

- How is this hymn a sung “theology of the cross”?
- How is its message against contemporary temptations in the Church to embrace a theology of glory?

Prayer

Now pray together the Lord’s Prayer and conclude with this collect: 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, and 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).

From East to West

Lutheran Service Book 385 | study by Larry A. Peters

Introduction

Christmas is a season of paradoxes: A virgin bears a son ... the Lord of creation finds no room in the inn ... God delivers His Son and the world sleeps ... angels announce it to shepherds ... the King born to sit on David's throne is welcomed by Magi ... the King of kings is born to be the servant of all. This Christmas hymn picks up many of these paradoxes and puts them into our mouths to sing. Though we want to reconcile these seeming contradictions so that things are nice, neat and tidy, the Church is called simply to confess them and own them by faith.

The Hymn of the Day for both the Second Sunday after Christmas and the Visitation of the blessed Virgin to Elizabeth is an old one. As we sing it, we add our voices to the myriad of those who came before us, who met the mystery of the incarnation with joyful faith.

- How do we fulfill the promise of these words today?
- Look out at the Church assembled on Christmas Eve and see there the assembly of nations at the manger. Where do we fit into the words?

Exploring the Scriptures

The Readings appointed for Christmas 2 and the Visitation are very different. Christmas 2 begins with Joseph, son of Jacob, bringing his family to Egypt for a surprise reunion (Gen. 46:1–7). The suffering of Joseph had a godly end — faith that trusts God's gracious will is vindicated (1 Peter 4:12–19). Matthew 2:13–23 records another Joseph, the carpenter of Nazareth, being warned and taking Mary and Jesus to a safe refuge in Egypt while a crazed and fearful Herod orders a murderous rampage. In contrast to this, the Visitation begins with Israel's dead stump and the shoot God sends forth in His Son (Is. 11:1–5). It moves to the call to trust the Lord and remain patient in tribulation (Rom. 12:9–16). In the Gospel, Luke records the details of blessed Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth (herself surprised to be pregnant with John the forerunner). It culminates in Mary's song, the Magnificat (Luke 1:39–56).

- What do we find in common in both pericopes?
- How did God turn Joseph's suffering into good?

- How did God protect His Son and the Gospel from His enemies?
- How does Mary's song tie the two events together?
- How did God vindicate those who trusted in Him?

Mary placed herself under God's merciful care when reason and emotion would have led her to panic and fear. We too face suffering and upset, things that defy reason or explanation, and inspire doubt and anxiety.

- Can we trust God in all things?
- Will God really work all things for our good?
- Is this what we meet in Bethlehem? Is this exactly the example of God working good from what the world would write off as something to be avoided?
- Joseph and Mary trusted in the Lord when everything else said to fear. They were moved by this trust to joy in God's promise. How do we meet life's challenges with the same holy joy in the Lord?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Little is known about Coelius Sedulius (c. 450), the author of this hymn. He probably lived in Rome. A convert to Christianity, he most probably remained a layman (though some suggest he was ordained). Though his writings were well known and popular, only two of his hymns survive. This hymn text is part of an acrostic poem of twenty-eight stanzas arranged according to the Latin alphabet. We have an eighth-century edition of the full text. The poem gave

birth to two hymns: *LSB* 399, "The Star Proclaims the King Is Here," and *LSB* 385, "From East to West."

The hymn was well known, appointed in the prayer book of priests (breviary) for Christmas. *LSB* 385 is the second version, by translator John Ellerton (1826–93). The translation is more thematic than literal.

- How does it feel singing a hymn that was sung for more than fifteen hundred years prior to your singing it today?

Text

“From lands that see the sun arise / To earth’s remotest boundaries” became “From east to west, from shore to shore” when the Latin became an English text. Like the call of the psalmist, this hymn summons the singer to awaken to God’s merciful purpose hidden in everything that happens and to respond with the joyful praise of those who trust He knows what He is doing.

- How is Christ’s birth an event for the whole world and not merely for those who believe in it?
- “The holy child whom Mary bore” (st. 1) is not the Savior of the few but the Redeemer of the whole world. How does the appearance of the Magi emphasize this from the very beginning of the Gospel’s story?
- Note the paradox of Christ the King, who is born of a lowly virgin and laid in a manger (Luke 1:35; 2:7). What does this say about our Lord? His ministry? The promise of salvation?

The heart of the Christmas message is the great mystery of the incarnation. God takes flesh, wears a diaper and nurses at Mary’s breast. This is a scandal to many, a conundrum to some and a stumbling block to others. Note the way the hymn avoids explaining and instead confesses this great mystery.

- Can one confess Christ without explaining the unexplainable mystery of the incarnation?
- How do we confess this in the creeds?

Making the Connection

This hymn confronts us with the fact that Christmas is not just for Christians. We say it in the Nicene Creed: “who for us men and for our salvation [He] came down from heaven” (*LSB*, p. 191). It is one thing to say it but another to meet it in the diverse faces of those who gather as the children of God. The cross is the means through which the many are made one and redemption is made for all people.

In Closing

So we meet the paradox. God comes in flesh through the blessed Virgin Mary. He is come for all or He comes for none. The Virgin sees this glory and calls us to stand before the manger, recognizing God in flesh and blood, rejoicing in the grace given to us there, and trusting in Him for our salvation. Here is the shepherd the Father sent to save His people, and from east to west we come.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 385.

- Notice stanza 2; instead of explaining the how, why is confessed: “His fallen creatures all to save.”
- How do we own this mystery?

God cannot be contained in temples or buildings built with hands, but He has chosen to live in our flesh and bone — born like us in every way except sin. Mary is the “chosen vessel” (st. 3) of Christ’s humanity — He takes His flesh from her.

- Compare Luke 1:47–50 with stanza 3. How are they parallel? What is Mary’s greatness (Luke 1:49)?
- Early Christian heresies tried to downplay Mary’s role. Orthodox Christianity has refuted this, insisting that Mary is *Theotokos*, God-Bearer, Mother of God. How does this confess the biblical truth? Is this for Mary’s benefit or does this protect the truth of the Son of God and His incarnation?
- What kind of honor to Mary detracts from Jesus and dishonors her own words? What kind of honor rightly honors both Mary and Jesus?

Note the unlikely visitors to the manger: shepherds. This is no accident. Christ was born to fulfill God’s promise to shepherd His people (Ezekiel 34). “He will tend His flock like a shepherd” (Is. 40:11).

- How important are shepherds to this story?
- What comfort comes from knowing Christ was born to shepherd God’s people and lead us home to Him?

- Can you get to the cross without the manger? Can you get the manger without the cross?
- Is there a Savior who is not born of the Virgin by the Holy Spirit? Is there a Savior incarnate for only the few? Does Christmas ultimately lead to Calvary?
- To call Mary blessed is to believe in Jesus her Son. In what way is Mary, who first believed in Christ, the mother of all believers?

Prayer

Almighty God, You chose the virgin Mary to be the mother of Your Son and made known through her Your gracious regard for the poor and lowly and despised. Grant that we may receive Your Word in humility and faith, and so be made one with 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 Visitation).

Now All the Vault of Heaven Resounds

Lutheran Service Book 465 | study by Paul Gregory Alms

Introduction

The basketball stadium is hushed and quiet. The home team had been down by twenty points at halftime against a vastly superior opponent. But now with one second left the game is tied. A home team favorite player is at the foul line with one foul shot left. If he makes it, there will be victory and rejoicing. If he misses, there will be dejection and sadness. He shoots and he makes it! The team goes crazy, jumping up and down, and so do the stands. All the fans start yelling and cheering and stomping so that the whole stadium vibrates and rocks with the happiness of a great victory.

It is a poor analogy, a very weak picture, but today's hymn wants us to see Easter, our Lord's magnificent resurrection from the dead, as something like the story above. "Christ has triumphed! He is living!" And heaven is filled with joy, and that joy filters down to us, the Church on earth, as we join in the singing and praise of Christ's triumph over death and sin.

- How is the story above like Easter Sunday? How is it unlike Easter Sunday?
- How does Christ's victory at Easter affect us?

Exploring the Scriptures

One of the most important and beautiful parts of the Book of Revelation is its picture of heavenly worship. Read Rev. 5:11–13.

- Who is being praised in these verses?
- What kind of Lamb is pictured in verse 12? Who is that Lamb? When was He slain?
- Who are the creatures in these verses who are giving praise to the Lamb and the one on the throne?
- Does that include us? When do we join in?

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is not simply a resuscitation. It does not simply mean He is alive again. It is an event that brings great blessings to us. Read Rom. 8:11.

- What Spirit dwells in us?
- What did that Spirit do to Jesus?
- What promise does this verse give to us?

The Scriptures testify that Christians are members of the Body of Christ. We are baptized into Christ's death and resurrection. We have been raised in our Baptism with Christ in His resurrection. This shapes our lives as Christians. Read Col. 3:1–4.

- What does this passage in verse 1 say has happened to us as Christians?
- What are "the things that are above" that we are to seek and set our minds on?
- How have we died in Christ?
- What promise does verse 4 make about our future?

Read 1 Cor. 15:51–57, especially verse 57.

- Verse 57 tells us that God gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Victory over what?
- When has Christ won that victory?
- What fact about our future fate does Paul assure us comes from the victory of Christ?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Rev. Paul Strodach (1876–1947) was a Lutheran pastor who was instrumental in putting together a Lutheran hymnal from the 1950s, *Service Book and Hymnal*. Part of his work on this hymnal included writing the text for this Easter hymn and joining it to the very familiar tune "Lasst uns erfreuen." Though he died before the hymnal was published,

this Easter hymn has gained great acceptance in the Lutheran Church and beyond.

- One of the great strengths of the Lutheran Church has always been congregational hymn singing. What are some of your favorite hymns in *LSB*?
- The Church has never stopped writing hymns. Every age produces its own great hymnic testaments to the faith.

Do your favorite hymns tend to be older hymns from the early centuries of the Church or the sixteenth century, or newer ones like this one?

Text

The center of this hymn is the stirring phrase repeated throughout the stanzas: “Christ has triumphed! He is living!” This simple double exclamation ushers the singer into the heart of Easter joy. The Scriptures proclaim Christ’s death and resurrection as a victory over sin and death and the devil. Christ had to die to pay for sin, but He also rose to defeat sin and death for us. Easter is the great conquest of Christ over our enemies.

- Read Ex. 15:1. What victory is being celebrated in that verse?
- How does that victory compare with Christ’s triumph? How are they the same and different?

Making the Connection

The connection between earthly worship and heavenly worship is a profound and important thought. This hymn invites us to repeat the songs of angels here on earth. We do this literally in some parts of the liturgy (the Gloria, the Sanctus) and in general throughout our worship when we praise Christ and His grace.

- What comfort does it bring you to know that heaven and earth are joined in the same worship?
- What moments of worship make you feel “closest to heaven”?

In Closing

The resurrection of Jesus is so much more than a winning three-point shot. It is the victory of God made flesh over every sin and over death and the devil. Christ lives and is with us every day. We sing with heaven in praise of Him in our worship. We truly have reason to sing with all creation: “Christ has triumphed! He is living!”

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 465.

A major theme of this hymn is the idea that heaven rejoices at the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The selections we looked at above from the book of Revelation are good examples of this joy. Stanza 2 goes on to invite us to join in that heavenly praise.

- What reasons does stanza 2 give us to praise Christ and His victory over death?

Easter is not only a victory and a reason for praising God, it is a present reality in the life of the believer. Christ lives and is with and in the Church and the individual Christian. Stanza 3 turns our focus to our daily lives and how Easter transforms them.

- What petitions does the hymn address to our Lord?
- How do we also “conquer” as Christ has conquered?

Sometimes we can miss the full message of the resurrection when we think of Easter as only “Jesus died and rose and went to heaven.” This hymn reminds us that Christ is living and present among us: “Now still He comes to give us life / And by His presence stills all strife.”

- How does Christ come to us now and give us gifts?
- What difference does it make when we face death to know Christ is not only living but present with us every moment?

Prayer

Almighty God the Father, through Your only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, You have overcome death and opened the gate of everlasting life to us. Grant that we, who celebrate with joy the day of our Lord’s resurrection, may be raised from the death of sin by Your life-giving Spirit; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Easter Day).

Christ, the Life of All the Living

Lutheran Service Book 420 | study by Allen D. Lunneberg

Introduction

It may seem odd that a Lenten hymn should be the Hymn of the Day near the end of July. But today we commemorate St. James the Elder, the brother of the Apostle John, a son of Zebedee. When we recall Jesus' prediction of James' destiny, however, it becomes clear why we should meditate on a hymn describing our Lord's passion and its greater meaning.

Exploring the Scriptures

The request of James and John in Mark 10:37 reveals how self-centered we can be, even the best among us. It surprises us to read this about those closest to Jesus. It did not, however, surprise Jesus. He didn't reprimand them but gently brought the conversation around to the beautiful description of His way of love and servanthood. "Even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). It is that service, that life and that ransom that is so thoroughly described in our hymn.

- In one word, what is the goal of Jesus' innocent atoning death according to the following passages?

John 1:4

John 6:33

John 10:27

John 14:6

- Read Acts 12:1–5. How was James martyred?
- What words of Jesus in Mark 10:38–39 describe James' eventual suffering and martyrdom?
- What is the hope stated in the very first line of the hymn in the face of any and all suffering and death?

- In stanza 1 of the hymn, which phrases describe our Lord's vicarious atonement, that *His* death was for *my* life?
- How does that compare with Is. 53:5? With 1 Peter 2:24?
- What details of Matt. 27:28–31 describe the "Pain and scorn" that were heaped upon Jesus?
- What detail of Christ's suffering do we learn from Matt. 26:56 and Mark 14:50? In what words is this reflected in stanza 3 of our hymn?

1 Corinthians 15:57 is the basis for our hymn's refrain. What words describe St. Paul's response to the fact that Christ's resurrection has defeated sin and death, and fulfilled the Law for us?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Written in 1659 by Ernst Christoph Homburg (1605–81), this text does more than merely report certain details of our Lord's crucifixion; it probes the deep and personal faith the author experienced being converted from a troubled secular life.

An omitted stanza of the original hymn speaks pointedly to the proud request of James and his brother in Mark 10:37. Sing or speak this entire stanza from *The Augustine Hymn Book* (402:4):

That Thou wast so meek and stainless
Doth atone for my proud mood;
And Thy death makes dying painless,
All Thy ills have wrought our good;

Yea, the shame Thou didst endure
Is my honour and my cure:
Thousand, thousand thanks shall be,
Blessèd Jesus, brought to Thee.

- What are some of the troubles of "secular life" in our day and age?
- How does the death of Christ relate to our troubles?
- In what ways does our pride lead us away from faith in Christ?
- How does dying become "painless" by faith in Christ?

Text

The first four stanzas describe the physical and verbal abuse of Jesus by His accusers and the soldiers.

Stanza 3 mentions Christ enduring “the curse of God.” In Gal. 3:13 St. Paul wrote, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us — for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’” (Deut. 21:23).

Stanza 5 addresses a person’s personal involvement and the great exchange that because of Christ’s suffering I am freed “from pain,” the false accusations of Christ mean my security, Christ’s lack of comfort means comfort for my soul.

- Read Ps. 27:12. What words in stanza 5 refer to this?

Making the Connection

Remembering that this hymn was chosen as the chief hymn for the feast of St. James the Elder, in contrast to our common, sinful selfishness or ego the main theme is in the words of Jesus, “whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:43–45). The extent of your service and the

- We still experience pain, worry and discomfort. What does stanza 5 have in mind to make its amazing claims that we are freed from this?
- Stanza 6 treats of Jesus’ crucifixion as atonement. What is “my doom” that His sacrifice prevents?

We are so used to giving thanks mainly for blessings received, for the good and pleasant gifts of God and things in life. Stanza 7, however, concludes our hymn with thanksgiving for “all that wrought my pardon.” List the seven things for which we give thanks in this stanza.

What is “that last triumphant cry” (John 19:30)? Why is it called “triumphant”?

troubles or sufferings endured in serving people who, many times, do not appreciate our service must always be with the love and the mind of Christ.

- How does the service and passion of Jesus inspire or motivate our service to others?
- How does the suffering and death of Jesus encourage us in our sufferings and troubles?

In Closing

The date of the commemoration of St. James the Elder is July 25. The hymn chosen for this commemoration is a wonderful Lenten hymn. Though it may seem odd to sing a hymn from the season of Lent in the middle of summer, we know that every day of the Christian life is characterized by repentance and faith because the struggle against sin, though it has been decisively defeated by Christ on the cross, is still a daily battle of living in the forgiveness of our sins. In the same way, in the Holy Communion, even though every Sunday is a celebration of Easter, as St. Paul said, “as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor. 11:26). For it is the Lord’s death that is our ransom, our true pride, and the cause of our “Thousand, thousand thanks” to God.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 420.

Prayers

O gracious God, Your servant and apostle James was the first among the Twelve to suffer martyrdom for the name of Jesus Christ. Pour out upon the leaders of Your Church that spirit of self-denying service that they may forsake all false and passing allurements and follow Christ alone, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for St. James the Elder, Apostle).

O God, You resist the proud and give grace to the humble. Grant us true humility after the likeness of Your only Son that we may never be arrogant and prideful and thus provoke Your wrath but in all lowliness be made partakers of the gifts of Your grace; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen (For humility, *LSB*, p. 312).

Ye Watchers and Ye Holy Ones

Lutheran Service Book 670 | study by Robert A. Sorensen

Introduction

Because of the unique role she played in the history of salvation, the Church has long afforded a special place of honor to Mary, the mother of our Lord Jesus. In order to highlight her importance in God's unfolding plan of redemption, numerous church fathers have contrasted the Virgin Mary with Eve. Writing in about AD 180, Irenaeus of Lyons did so in these words: "And just as it was through a virgin who disobeyed that man was stricken and fell and died, so too it was through the Virgin, who obeyed the word of God, that man resuscitated by life received life" (*Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* 33, Ancient Christian Writers 16:69).

While we recognize Mary's unique role in the unfolding of God's plan of salvation — the fact that she embraced and faithfully fulfilled her task of bearing and raising the Son of God — Lutherans are leery of getting carried away in her

praise. We take pains to avoid worshiping Mary (or any other saint), lest we put a creature in the place of the Creator and give to another that which is reserved for God alone. At the same time, we Lutherans have retained the observance of honoring Mary with a holiday. Accordingly, it is fitting that we clarify our doctrine and attitudes about questions such as these:

- According to the Bible, what is a "saint"? In light of what the Bible says about the saints, what should be our attitude toward the great heroes of the faith?
- Which attitudes toward the Virgin Mary seem extreme, going too far to one side or to the other? See if you can cite specific examples.

Exploring the Scriptures

The Epistle Lesson appointed for this holy day is Gal. 4:4–7. After reading this passage, carefully answer the following questions.

- How does this passage support the Small Catechism's explanation that Jesus Christ is both "true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary" (*LSB*, p. 322)?
- How do John 1:1–4 and 14–18 reinforce this understanding that Jesus is both fully divine and fully human? Where does the Nicene Creed convey the same idea?
- Why has the Church insisted upon both of Christ's natures, that is, Jesus' full divinity and complete humanity? What is at stake?

Now turn to the appointed Gospel Lesson for today, Luke 1:39–55. After reviewing this passage, discuss the following questions.

- For what reasons does Elizabeth call Mary "blessed" (vv. 42–45)? Is Mary uniquely blessed by God, or have all Christians been blessed just as she was?
- What does Mary mean when she says, "from now on all generations will call me blessed" (v. 48)?
- At numerous places Mary's song of praise (vv. 46–55) emphasizes the idea that God gives grace to the humble and lowly but opposes the proud and mighty. How should that theme shape our attitude toward Mary and the rest of the saints?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

The hymn under review today was written by one of the editors of the 1906 *English Hymnal*, namely, John Athelstan Laurie Riley (1858–1945). Thus, this text may be understood as being of a more recent vintage. But there is more to the story. As will be shown, this hymn borrows much from the traditions of both the Eastern and Western branches of the Church.

Riley's most obvious borrowing is the tune. This hymn is set to *Lasst uns erfreuen*, a melody that has been a favorite

since its appearance in Germany in the early seventeenth century. In this regard, note that three other hymns in *LSB* (465, 493, 816) share this musical setting.

More pertinent to this present discussion, however, are the words and structure of this hymn's text. In this regard, Riley's expertise in ancient Greek and Latin as well as his role as translator of ancient hymns for the aforementioned Anglican hymnal are important.

In simple terms, this hymn is structured as follows. The first stanza is addressed to the various orders of angels,

urging them to praise the Lord. Here, Riley is indebted to the nine ranks of angels systematized by the *Celestial Hierarchy* of the Greek father Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite (c. 500).

The second stanza is a paraphrase of a Greek Orthodox hymn known as the *Theotokion*, the “Hymn to the Mother of God.” This chant is also part of the Greek Orthodox tradition and dates from no later than the fifth century.

Stanza 3 shows a less direct borrowing. It calls upon the souls in heaven — those of the faithful departed, prophets, patriarchs, martyrs and so forth — to join in the eternal triumphant song.

Finally, the last stanza wraps things up by inviting the saints on earth, also known as the Church Militant, to join in the heavenly praise.

- Are you familiar with the doctrine that our earthly worship actually unites with the worship of the angels and saints in heaven?
- How can that understanding inform people’s appreciation of their Sunday worship? How might it shape one’s sense of reverence and awe?

Text

As was mentioned above, this hymn’s first stanza addresses the various angelic orders in heaven, exhorting them to give praise to God.

- Which names of the various angelic orders are familiar to you? What terms are new to you?

Making the Connection

Though this hymn certainly sets into high relief the unique role played by Mary, it does not offer her praise or adoration. Instead, it depicts her as one of many saints who worship God before the throne in heaven. She is afforded unmistakable prominence, but only because of what God has done for and through her. Hers was the singular honor of bearing the eternal Word made flesh, the God-man Jesus Christ.

In Closing

When we praise another Christian rightly, we are in fact praising God — the Father who created him, the Son who has freely given His redeeming grace to him and the Spirit who dwells within. Understood this way, we can remember and offer thanks for so many things that God has accomplished through His people.

- Read together “Mary’s Hymn of Praise” (Luke 1:46–55).
- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 670.

- What does the Bible say about the different angels, especially with regard to their divinely appointed tasks? In this, see Gen. 3:24; Ps. 91:10–12; Is. 6:1–3; Matt. 18:10; Heb. 1:14.

In this hymn’s second stanza, Mary is singled out. She is addressed as the “bearer of the eternal Word.”

- To which Bible passage (previously read in this lesson) does this hymn refer when it speaks of Mary as bearer of “the Word”?
- In this connection, see also Luke 1:31–33.

Stanza 3 makes reference to others who are now part of the heavenly court. These are the souls of those who departed in the faith, as well as the patriarchs, the prophets, the Twelve, the martyrs and the saints triumphant.

- How many of these characters appear in the vision described in Rev. 7:9–15? How about the scene depicted in Rev. 5:8–9?
- How about Luke 13:22–30?

The concluding stanza turns its address to the earthly realm, calling us also to join in the heavenly chorus.

- Can you think of any parts of our liturgy or hymns that do this very thing, inviting us to sing the very words that are being sung in heaven?

Having now considered the holiday established for St. Mary, as well as that feast’s Hymn of the Day, answer these questions.

- Do we Lutherans make too big a deal of the different saints’ days, or not enough?
- What kind of balance needs to be struck and maintained in the observance of St. Mary’s day, especially for evangelical-Lutheran Christians?

Prayer

Almighty God, You chose the virgin Mary to be the mother of Your only Son. Grant that we, who are redeemed by His blood, may share with her in the glory of Your eternal kingdom; 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 St. Mary, Mother of Our Lord).

God Has Spoken by His Prophets

Lutheran Service Book 583 | study by Aaron A. Koch

Introduction

You'll sometimes hear people say that God spoke to them or told them what to do in a particular situation. Or preachers will say that God gave them a particular message to share.

But we must be careful and “test the spirits” here as Scripture reminds us (1 John 4:1). The Smalcald Articles, one of our Lutheran Confessions, say this: “Therefore, we must constantly maintain this point: God does not want to deal with us in any other way than through the spoken Word and the Sacraments. Whatever is praised as from the

Spirit — without the Word and Sacraments — is the devil himself” (SA III VIII 10).

God always comes to us and speaks to us through His external, outward Word, given in the Holy Scriptures of the apostles and prophets.

- How can we test if a message is from God, or if it's from the devil or the sinful heart of man?
- Where should we be looking for God to speak to us?

Exploring the Scriptures

Read Heb. 1:1–2.

“Long ago” refers to the time of the Old Testament; and the “fathers” are our ancient fathers in the faith, such as Abraham, Moses and Elijah.

- What are some of the “many ways” in which God spoke to our fathers? (See Gen. 15:1; Ex. 3:1–6; 1 Kings 19:11–13.)
- How were all of these ways that the Lord came to the fathers/prophets tangible and external?
- Were there also false prophets in the Old Testament? On the basis of Jer. 23:16–17, 21–22, 25–26, discuss some of the characteristics of these false preachers.
- With what title is Jesus referred to in John 1:1–3, 14? How is Jesus the embodiment of all of the Scriptures?
- With what actions in Christ's life has God “spoken” of His love toward us?
- In what way is Jesus the “final Word” of God, beyond which we shouldn't be looking for any more special messages or revelation from Him?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

In preparation for the publication of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible (a predecessor to the current English Standard Version commonly used in churches of the LCMS), the Hymn Society of North America asked for hymns to be submitted to celebrate this event. “God Has Spoken by His Prophets,” written by George Wallace Briggs (1875–1959), was one of the submitted hymns chosen and later published in a collection titled “Ten New Hymns on the Bible” (1952).

- Why is it natural that the Word of God should inspire music and be the subject of our hymns?
- How does God's Word provide the very content of what we are given to sing? (See Ps. 51:15; Psalm 136.)
- Are there any times in the year when your congregation has a special focus on the gift of God's Word in Divine Service?

Text

Note how the three stanzas of this hymn correspond to the three persons of the Holy Trinity. All three persons are present and involved in the work of God's revelation throughout every age of history. Even in Old Testament times, we confess in the Nicene Creed that it was the Holy Spirit who “spoke by the prophets.” And God the Father continues to speak “His Word unchanging” (st. 3) down to this very day.

Read 1 Sam. 15:29.

- Why is the Word that God has spoken by His prophets unchanging?
- Since “God is king,” “eternal,” “the first, and ... the last” (st. 1), does that make it easier to trust in His Word? Why? (See also Rev. 22:6.)

Read Heb. 1:3.

- What phrase does stanza 2 borrow directly from this verse? What does it mean?
- What other words or phrases are used in stanza 2 (including some borrowed from the Creed) that emphasize Jesus is equally God with the Father?
- How does Jesus reveal our God to us (st. 2)? (See John 12:44–45.)

Read John 6:63; 2 Tim. 3:16.

- According to these verses, where is the Holy Spirit located for us? (Remember that the words for “breath” and “spirit” in the Bible are the same.)
- How then is God “Speaking to our hearts again” (st. 3) in this day and age?
- How does God’s Word breathe new life into us in the way that God first breathed life into Adam in the beginning?

Making the Connection

Stanza 1 refers to the eternal God and His Word as a “firm anchor” in the midst of “the world’s despair and turmoil.”

- How does God’s Word give you hope and certainty in the midst of the changes in your life?

Stanza 3 reminds us that God is still speaking by His Spirit, “In the ageless Word declaring His own message, now as then.”

In Closing

Our God is not silent. The psalmist’s prayer is heard: “if you be silent to me, I become like those who go down to the pit” (Ps. 28:1). Our Lord speaks to us, but not through the inner voice of our heart and spirit. He spoke to His people of old through the prophets whom He sent. And He still speaks to us through the external voice of His Spirit-filled Word, guiding us by His preached Law and Gospel. Since Jesus is the embodiment of the Word and the fulfillment of all the Scriptures, all true messages from God will be centered on Christ and what He has done — how He has redeemed us by His holy cross. As St. Paul said in 1 Cor. 2:2, “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” May God grant us always to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus the Savior and to be guarded against anything that would lead us away from Him who is the Word made flesh!

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 583.

- You certainly hear God’s voice in your own individual reading of Scripture. But what place especially has He given for you to hear Him speak to you, audibly and out loud? (For help, see Rom. 10:14–17.)

Prayers

Almighty God, Your Son, Jesus Christ, chose Bartholomew to be an apostle to preach the blessed Gospel. Grant that Your Church may love what he believed and preach what he taught; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for St. Bartholomew).

Blessed Lord, You have caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning. Grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that, by patience and comfort of Your holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen (Grace to receive the Word, *LSB*, p. 308).

If Thou But Trust in God to Guide Thee

Lutheran Service Book 750 | study by John G. Fleischmann

Introduction

There are some who believe that once a person becomes a Christian, all problems disappear.

Holy Scripture paints a much different picture. Often, it records that those called by God endured tremendous suffering.

Through their trials the patriarchs, prophets, apostles and others clung to the promises of God, knowing that He would deliver them eternally.

As we cling to God's promises in Christ, we too receive strength, protection and comfort. Jesus sanctified our suffering by entering into it when He took on our flesh. Now He uses it to draw us closer to Himself.

- What is the cause of all suffering?
- What is the worst kind of suffering that one can endure?
- What are some of the struggles you face today?

This hymn, sung on the observance of the Martyrdom of St. John the Baptist as well as at Christian funerals and other times, lifts our eyes from our suffering to the promises and assurances that we receive from God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Exploring the Scriptures

This hymn is based on passages of tremendous hope in the Bible. Read Ps. 55:22; Prov. 3:5–6 and Is. 41:10.

- What is their common theme?
- What is the source of this hope?

Read Rom. 6:1–5, the Epistle for the Martyrdom of St. John the Baptist.

- What two things does Baptism do? See verses 3 and 5.
- What other assurances does Baptism give? See the Small Catechism, *LSB*, page 325.
- How does this help you when faced with life's issues?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

The writer of this hymn, Georg Neumark (1621–81), had gone through an extremely difficult time in his life. Not only was the bloody Thirty Years' War in progress (1618–48), but he had personally lost everything.

Nomadically walking the country with an uncertain and bleak future, he was rescued when the Lord brought Pastor Nicholas Becker into his life.

Pastor Becker, who learned of his desperation, was able to arrange for Neumark to become a tutor for a local magistrate's family in Kiel. This provided Neumark with stability and gainful employment.

It was at this time that Neumark composed this hymn.

- Can you think of a time in your life when you were desperate?
- How did the Lord bring healing to you?
- What was your response to Him when you were delivered?

Text

This hymn is truly a hymn of great hope and encouragement.

The first stanza addresses the singer with a pastoral voice, encouraging him to place his hope in the Lord and His will. "He'll give thee strength, whate'er betide thee, / And bear thee through the evil days."

- What comfort do you receive from this reminder of God's "No Matter What" promise?

Stanza 2 speaks of the enormity and futility of earthly suffering. Our "never-ceasing moans and sighs" are evidence of the grave struggle that we endure, birthed by sin. Near its end, the stanza speaks of our "cross and trials." In Christian theology, a "cross" is different from generalized suffering caused by sin.

- Read Matt. 14:1–12. Why did John the Baptist suffer?
- Read Rev. 6:9–11, the First Lesson for the Martyrdom of St. John the Baptist. Who was seen "under the altar"?

- Can you think of other biblical accounts in which God's children suffered because their faith in God conflicted with the world?

Stanza 3 encourages us to be "patient," for "our inmost wants are known / To Him who chose us for His own."

- What does Gal. 5:22 tell us about patience?
- When were you chosen as God's own?

Stanza 4 shows that the Lord brings gladness and allows for sadness in our lives.

- What do you think Neumark meant when he penned, "He comes to thee all unaware / And makes thee own His loving care"?

Stanza 5 shows us that our suffering can be great, using the words "fiery trial" to describe it. Read 1 Peter 4:12–16.

- What does Peter have to say about these "fiery trials"?
- What hope does Peter give?

Ponder the words of stanza 6. Then read Mary's words as she sings the Magnificat in the presence of Elizabeth (Luke 1:46–55).

- What theme do you see in both?
- What deep hope does Neumark share in the last two lines?

The final stanza ends with a succinct summation of the entire hymn.

- What are the ways that Neumark lists to face the trials of life?

Making the Connection

The Church has cherished this hymn over many centuries. It has comforted countless Christians as they wept beside the graves of loved ones, or faced the enormity of life's issues. It still clearly speaks the hope that we have in God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The same hope given in this hymn can be found in the Confession and Absolution of the Divine Service (*LSB*,

p. 184). There, we exchange the words, "Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth" (Ps. 124:8).

- What does this tell us about the power of God in our lives over any issue that we face?
- Where is God's power over all suffering most clearly shown?

In Closing

The journey of life is filled with joys and sorrows. Sometimes the suffering can steal our joy, causing us to withdraw, or even tempt us to turn away from the Lord.

This hymn is a wonderful sermon assuring us that when we suffer, God is present. It reminds us that our difficulties are quite temporary when compared to the eternal joy that awaits those baptized into Christ's death and resurrection. It is this hope and comfort, given us by the Holy Spirit, that empowers us to "Sing, pray, and keep His ways unswerving" no matter what life throws at us. For "God never yet forsook in need / The soul that trusted Him indeed."

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 750.

Prayer

Almighty and most merciful God, in this earthly life we endure sufferings and death before we enter into eternal glory. Grant us grace at all times to subject ourselves to Your holy will and to continue steadfast in the true faith to the end of our lives that we may know the peace and joy of the blessed hope of the resurrection of the dead and of the glory of the world to come; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen (In times of affliction and distress, *LSB*, p. 317).

Sing, My Tongue, the Glorious Battle

Lutheran Service Book 454 | study by Paul Gregory Alms

Introduction

By all outward appearances, the cross of Jesus is not triumphant, beautiful or glorious. The cross looks like defeat, weakness and great suffering and death. No one who judged by common sense would say the spectacle of Jesus dying on the cross was anything but horrible. Yet the Scriptures and the Christian faith point to the cross as the greatest, most wonderful moment not only of Christ's life but also of ours. It is the supreme moment of Christ's power, and the pinnacle and foundation of our life and hope. It is a moment of great victory and salvation.

That contrast and paradox is at the center of this hymn. The awful cross is in reality a "trophy," a triumph, a tree of life.

- What words occur to you as you meditate on the cross?
- How many are positive (focused on salvation and forgiveness) and how many are focused on the sufferings of Christ?
- How are these groups of impressions and words related to each other?

Exploring the Scriptures

The core scriptural idea of this hymn is expressed in the final phrase of the first stanza: "Tell how Christ, the world's redeemer, / As a victim won the day." The message of salvation is not just that Christ saved us from sin; it is that He saved us "as a victim." Christ saved us from sin and death by suffering, by being beaten, by dying, by lying lifeless in the tomb. Christ won a great victory by becoming, for our sakes, a lifeless, dead human being, by suffering and being weak. That contrast and mystery is at the heart of the Gospel.

Read Is. 53:5. This passage mentions both what will happen to Christ and to Christians.

- What will happen to Christ according to this passage?
- What will happen to Christians?
- How are the two related?

Read John 17:1. In John's Gospel, Jesus' "time" or "hour" usually means His crucifixion and burial and resurrection.

- Here Jesus asks His Father to glorify Him, since His hour has come. When does the Father glorify Jesus?
- Is His death on the cross a moment of shame or glory for Jesus?

Read Gal. 6:14.

- What does Paul say is the only thing he will boast about in this life?
- Why is this true for Paul and for all of us?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

The author of this hymn is known as Venantius Honorius Fortunatus (c. 530–609). He was a prodigious writer of verse, much of which has been lost over the centuries. Two hymns survived, this one and "The Royal Banners Forward Go," both of which have to do with the crucifixion. This hymn became very well-known and has been widely used within the Church.

Both hymns were inspired by the appearance of a supposed relic of the cross in the monastery where Fortunatus lived. This shard of wood was regarded as a real piece of the cross on which Jesus was crucified. Fortunatus was commissioned to write a hymn in honor of this relic. "Sing, My Tongue" is that hymn. While we rightly reject the idea

that such relics were genuine and, more importantly, reject the idea that such relics ought to be honored, the version of Fortunatus' hymn, which we sing in *LSB* 454, points to the saving work of Christ that He accomplished on the cross.

- Why do you think relics were so popular through the ages?
- What real, tangible evidences of Christ and His love for us does the Bible really point us to?

Text

This hymn is first and foremost an invitation to sing and praise God. Read Ps. 98:1–2.

- What is the reason in this psalm for praising God?

- How is this similar or related to our hymn?

Stanza 1 concludes that Christ “As a victim won the day.” This little phrase brings us right into the heart of redemption and atonement. It is Christ’s cross that is our victory and salvation, and yet the cross is apparent weakness and suffering and defeat.

- Which enemies of ours did Christ defeat on the cross?
- How did His dying “as a victim” defeat them?

While the hymn is appointed for Good Friday and Holy Cross Day and focuses on the crucifixion, it encompasses the whole scope of Christ’s redemptive work.

Making the Connection

This hymn presents to us Christ’s suffering and cross as a victory and a triumph. Scripture also reminds us that we are baptized into Christ. Our lives are connected to His. The fact that Christ’s suffering is a victory over sin and death allows us to see our own suffering in faith. Christ suffers with us and weeps with us and, since we are connected to Him, leads us through our suffering to eternity and life.

- How does this hymn help us to see our suffering as part of our Christian life?

This hymn also gives a glimpse of Christ’s “passive obedience.” He obeyed and fulfilled the Law though He had no need to do so, since He is the Giver of the Law.

In Closing

The cross of Jesus is a triumphant sign, though it is a disgraceful one to the world. A dying man’s blood, suffering and death seem like foolishness or worse to those without faith. To us it is glorious, a sign of conquest, a noble and beautiful tree. The more we consider the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, the more we keep in mind His great love for us in giving Himself into death, the more the Spirit will lead us to sing of the glorious battle and to tell how Christ, the world’s redeemer, won the day.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 454.

- According to stanza 2, what else did Christ do to redeem us?
- Read Gal. 4:4–5. How does this passage help us understand Christ’s life of obedience?
- For whose sake was He being obedient?

Stanza 4 draws a comparison between the tree of life in the Garden of Eden and the cross.

- Read Rev. 22:2. How is this tree of life similar to the cross? See Is. 53:5.
- Read Gen. 3:22. There God mentions that eating of the tree of life brings eternal life. How do we “eat” the cross, our tree of life, for eternal life?

- For whose sake did Christ obey the Law?
- Who gets the “credit” for His obedience?

Stanza 3 emphasizes the willingness of Christ to die on the cross for our sakes and for our forgiveness.

- What does such willingness indicate about Christ’s attitude toward us?

Such an attitude calls forth from us just the type of praise and singing this hymn invites us to offer to God.

Prayer

Almighty God, graciously behold this Your family for whom our Lord Jesus Christ was willing to be betrayed and delivered into the hands of sinful men to suffer death upon the cross; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Good Friday).

The Royal Banners Forward Go

Lutheran Service Book 455 | study by Paul Gregory Alms

Introduction

Every king or president or ruler has symbols of power that surround him. A king has a scepter and a crown. A president has the presidential seal and Air Force One. Ancient generals often had banners that were lifted up before their armies to march before them. Such things are used to proclaim that the ruler or king is powerful and important.

Jesus Christ's "banner" is His cross. It is the sign and the place of His great victory. Churches have for many, many centuries lifted up crucifixes and crosses in worship as reminders of Christ's power and might. But this banner of

Christ is a strange one. For on that wood He suffered and bled and died. His grisly death does not seem like a victory but an awful tragedy. But in such things as suffering and blood and death is the triumph of our Savior. With such things He wins the battle for us.

- How is the cross a sign of victory?
- Where and how does your church use crosses or crucifixes or banners with the cross? What messages do they (and how your church uses them) convey?

Exploring the Scriptures

The Readings for Holy Cross Day form an excellent scriptural basis for this hymn. Numbers 21:4–9 tells the story of Moses lifting up the bronze serpent in the wilderness to save the people of Israel from God's wrath.

- What do the people say to Moses in verse 7, and how is this similar to the way we approach God in the Divine Service?
- What does God tell Moses to "lift up" for the people? What does God "lift up" for us today? Where do we see and receive this?

In the Epistle for today, 1 Cor. 1:18–25, Paul says many regard the cross as folly and weakness.

- Do people today still have this attitude? What about Jesus on the cross appears foolish?
- Paul writes that in truth the word of the cross is the power and wisdom of God. How is the proclamation of Christ's death powerful?

In the Gospel Reading, John 12:20–33, Jesus says, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (v. 32).

- How does the crucifixion and death of Jesus draw us to Him?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Venantius Honorius Fortunatus (c. 530–609) is the author of this hymn. He wrote many hymns, most of which were written for use in the church year. One volume of verse was entitled *Hymns for All the Festivals of the Church Year*, but it, like almost all of his work, has been lost. This hymn is among the few that have survived.

This hymn was written as a procession hymn for a specific occasion. A supposed relic of the cross of Jesus was being brought into the monastery where Fortunatus lived. This piece of wood was highly regarded and greeted with pomp and ceremony at the church where it would be displayed. Fortunatus wrote this hymn to be sung as the relic was first brought into the sanctuary. Of course we reject the value of relics, or the idea that they are genuine. The hymn itself

does not mention relics but rather praises the atoning work Christ did on the cross for us.

- What is the difference between worshiping relics and using crosses and crucifixes and banners and art in our churches?
- If we are looking for tangible signs of Christ's love for us, where should we look? Has God given such signs?

Text

The first stanza of this hymn includes a challenging theological statement. Fortunatus points to the mystery that the one who made our flesh (the Son of God) now pays the ransom of sin in that very flesh He has made. God has taken on the flesh He made in order to free that flesh (us!) from our own sin.

- Consider how this stanza emphasizes God's working all things in our salvation: creation, incarnation and atonement.

Read John 19:34.

- What does this Scripture tell us flowed from Jesus' side?
- The hymn calls the "torrent rushing from His side" (st. 2) a "precious flood" that washes us. How are we washed in the cross of Jesus?
- How do Baptism and the Lord's Supper connect to this image of blood and water flowing from the crucifixion of Christ?

Making the Connection

This hymn text pushes us boldly to meditate on the cross of Christ, on His suffering and death. But it does that with us in the picture. Read the hymn text slowly and consider how each part of the picture of Christ's redemptive suffering includes us and our sin and the salvation Christ brings.

- How can you find yourself and Christ's work for you in these individual words:

ransom (st. 1)

flood (st. 2)

price (st. 4)

shame (st. 5)

restore (st. 6)

In Closing

Christ is our King and Lord. But unlike other earthly rulers, the banners and symbols of His power are upside down. His banner is His holy cross, where He conquered in the fight against our sin not with worldly displays of power but by suffering and dying. The true cross is shown forth in our midst by preaching and Baptism and the Lord's Supper. There Christ has promised to give the victory over sin that His cross has won.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 455.

Stanza 3 says that Jesus reigns "in triumph from the tree."

- Why is Christ's place of death considered the place where He rules and triumphs?
- How does Gal. 3:13 fit in here?

The hymn speaks of the cross as a "tree of beauty" (st. 5) that bore "holy limbs." Further in that same stanza, the hymn proclaims that the shame once associated with the tree is now gone.

- What shame might be attached to a tree in the biblical narrative? See Gen. 3:1–7.

We often encounter difficulties, burdens and afflictions. How can this hymn's proclamation that Christ reigns and triumphs especially on the cross in His agony be a comfort to us?

- Are there words or images in this hymn that especially speak the comfort of the crucified Christ to you?

Prayer

Merciful God, Your Son, Jesus Christ, was lifted high upon the cross that He might bear the sins of the world and draw all people to Himself. Grant that we who glory in His death for our redemption may faithfully heed His call to bear the cross and follow Him, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Holy Cross Day).

What Is the World to Me

Lutheran Service Book 730 | study by J. H. Sorenson

Introduction

A very wealthy man thought he had made a shrewd arrangement to “take it with him” by making a huge contribution to “the Building Fund.” He arrived at heaven’s gate lugging a large trunk. The gatekeeper said, “Sorry, you can’t take that in here,” but the man insisted he had permission. The gatekeeper said, “We’ll see. Show me what’s in the trunk.” He opened the trunk, and it was full of gold bars, a huge fortune. The gatekeeper said, “You brought paving?”

This modern parable illustrates something about the values of heaven and those of earth.

- What do you think is the main point of the story?
- Is anything like that story remotely possible?

This hymn emphasizes and underlines a teaching that few people ever really learn.

- What evidence is there that St. Matthew learned it (Matt. 9:9–13)?
- How did following Jesus change him?

Exploring the Scriptures

In Luke 16:1–13, Jesus told the parable of the dishonest manager to teach the importance of eternal values. In discussing the matter, He told His disciples and us, “No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money” (v. 13).

- What does the word “money” include?
- What are some of the “masters” we are susceptible to?

In 1 John 2:15–17, the apostle urges us not to love the world or the things of the world that appeal to our senses. In Phil. 3:7–9, Paul strongly and passionately says that he counts everything as rubbish compared to knowing Jesus Christ by faith.

- Do these two passages give a different message?
- Why is loving the “things of this world” not compatible with loving eternal things?
- What is the “tipping point” between love for God and love of money?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

The origin of this fine eighteenth-century hymn is a little bit cloudy. Most students of the matter agree that the author was Georg Michael Pfefferkorn (1645–1732), a teacher and pastor in Germany. However, the hymn first appeared anonymously, and lately it has been attributed to Balthasar Kindermann (d. 1706). It was translated into English by August Crull, who was born in Germany in 1845. He emigrated to the United States at an early age, and graduated from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, in 1862. He served as pastor and teacher in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Grand Rapids, Michigan, and died in 1923.

Text

Pastor Crull used his gift as a poet in translating the key phrase of the hymn as “What is the world to me!” Its literal meaning in German is “What do I ask of the world?”

- Does the translation change the meaning of the phrase?
- What is the answer to the question, either way?

Stanza 1 of the hymn makes a bold statement of the changed value system of the Christian life, contrasting the world and its “vaunted pleasures” against the peace and rest of having Jesus as treasure and soul’s delight.

- What are some of the “vaunted pleasures” of this world?

Stanza 2 considers the praise and honor of the “mighty” of this world, but finds them “frail and flighty” compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus.

- How are the “mighty” of this world “frail and flighty?”

In Stanza 3 the wealth of this world in money is contrasted to the wealth of knowing Jesus.

- How much money is enough?

The fourth stanza brings the main message of the hymn together in a striking way with a list of important things that Jesus means to the believer — wealth, treasure, life, health, friendship, love, pleasure, joy and eternal bliss.

- Can you think of a few more things to add to the list?

Making the Connection

Hard times often make people reevaluate their list of what is important in life.

■ Have you had that kind of experience lately? Or ever?

Jesus said, “For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God” (Luke 18:25).

■ Is it easier for a poor person to believe?

■ How poor do you have to be?

“What Is the World to Me” is a hymn not only for the eighteenth century, but for the twenty-first century as well. It seems designed to make us think about what is important eternally, and who we have in first place in our lives.

In Closing

Another parable that teaches a point similar to the story about the rich man who thought he had a way to “take it with him” is Jesus’ parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:16–21). A man is so wealthy he has no place to store all his goods. He decides to tear down his barns and build bigger ones, thinking that then he will be at ease. “But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God” (Luke 12:20–21).

■ Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 730.

In the lifetimes of most of us, we have seen unprecedented prosperity. Our nation, as a whole, is part of the wealthiest people the world has ever seen. Yet we have recently been hearing of the overwhelming greed of some of our fellow citizens — not only greed for money and possessions, but for power, for pleasure and whatever else the world may give.

■ What are some of the signs of this trend?

Christians are not immune to these social trends, but by our Savior’s grace we are called to ask the question, “What is the world to me?”

■ How does this trend toward the values of this world show itself in the church?

■ What can Christians do to work against this trend?

Prayer

Almighty God, heavenly Father, You have called us to be Your children and heirs of Your gracious promises in Christ Jesus. Grant us Your Holy Spirit that we may forsake all covetous desires and the inordinate love of riches. Deliver us from the pursuit of passing things that we may seek the kingdom of Your Son and trust in His righteousness and so find blessedness and peace; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen (Against the love of money, *LSB*, p. 311).

Lord God, to Thee We Give All Praise

Lutheran Service Book 522 | study by Thomas E. Lock

Introduction

For this feast of the church year Martin Luther preached:

Now, you have often heard that the devil is around people everywhere, in palaces, in houses, in the field, on the streets, in the water, in the forest, in fire; devils are everywhere. All they ever do is seek man's destruction... . Against such a malicious, spiteful, cunning enemy, who is continually hounding us, God has appointed the beloved angels, to keep watch so that where the devil suddenly comes and strikes with pestilence, with fire, with hail, and the like, an angel is there to counter it. (Eugene F.

A. Klug, ed., *Sermons of Martin Luther* [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000], 7:375–76)

- The devil and his demons are angels who sinned against God (2 Peter 2:4). With what power or might can people defend themselves against the evil spirits? What hope is there for Christians?
- Are there events that have happened which reveal the destructive power of the devil and his crew? How have angels guarded people from such evil?

Exploring the Scriptures

Who, or what, are angels? It is a common fallacy that angels are Christians who have died and been taken to heaven. As we will see, they are spirit beings who are in heaven alongside God and His saints.

- Read Matt. 18:10, a portion of the Holy Gospel for this day. Who protects Christians? Where are they? Whose face do they see?
- Read the Epistle for this day, Rev. 12:7–12. What took place? Who was the leader of the angels? In Job 1:6–12 we see that Satan had access to heaven even after his fall

into sin. But at Christ's death and resurrection, what took place according to Rev. 12:9? Where do Satan and his demons now reside? Why should heaven rejoice and earth fear at his descent?

- Read Rev. 7:9–14. Besides the angels, who are present around the heavenly throne?
- Who will judge the angels? The answer is given in 1 Cor. 6:2–3. How then is it possible for saints to become angels? Doesn't the fallacy of saints becoming angels actually diminish the standing of saints?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Philipp Melancthon (1497–1560) was Luther's right-hand man during the Reformation. Born as Philipp Schwartzerd in 1497, he was given the name Melancthon (which is Greek for "black earth," the meaning of *Schwartzerd* in German) by one of his teachers, Johann Reuchlin.

Melancthon was highly intellectual, even in his youth, having earned his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1511 and his Master of Arts degree in 1514, when he was sixteen years old. In 1518 he accepted a call to teach Greek and literature at Wittenberg University. At Wittenberg he trained generations of men how to be theologians through his compilation of texts under subject headings known as *Loci communes theologici*. Melancthon also gave the Church three of the Lutheran Confessions, later contained in the Book of Concord, namely, the Augsburg Confession (1530), the Apology of the Augsburg Confession (1531) and the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope (1537).

Melancthon published this hymn in Latin in 1543. Since it was in Latin, the hymn was to be used at the university and by the educated. In 1554 Melancthon's friend and colleague, Paul Eber, made a German translation from this Latin text so that it could be sung by the uneducated as well. Finally, this hymn came to us in an English translation by Lutheran pastor Emanuel Cronenwett, published in 1880.

- Why was it important for the Latin version to be translated into German and, eventually, into English?

Text

Stanza 1 of our hymn for today is a general thanksgiving to God for the angels, based on Ps. 103:20–22 and Matt. 18:10. The remainder of the hymn explores why Christians thank God for these angels.

Stanzas 2 and 3 speak of the nature of these angels of God.

- When Jesus spoke of the angels in Matthew 18, He was speaking from His own knowledge as God, and as He revealed in Ps. 34:7. Read Ps. 34:7. How is that verse like the lines in stanza 3, “Their whole delight is but to be / With Thee, Lord Jesus, and to keep / Thy little flock, Thy lambs and sheep”?

Stanzas 4–6 sing of the one against whom the angels need to defend the saints.

- Read Eph. 6:10–12. How are the evil angels portrayed in verse 12?

- Read 1 Peter 5:8–9. How is the devil described? What does he seek?
- Read stanza 5 of our hymn. Against whom is the deceiver of old fighting?
- Read Rev. 20:1–2. Who is the dragon being bound? Who does the binding?

Stanzas 7 and 8 conclude Melancthon’s hymn.

- Read the final two stanzas of the hymn. Who defeats our foe? What are Christians to do in return for this blessing?

Making the Connection

Luther included Morning and Evening Prayers in his Small Catechism. Both of these prayers include the sentence, “Let Your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me” (*LSB*, p. 327).

- Whom does God appoint to guard you from dangers of body and soul? Have you ever had a time when you might have been injured or even died, but you escaped all harm? Explain what happened.

Luther preached:

[God] does at times permit us to experience such [evil and harmful attacks], that we might learn, if God were

not there [with his angels] all the time preventing their occurrence, they would happen continuously; and for this reason we ought to pray all the more diligently and thank God for such protection. (*Sermons of Martin Luther*, 7:376)

- Have there been occurrences in your life in which one can see God’s withholding of the protection by the angels? Why would such a loving God allow terrorist attacks to occur in the United States and other countries?

In Closing

Why do Christians celebrate the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels? Luther summed it up nicely in one of his sermons on this day:

This feast commemorating the angels has been placed in the church’s calendar for the sake of our young people, or more correctly, for the sake of all Christians, so that they might train themselves to think about the beloved angels and thank God for appointing these mighty lords to be his servants for us. (*Sermons of Martin Luther*, 7:374–75)

Thanks be to God for appointing these ministering spirits (Ps. 104:4 and Heb. 1:7).

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 522.

Prayer

Everlasting God, You have ordained and constituted the service of angels and men in a wonderful order. Mercifully grant that, as Your holy angels always serve and worship You in heaven, so by Your appointment they may also help and defend us here on earth; through Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect St. Michael and All Angels).

O God of God, O Light of Light

Lutheran Service Book 810 | study by David R. Schmitt

Introduction

An artist once made a pair of banners that hung from the ceiling to the floor, framing a stone altar in the front of a church.

If you look at the banners from the back of the church, they look like two plain panels of red. As you move into the church, however, the vision changes. When you are about halfway down the aisle, you notice that the banners aren't plain at all but have words on them. Because the letters are the same color as the panels, at first you did not see them. About halfway down the aisle, however, you read the word "Alleluia." An altar framed with alleluias.

When you reach the front of the church, you see that the banners are not plain panels of cloth at all; they are a weaving together of various fabrics all the same color. Bits of felt are woven with burlap, satin with velvet, to make two large panels bearing the word "Alleluia." Finally, when you kneel at the Communion rail, you see a ribbon running through the banner, beginning at the top, moving to the bottom and returning to the top once again $\frac{3}{4}$ a ribbon of praise.

With these banners, an artist created a vision of the Church. From the world, the Church can often look like an ordinary gathering of people, a plain piece of fabric. But when you enter into the congregation and participate in worship, you begin to see what God has done. God has gathered people from all parts of the world and woven them together in His Son, Jesus Christ. These people hear a song of praise that begins in heaven, comes to earth, where they join their voices, and then returns to heaven once again.

What this artist did with fabric, this hymn does with words and music. It brings to our lips a song of heaven and teaches us to join the angels in praise.

- When artists paint visions of heaven, they usually picture angels singing. Why?
- When you think about the content of our singing in worship, could the angels join us in song? Why or why not?

Exploring the Scriptures

In Revelation, the apostle John records a vision of heaven, where angels join their voices in song before the throne of God. Read Rev. 5:11–12.

- Why do the angels call Jesus the Lamb? Compare John 1:29 and Exodus 12.
- Why is this Lamb's death of such great value to the angels? See Luke 15:1–7.

Moving outward from this angelic song, we notice that it is part of a much larger event of singing, as one song leads into another and that song leads into yet another song. Read Rev. 5:6–10 and 13–14.

- Before the angels sing, the elders greet the presence of the risen Christ by remembering what He has done. What has Jesus done that the elders celebrate in song?

- After the angels sing, all of creation joins the song of praise. Who does John tell us is singing, and how does that help us understand the extent of Jesus' rule?
- How does this give deeper meaning to those times in worship when we sing "This Is the Feast"?

In John's vision, all creation joins in one eternal song, praising God for His saving work in Jesus, the one whose death and resurrection save us from our sin. Until the return of Christ, however, this contagious song is not being fully sung on earth. Read Rom. 8:18–25 to see how the apostle Paul describes creation's current song.

- What is the sound one hears from creation?
- Why is creation groaning rather than singing?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

John Julian (1839–1913), an Anglican priest, is best known not for his hymn writing but for his writing on hymns. During his lifetime, he published an extensive *Dictionary of*

Hymnology that is still in use today. How fitting then that the one hymn by Julian in *LSB* is a hymn about singing.

Julian wrote this hymn for the Sheffield Church Choirs Union Festival on April 16, 1883.

- What are some reasons churches have choir festivals?
- What are some reasons people go to these festivals?
- What reasons does Julian's hymn offer for holding and participating in a choir festival?

The choir festival for which Julian wrote this hymn was held on the Monday following the Fourth Sunday of Easter.

- How does Julian's hymn relate to the Church's celebration of Easter?
- How does Julian's hymn look forward to the Church's upcoming celebration of the Ascension?

Text

Like the artist's banner, Julian's hymn begins with a song of praise sung eternally ("forever rings") in heaven (st. 1). As you read the first stanza, notice how the words shift from describing something that happens in heaven ("The song of praise forever rings") to inviting something to happen on earth ("To Him ... Be all the glory ... All thanks and praise!").

- What is the primary reason the angels give such praise to Jesus (see line 6)?
- How do we join them in giving glory, thanks and praise to Jesus Christ in worship? In the world?

Making the Connection

This hymn is appointed for the Church's celebration of St. Luke, the Evangelist. Luke records many of the songs of praise that people sang when God worked salvation in Jesus Christ in their midst. Those songs of praise are now included in our services of worship (the Magnificat, the Gloria in Excelsis, the Benedictus and the Nunc Dimittis)

In Closing

While your congregation may not have the banner described in the opening of this study, you do have the work of faithful artists who have listened to the songs of angels and put the story of our world's salvation in Jesus Christ into words for you to sing on earth. As the angels taught the shepherds to join in heaven's praise (Luke 2:13–14, 20), so too our hymns now teach us to join the angels as we raise our voices and sing back to heaven what has first been given to us.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 810.

In the second stanza, this angelic song enters into the fallen world. The hymn contrasts the long period of prophetic waiting with the sudden appearance of the angels teaching the shepherds to sing at the birth of Christ.

- How did Gen. 3:15 begin a long period of waiting for our "coming Lord"?
- The angels are messengers of God, bringing the good news of salvation to the shepherds. How did hearing that message make the shepherds messengers as well (see Luke 2:8–20)?

In the third stanza, the hymn teaches us to be messengers of the Good News as we sing of salvation in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ.

- Compare the first four lines of this stanza with the earliest Christian preaching of the Good News in Acts 2:22–24 and 32–33. How is preaching part of the Church's song of praise?
- The stanza closes with a moment of anxious anticipation ("Lift up your heads") sung by angels and humans. What do we await (see Rev. 21:1–8)?

In the fourth stanza, this heavenly song now rises from earth and returns to heaven, so that human voices join angelic choirs in a song of praise that never ends.

- How have you participated in that song this past week? Today?

and become our song as we praise God for what He is doing in Christ among us today.

- Read the Nunc Dimittis (Luke 2:29–32) and share with one another a phrase from Simeon's song that expresses your praise to God for what He has done for you and for others in the Lord's Supper.

Prayer

God of majesty, whom saints and angels delight to worship in heaven, be with Your servants who make art and music for Your people that with joy we on earth may glimpse Your beauty. Bring us to the fulfillment of that hope of perfection that will be ours as we stand before Your unveiled glory; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen (For church musicians and artists, *LSB*, p. 307).

Praise the Almighty

Lutheran Service Book 797 | study by Bernard J. Schey

Introduction

In recent years, many churches have popularized anthems for worship known as “praise songs.” Actually, one would be hard pressed to find a hymn worth the name that *isn’t* a “praise song.” A good hymn to Christ is not only filled with happy thoughts; the reality of sin and death are featured in them as well, along with the grand victory of the cross of Jesus.

- Do our souls always praise the Lord God? Do we praise Him for *all* things? How do we know that our praises are acceptable to Him? See Rom. 8:26–30; Heb. 10:19–25.
- What is the relationship of text/words to melody in a hymn? Could some hymns be better matched when their words and tune are compared?

Exploring the Scriptures

The last five psalms in the Book of Psalms each begin with the Hebrew word “Hallelujah!” (meaning “Praise the Lord!”). Hence, they are called the “Final Hallel” psalms. This hymn, “Praise the Almighty,” is a loose paraphrase of Psalm 146, the first of that group of five psalms.

If we take political campaigns too seriously, we might begin to believe that electing just the right candidates

will bring about a golden age of purity, wealth, peace and well-being. However, verses 3 and 4 of Psalm 146 put that idea out of reach. But grand assurances are given to those who cannot well defend or even speak for themselves. See verses 7–9.

- Which sorts of people are included in that group in our own day and time?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Johann Daniel Herrnschmidt (1675–1723) came from a small town in southwestern Germany and spent time there as a parish pastor. He concluded his career as a professor at the University of Halle, the center of the Pietist Movement among German Lutherans. This school of thought began over concern that people weren’t being taught or encouraged to lead a devout, Christlike life. While this inconsistency is a concern of every child of God in any age (Romans 7), the Pietists sought to address it wrongly when they tried to motivate by means of the Law rather than the Gospel. Yet the Pietists had their strengths, and this hymn is an example of a zealous song of praise from the sincere heart of a teacher and pastor.

- When any one of us is prompted to write down a prayer or song of praise, even a few words long, is that a valid confession of faith? Why must the Scriptures be our guide in such confessions or prayers?

Text

Our prayer as Christians for steadfastness in faith to the point of death is expressed clearly in the first stanza of this hymn. See Ps. 104:33–34.

- Will the song of faith always sound beautiful to the ear, that is to say, hit the right notes and always be on key?

In stanza 2, we are reminded again of the limited nature of earthly help. Certainly God has established governments and other authorities for our benefit and protection (Romans 13), but they all must yield to Christ when it comes time to answer concerns over eternal life.

- How does Jesus teach that the powers of this world have clear limits? See John 18:35–38; 19:10–11.

Stanza 3 encourages us to trust above all things in God, who alone can keep us in faith in Him until our lives end, and who will let none of His children slip away. See John 10:27–30.

- Jesus fulfilled Psalm 1 perfectly, and how do we now follow in His steps in the words of this, the first of the 150 psalms?

The poor in spirit (Matt. 5:3) are those who know their sin all too well, and cry for mercy from God Himself. They cry for mercy, and God Himself answers them with the assurance of the cross and resurrection of Jesus (Gal. 6:14). Stanza 4 addresses this desperate need.

- How is it that widows and the fatherless need this assurance in a way unknown to those who have not been widowed or orphaned?

Herrnschmidt concludes the hymn with a fifth stanza done in a doxological (“glory words”) mode. The final address of praise is to the three persons of the blessed Trinity. Just as the psalmist ends Psalm 146 with a final “Hallelujah!” so does the hymn writer exhort the singers to join “with angels

and archangels and with all the company of heaven” (*TLH*, p. 25) in praising and glorifying the one true God.

- In Rev. 5:11–14, the final word is “Amen!” How can we express our agreement and unity with this word that means “Let it be so!”?

Making the Connection

This grand hymn of praise calls us to laud and magnify the Lord’s name not just when we are in a happy and jubilant mood, but also when we are indifferent to thoughts of praise, or even when we are crushed by the effects of sin in this world.

- “Yes, I will laud Him until death” (st. 1) truly seems to include every chapter of life! Can you think of times

when, though shattered with grief, you’ve been called to sing to Christ — even through tears?

- “Penitent sinners, for mercy crying, / Pardon and peace from Him obtain” (st. 4). How does this hymn teach us that our greatest need is for reconciliation and forgiveness in Christ Jesus, our Lord?

In Closing

Never forget that every hymn worth the name is a hymn of praise. Whether or not the tune is “happy” or “sad,” if the tempo is “upbeat” or not, the name of God is to be praised for the fact that He has rescued us from our sins. The God of Jacob (Ps. 146:5) has promised to hear us and to rescue us.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 797.

Prayer

O Lord, let Your merciful ears be open to the prayers of Your humble servants and grant that what they ask may be in accord with Your gracious will; 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 Proper 18B).

O Christ, Who Called the Twelve

Lutheran Service Book 856 | study by Paul F. Becker

Introduction

Cyril of Alexandria (c. 375–444) said this about the twelve apostles: “These holy men became the pillar and mainstay of the truth, and Jesus said that he was sending them just as the Father had sent him... [I]n affirming that they are sent by him just as he was sent by the Father, Christ sums up in a few words the approach they themselves should take to their ministry. From what he said they would gather that it was their vocation to call sinners to repentance, to heal those who were sick whether in body or spirit, to seek in all their dealings never to do their own will but the will of him who sent them, and as far as possible to save the world by their teaching. Surely it is in all these respects that we find his holy disciples striving to excel. To ascertain this is no great labor, a single reading of the Acts of the Apostles

or of St. Paul’s writings is enough” (*Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, crossroadsinitiative.com/media/articles/mission-of-the-12-apostles-st-cyril-of-alexandria/).

Our hymn rehearses for us why Christ selected these twelve men to be His apostles, while challenging us to realize that a similar call has come to every believer.

- Discuss the various vocations of the Twelve before their call. Was there anything in their life before Christ that prepared or qualified them for their new work?
- If we also are being sent into the world as the Father sent Jesus, what sort of activities would characterize the life of the Church?

Exploring the Scriptures

At different times, the Lord Jesus sent His disciples out two by two: the twelve apostles (Matt. 10:1–15; Mark 6:7–13; Luke 9:1–6) and the seventy-two (Luke 10:1–12). His instructions fall into three broad categories: proclamation and signs of the kingdom, being prepared for persecutions and the exclusivity of answering Christ’s call.

Read Matt. 10:5–15.

- How did the apostles mirror Jesus’ compassion for the multitudes who “were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matt. 9:36)?
- How were the apostles’ needs provided for, and what were they to expect in return for their ministry?
- What indicates the necessity for a radical dependence on the person and power of Jesus?

Read Matt. 10:16–31.

- Why does persecution come to Jesus’ disciples, and what promises does He give to those who suffer for His name?
- What opportunities for the Gospel arise from times of persecution?

Read Matt. 10:32–42.

- What must Christians be willing to lose? What will they gain in return?
- Discuss how believers might either confess or deny their relationship with Christ in their daily vocation.

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Herman G. Stuempfle (1923–2007) grew up in a Lutheran parsonage and served both as a parish pastor, author, seminary president and teacher of preaching. But his lifelong love of hymns blossomed creatively only in his later years. He thought of writing hymn texts as another way to proclaim the Good News, and said that his texts were “triggered by such-and-such a passage of Scripture.”

- After a lifetime of parish ministry, teaching and administration, becoming one of the great hymn writers of his time must have come as a bit of a surprise. How has God filled the later years of someone you know with unexpected blessings?

Stuempfle is among the most honored and respected hymn writers of the twentieth century. His collections are entitled *The Word Goes Forth: Hymns, Songs, and Carols* (1993),

Redeeming the Time: A Cycle of Song for the Christian Year (1997), *Awake Our Hearts to Praise: Hymns, Songs, and Carols* (2000), and *Wondrous Love Has Called Us* (2006). He has written an estimated 550 texts, more than half of them already published, including 15 in *LSB*.

- As you ponder the titles of his hymn collections, what theological themes can you deduce were of significance to Stuempfle?

Text

Stanzas 1–4 divide equally into a reminder of how Christ worked with His Twelve, and a request that He would work in much the same way with us:

1. Christ, who *called* — Grant us to *hear*
2. Christ, who *taught* — *Instruct* us now
3. Christ, who *led* — *Lead* us along the ways
4. Christ, who *sent* — *Send* us

For the Twelve, following Christ brings “ventures bold and new” (st. 1) in which they see “The ways of God revealed” (st. 2); ways that include miraculous feeding of multitudes but also proclaim God’s reign as they serve, suffer and teach “On roads they’d never trod” (st. 4).

Read Acts 5:17–20; 12:1–11.

Making the Connection

The hymn makes a strong connection in the final stanza between the Twelve and the saints and martyrs of every generation who share “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:5–6).

In Closing

“How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news, who publish peace and bring good news of salvation” (Gradual for St. Simon and St. Jude, Apostles). By God’s grace, we also confess the faith of the Twelve: “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen” (*LSB*, p. 323).

- Read aloud or sing together *LSB* 856.

- Imprisoned by both religious and secular rulers, the apostles experienced supernatural protection. How did this strategy of the evil one “backfire”?

Modern-day believers soon discover they are not exempt from the call “To risk security” (st. 1). The tragic wounds of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries “Lead us along the ways / Where hope has nearly died” (st. 3). These wounds can only be healed by going to the cross on that lonely hill “Where love is crucified” (st. 3). And yet, as another apostle wrote, “now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13:13). These three have power to transcend timidity and sustain “Both life and ministry” (st. 4).

Read Rev. 7:13–17.

- The apostles speak of times of trials, testing by fire and great tribulation as something all believers share. Describe the promise that sustains us through these difficulties.

Read Eph. 2:19–22; Rev. 21:14.

- How does the apostolic foundation help explain the mystery not only of the Church’s survival despite persecution, but her spread to all tribes and nations, peoples and tongues?

- Name two or three things you share in common with saints of every generation that remind you that you belong to the crucified and risen King.
- Even though it is traditionally held that only one of the Twelve, St. John, died of natural causes in old age, what unique difference in their lives and their deaths continues to inspire us today?

Prayer

Almighty God, You chose Your servants Simon and Jude to be numbered among the glorious company of the apostles. As they were faithful and zealous in their mission, so may we with ardent devotion make known the love and mercy of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for St. Simon and St. Jude, Apostles).

A Mighty Fortress Is Our God

Lutheran Service Book 656/657 | study by Marion Lars Hendrickson

Introduction

Martin Luther (1483–1546) wrote a poem to serve as the preface to Joseph Klug’s *Geistliche Lieder*, revised and published in Wittenberg in 1543. In his poem Luther wrote in part, “Of all the joys that are on earth / Is none more dear nor higher worth, / Than what in my sweet songs is found / And instruments of various sound. / Where friends and comrades sing in tune, / All evil passions vanish soon; ... The heart grows still when I am heard, / And opens to God’s Truth and Word.”

Luther’s own hymn, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” has captured these very sentiments over the five centuries since he wrote the text and composed the tune.

- What are some of the feelings you have known when you sing this hymn? How do the text and music together contribute to these feelings?
- Describe the image that comes to mind when you think of the word “fortress” in this hymn.

Exploring the Scriptures

Luther’s famous hymn is inspired by the words of Psalm 46 and the comfort Luther himself found in this psalm. Read Ps. 46:1–3.

- In the opening verse, the writer states his confidence. What do you think is the basis for his confidence? If your answer is “experience,” what sorts of experiences might they have been? If your answer is “faith,” what is the source of such faith?
- Verses 2–3 use parallel thoughts to emphasize a major point. If the writer has events in Israel’s history in mind, what might some of them be? Although written long before the New Testament era, what are some events in the Gospels or in Acts in which these words of Psalm 46 could come to mind?

Read Ps. 46:4–7.

- Jerusalem, Israel’s capitol and the site of the temple, had springs of water supplying the city but no river flowing through it. What could the writer have in mind with verse 4? The prophets wrote of such a stream in Jerusalem.

Read Joel 3:18 and Zech. 14:8. What do the prophets have in mind? See also Rev. 22:1–8. In what ways are these images of the Holy Spirit? What does God’s Spirit have to do with the confidence within this psalm? Based on Ps. 46:4–7, what sort of fortress is God?

Read Ps. 46:8–11.

- In the third part of the psalm the writer invites the reader to meditate, “Come, behold the works of the LORD.” In this psalm, the writer points to the end of war and conflict as an act of God. What are some other possible “acts of God” on which a person could meditate beneficially?
- Verse 10 suggests the outcome of such meditation. Do you agree? Are the words of verse 10 words of fear or of praise? Or both? Why? To whom is God saying, “Be still”; the noisy world or the person of faith in the noisy world? Why? Read Mark 4:35–41. Notice any similarities?
- The final verse repeats the theme. After all has been said, what sort of fortress is God?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

While Luther’s hymn has been employed in triumphal ways — the Swedish Lutheran king Gustavus Adolphus made his army sing this hymn before the Battle of Leipzig in 1631; the nineteenth-century German literary figure Heinrich Heine (1797–1856) called it the Marseillaise of the Reformation — Luther himself called it a hymn of comfort. In the period 1527–31, when the hymn began to appear in a number of hymnals, Luther was surrounded by troubles. In 1527, ten years had passed since Luther posted his

“Ninety-Five Theses” in Wittenberg. During this time and after he was buffeted by theological and political storms. His own life was in danger from the empire, from Rome and from outbreaks of the plague. The darkness of depression often closed in on him.

- What are some major cataclysms of the present day that could send a person to seek the comfort expressed in Luther’s hymn?
- What sort of personal troubles — physical, emotional, spiritual — could also find comfort in this hymn?

Whenever Luther's world would "roar and foam" like the waters in Ps. 46:3, he would invite his friends to join him in singing this hymn. In 1530 at Coburg, awaiting the outcome of the Diet of Augsburg, Luther sang his hymn often, perhaps daily.

- What is the comfort in the phrase, "He's by our side" (*LSB* 656:4)?
- Luther mentions "weapons of the Spirit" (*LSB* 657:4). What might these be?
- What phrases in the hymn are helpful when a person's troubles are of long duration, or an end to them is not in sight?
- What difference does it make, do you think, singing the hymn rather than simply reading the text?

Text

While Luther found inspiration for his hymn in the words of Psalm 46, he did not confine himself to that text alone. Read Rev. 19:11–16, where St. John sees a vision of a conquering rider on a white horse, who "in righteousness ... judges and makes war" (v. 11).

- According to stanza 2 of the hymn, who is this rider?
- What other clues to the rider's identity do you find in Rev. 19:11–16?
- Although the imagery of warfare is violent in this text, how does the rider's identity interpret that violence? Hint: think about the crucifixion of Jesus.

Making the Connection

In the preface to the Wittenberg edition of his writings, Luther wrote, "I want to point out to you a correct way of studying theology, for I have had practice in that... . This is the way taught by holy King David ... in the one hundred nineteenth Psalm. There you will find three rules, amply presented throughout the whole Psalm. They are *Oratio* [prayer], *Meditatio* [meditation], *Tentatio* [affliction, trial]" (AE 34:285).

- In what ways is Luther's hymn a prayer? What is it asking? What hope does it express?

In Closing

As Luther said in his hymnal preface for Klug's *Geistliche Lieder*, where people of faith sing hymns there is joy, "All evil passions vanish soon" and hearts are stilled and open to God's Word.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 656 or 657.

Read Eph. 6:10–17. In this epistle, St. Paul uses the imagery of a Roman soldier.

- How is such imagery helpful and comforting?
- How can military imagery be misused within the Church?

For Martin Luther, the devil was no fictitious figure, but very real and troublesome. Read stanza 3 of the hymn.

- How is the devil portrayed?
- Luther writes in *LSB* 656:3, "This world's prince may still / Scowl fierce as he will." What do you think Luther means by "still"? Jesus' crucifixion is judgment upon Satan. What does this mean for us who live in the world?

Read Rom. 8:31–39. St. Paul's answer to his list of questions is verse 37: "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."

- As the Small Catechism asks, what does this mean?
- Is this an answer based upon experience or on faith?
- Must a Christian have experiences similar to those listed by the apostle in this passage to express the same confidence? Why? Why not?
- If "the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (v. 39) does not eliminate all of our troubles, what does it do? What sort of fortress does this make of God?

- Luther sang this hymn often. What is gained by the repetition? Does singing the text make a difference for meditation?
- Do you think Martin Luther would have expressed the confidence of the Gospel as boldly and forcefully as he did if he had not endured the troubles he faced? How have your own troubles thrown you back onto the promises of God in Christ?

Prayer

Almighty and gracious Lord, pour out Your Holy Spirit on Your faithful people. Keep us steadfast in Your grace and truth, protect and deliver us in times of temptation, defend us against all enemies, and grant to Your Church Your saving peace; 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 Reformation Day).

Salvation unto Us Has Come

Lutheran Service Book 555 | study by Christopher I. Thoma

Introduction

If you take a test and fail it because you didn't study, do you deserve an A? If you studied all week and memorized all of the necessary information and answered all of the questions correctly on the test, do you deserve an A? These are not difficult questions to answer because it is natural for man to play by the rule that says quite simply, "You get what you deserve."

Today's hymn, like the Gospel theme it supports, gets this rule a little mixed up. In fact, it turns it around completely.

- What do you believe to be the focus of the hymn?
- In your opinion, what is a "good work"? Read Article IV of the Augsburg Confession:

Our churches teach that people cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works. People are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake. By His death, Christ made satisfaction for our sins. God counts this faith for righteousness in His sight (Romans 3 and 4 [3:21–26; 4:5]). (AC IV)

- What light does this quotation shed on your understanding of good works in the Christian life?

Exploring the Scriptures

Read Matt. 20:1–16. In this Gospel Reading, Jesus makes it clear that God's fairness is different from the fairness of man. He tells us that the reward of heaven is not based on what we do; rather, God gives to us something other than what we deserve.

- After working all day, how would it make you feel if you received the same amount of pay as someone who worked for only an hour?

- Remember that Jesus tells us that this parable represents the kingdom of heaven. With this in mind, what do we learn about the generosity of God?
- Read Is. 64:6. If we were to demand from God what we deserve because of our acts, what would we receive?
- Read Eph. 2:8–9. Salvation is referred to as what in this text?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Paul Speratus (1484–1551), a colleague of Luther and a significant contributor to the efforts of the Reformation, fashioned this hymn from the gut-wrenching threads of experience. Speratus was an ordained preacher who was expelled from several cities for his evangelical preaching. He was excommunicated for preaching salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ and was eventually arrested, imprisoned and condemned to death. He did manage to escape his captors, and in this freedom was used by the Lord to great ends.

- During Speratus' time, what were the widely held views regarding good works? What role did monasticism play in this?
- How might the title of this hymn reflect the situation of the Reformation and the feelings of those hearing the pure Gospel through men like Luther and Paul Speratus?

Text

The language and tune of this hymn are borne along with what is seemingly a sigh of blissful relief. There is so much joy, it appears that Speratus cannot stop writing stanzas, and so we are given a hymn with ten stanzas of great substance. Let's consider a few of these stanzas.

Stanza 1 does a wonderful job of telling the reader the purpose of the joyful hymn to follow. Stanzas 2–4 drop us into the dirty reality of the Law's requirement, our sinful condition and our helpless standing against it.

- According to stanza 1, for whom did Christ die?
- Who else might have been considered as an advocate and/or redeemer (which is contrary to the Christian faith) by the people and Church of Speratus' time? Which statements in stanza 1 make Christ's role in the Church abundantly clear?

- What is the stance of stanza 2 toward those who would seek to purify themselves by monastic living? Describe in your own words the burden of the Law to sinners (particularly those who believe they must do good works to get to heaven). Is there certainty of salvation in this?
- Read Rom. 3:10–20. How does this text shed light on stanzas 2–4?

Stanza 5 is a significant turning point in the text of the hymn, setting the stage for the Christian to sing the remaining stanzas with confidence and certainty.

- Who is the focus of stanzas 2–4? Who is absent in stanzas 2–4 and introduced as the focal point in stanza 5?
- With this introduction, how is the direction of the hymn changed? The spirit of its tune? Christian certainty?

The remaining stanzas (6–10) reintroduce the Church to familiar terms.

Making the Connection

Reflect on the parable in Matt. 20:1–16. Perhaps we often grumble to the Lord as the workers grumbled to the landowner.

- Why is it this way for us?

In Closing

“Salvation unto Us Has Come” seeks to reveal a right understanding of God’s Law, and it refreshes and strengthens the sin- and guilt-wearied heart with the Gospel. Ultimately, it reveals that this Gospel message truly is “foolishness” and a “stumbling block” as it flies in the face of the human understanding that “you get what you deserve.”

By Christ’s life, death and resurrection we are spared from what we deserve. In fact, the Innocent pays for the guilty, and the guilty are declared free. By the power of the Holy Spirit through the Gospel, faith and the merits of Christ’s innocence are given to us. What a joyful declaration of justification for the believing heart, a heart now strengthened to cling to the Lord and not to self.

- Read again the text of Eph. 2:8–10. What ancient and yet radically new theology is presented here?
- Consider the following terms in the remaining stanzas: atonement, baptized, ransom, the cross, trust, peace, justify. How does “saved by grace through faith in Christ” theology change their substance? (For example, Baptism as taught in the Roman Catholic Church removes only original sin. Actual sin remains.)
- Look for and discuss other words.

The hymn ends with a trinitarian conclusion.

- Consider the First through Third Articles of the Apostles’ Creed and their meanings in the Small Catechism (*LSB*, pp. 322–23). In his explanations, how does Luther make clear God’s redemptive plan in Christ?
- Read John 14:8–11, 23–28, and 15:26. How do these texts reflect upon not only stanza 10 but the entire hymn?

- Read Luke 15:3–7. What do these words reveal to us about others? About ourselves?

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 555.

Prayer

Lord God, heavenly Father, since we cannot stand before You relying on anything we have done, help us trust in Your abiding grace and live according to Your Word; 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 Proper 20A).

For All the Saints

Lutheran Service Book 677 | study by Shawn L. Kumm

Introduction

“Saints alive!” someone exclaimed in surprise. Yes, indeed, saints alive. Saints alive here on earth; saints alive also in heaven. Certainly the people of God believe that saints are alive!

All Saints’ Day, which falls on the first day of November, stirs up all kinds of thoughts, memories and ideas about saints.

- What are some common thoughts people have when they hear the word “saint?”

Turn to page xi in the front of *Lutheran Service Book*. Here is a list of the saints associated with the life of Christ and the time of the apostles.

- What do we learn about the lives of these saints from the letters “R” and “W” beside their names?

Now turn to pages xii–xiii. Here is a list of saints who span the beginning of time up to recent history.

- Scan through the lists on these two pages. Which names surprise you? Which names are unfamiliar?

Exploring the Scriptures

Hebrews 12:1–3 is the chief Scripture upon which this hymn is based, but before you read these verses, scan the New Testament list of saints in Hebrews 11.

- Which words are repeated throughout this chapter?

As is true of the people in the lists above, these saints also lived in a tension. That tension is described by the Latin phrase *simul iustus et peccator*, simultaneously justified (saint) and sinner.

- Choose two names from Hebrews 11 and discuss how each person was at the same time a sinner and a child of God.

Now read Heb. 12:1–3. The author of Hebrews sees us continuing in the same list of chapter 11.

- Who and what is the focus of faith?
- How is it the writer of Hebrews speaks as if your name is included in this list of believers?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

William Walsham How (1823–97) was born into a solicitor’s family and grew up in the historic market town of Shrewsbury, England. He spent his years of ministry in rural areas and the impoverished East End of London. In such challenging places William How became known as the “children’s bishop.” This title of endearment reflected his great love and attention shown to an often overlooked group of God’s kingdom. His published works include sermons, poetic verse and a still-used volume on Holy Communion. How’s most well-known work, though, is the hymn “For All the Saints.”

- If you were to write a hymn about saints, what important points would you need to include? Which particular Bible passage would you want to use as the hymn’s foundation?

Originally this hymn was eleven stanzas long, but the three stanzas that reflected the ancient *Tē Deum* are traditionally omitted. The remaining eight stanzas of “For All the Saints”

give to the worshiper a well-developed theology of both the Church Triumphant, which is comprised of the saints now gathered into heaven, and the Church Militant, the saints still fighting here on earth.

Text

Though at first glance this hymn seems to begin with the saints of God, careful observation shows the hymn writer rightly begins by addressing the first two stanzas to the Lord Jesus.

- What comfort do you look forward to in enjoying rest from your labors? See Rev. 21:1–4 for a fuller description of rest.
- In stanza 2 Jesus is called “captain.” Read 1 Tim. 6:12. What is the battle about? See Eph. 2:1–3 for a description of the enemy. Why is it necessary to have Jesus as your captain?

Stanzas 3 and 4 turn our focus from the saints who have gone before us to the saints here on earth, and it is among the earthly saints that we are included.

- What caution do we need to keep when considering “the victor’s crown of gold”? Consider what Paul writes in 2 Tim. 2:1–5.
- Why do we “feebly struggle”? In what ways do you need help? Turn to Is. 35:3–4 and rejoice in God’s promises to you.

Stanza 5 speaks of the earthly fight of faith as “fierce” and “the warfare” as “long.”

- What makes you weary as you follow your captain, Jesus?

- What are the things of God that embolden and strengthen the saints here on earth? On what basis can St. Paul say what he does in 2 Tim. 4:7?

Stanzas 6–8 draw our eyes to the same rest that began the hymn. The setting of the sun on the lives of those who have died in Jesus is contrasted with the rising of the dead, the resurrection to come, all following the “King of Glory.” Finally, in stanza 8, the “countless host” of heaven are seen gathered around the Triune God.

- What is it about “the calm of paradise” (st. 6) that appeals to you most?

Making the Connection

Read the appointed Gospel for this day, Matt. 5:1–12. Here Jesus describes your baptismal life centered in His suffering, His death, His resurrection and His ascension.

- At which points does this hymn connect with the Beatitudes? In what ways do these both sing and speak of the same realities?

- The important distinction is made that we do not pray *to* the saints nor do we pray *for* the saints, but we do *sing* with the saints, and our prayers are joined with theirs. Especially on All Saints’ Day do we also *give thanks for* the saints. For examples see *LSB*, pages 250–51.

In Closing

“Our churches teach that the history of saints may be set before us so that we may follow the example of their faith and good works, according to our calling... [T]he Scriptures do not teach that we are to call on the saints or to ask the saints for help. Scripture sets before us the one Christ as the Mediator, Atoning Sacrifice, High Priest, and Intercessor [1 Timothy 2:5–6]” (AC XXI 1–2).

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 677.

Prayer

Almighty and everlasting God, You knit together Your faithful people of all times and places into one holy communion, the mystical body of Your Son, Jesus Christ. Grant us so to follow Your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living that, together with them, we may come to the unspeakable joys You have prepared for those who love You; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for All Saints’ Day).

Christ Is Our Cornerstone

Lutheran Service Book 912 | study by Gregory Just Wismar

Introduction

“What is in the cornerstone?” That question is often asked in conjunction with anniversary celebrations of notable buildings, including many churches. At the time cornerstones are laid by builders, items of interest and value are usually included in a box and sealed within the cornerstone, which is the foundational part of the entire building. Items placed in the cornerstone may be current newspapers or coins, or perhaps even a copy of the deed of the building being erected.

In addition, the cornerstone is often inscribed with the date of construction. For the life of the building, the cornerstone with its inscription often becomes a central focus for those who regularly use the building as well as for those who may view it only from the outside.

Exploring the Scriptures

There is a specific linkage between the cornerstone references in the Scriptures that carries over from the Old Testament to the New Testament. Read Is. 28:16 and Ps. 118:22–23.

- With what descriptive word (adjective) does Isaiah describe the cornerstone? What kind of foundation does the cornerstone anchor? What promise is given to those who trust in this foundation?
- What kind of “stone” picture does the psalmist use in Psalm 118? What cause for joy is there in the Lord’s workmanship?

In three of the Gospel accounts, we note that Jesus specifically quotes the Psalm 118 text relating to the cornerstone. Read Matt. 21:33–45. This parable is also recorded in Mark 12:1–12 and Luke 20:9–19.

- What word of hope for all people can be found in Jesus’ use of the familiar image of the cornerstone?
- How does the Parable of the Tenants show the full extent of Jesus’ saving ministry?

In a sermon given before the rulers, elders and teachers of the law in Jerusalem in the very first days of what would become the Christian Church, Peter the disciple used the

The image of the cornerstone is used throughout Scripture to bring focus on Jesus Christ as the one whose saving work is the basis for the Church and its ministry. Jesus Himself appropriates the image used in Isaiah 28 and Psalm 118 as a fitting description of His person and work. That’s why the hymn “Christ Is Our Cornerstone” is the Hymn of the Day for the Anniversary of a Congregation.

- Is there an inscribed cornerstone on the building where you worship? What message does it display?
- How does the image of the cornerstone speak to our society today?
- What image comes first to your mind when you sing the words “Christ Is Our Cornerstone”?

“stone” image in explaining the healing of a crippled man. Read Acts 4:1–12.

- Who does Peter say that the psalmist has in mind when he writes of the cornerstone (also translated as “capstone” or “head of the corner”)?
- What does that singular identification say about the uniqueness of the salvation that is in Christ?

The image of Christ as the cornerstone is given fuller expression by St. Paul as he writes to the Christians at Ephesus in the middle of the first century. Read Eph. 2:19–21.

- How does God continue that process of building the Church in and through us?
- What important foundation does the building that is the Church have? How does God continue that process of building the Church in and through us?

Read 1 Peter 2:4–9.

- To what does Peter compare those people who are being built into a spiritual house?
- In what ways are we, as God’s people built upon Christ the cornerstone, truly “living stones” in our daily lives?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

The hymn “Christ Is Our Cornerstone” is what students of text-writing identify as a “cento.” A cento is a “new” hymn

text that is made up of certain stanzas of a longer hymn that have been selected and linked together into a new structure. The three stanzas that are the text of “Christ Is Our

Cornerstone” in *Lutheran Service Book (LSB)* were originally part of a much longer Latin hymn that dates back to about the seventh century. The original hymn, titled *Urbs beata Jerusalem*, had nine stanzas and was frequently used for dedication festivals. The hymn “Christ Is Our Cornerstone” reflects the second half of the original text, which is traced to the medieval Spanish Church. In an interesting coincidence, the Latin text used for “Christ Is Our Cornerstone” is also the basis of another hymn in *LSB*. Read hymn 912 and then read hymn 909, “Christ Is Made the Sure Foundation.”

- In what ways are the two translated texts by John Chandler (1806–76) and John Mason Neale (1818–66) similar? In what ways do the two translations differ in the two “new” hymn texts?
- Why are both of these hymns appropriate for use in the celebration of a church anniversary?
- Both of the hymn texts based on this Latin hymn underscore the Christian hope of heaven. In what way is eternal life in heaven an extension of the worship we experience today?

In the original text translation by John Chandler, the stanza that is the third and final one in *LSB* came before the stanza that now precedes it. The word “alt.” in the line that begins “Text” at the bottom of hymn 912 means that the hymn has been altered in the way it is presented in this hymnal.

Making the Connection

The truth that Christ is our cornerstone is central to all parts of our lives of faith. It is interesting to note that in the three successive hymnals of the Synod, this hymn has been included under three headings: In *The Lutheran Hymnal* it was in the “Communion of Saints” section, in *Lutheran Worship* it was located in the section titled “The Church,” and in *LSB* it is located among the “Beginning of Service” hymns.

In Closing

Through the singing of “Christ Is Our Cornerstone,” we become linked back in time for more than a millennium, joined with Spanish Christians who used what is known as the Mozarabic Rite for their liturgy and hymn tune source. As we sing the hymn together, we can imagine ourselves joined with the saints of the past and the saints yet to be who proclaim in joyful song the glorious name of Christ, our Savior.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 912.

- Why might the last two stanzas in *LSB* 912 have been transposed for this hymnal?
- What are some of the major reasons for the singing that is done by God’s people?

Text

The text of “Christ Is Our Cornerstone” expresses the “both now and then” dynamic that is woven throughout the stanzas. The words speak not only of our present building on Christ, but they remind us that the courts of heaven are filled with those whose earthly building is complete and who now enjoy the rest in the Lord promised by Jesus to all the faithful. St. Paul uses that theme in a number of his letters as a source of encouragement. Read 2 Thess. 1:5–12; 2 Tim. 2:11–13; and Phil. 1:6.

- The hymn speaks of the joy belonging to the “true saints” (st. 1) in the courts of heaven. What kind of “end of the world” scene does Paul describe to the Thessalonians? How is the returning Christ “glorified in his saints” (2 Thess. 1:10)?
- What is the eternal promise in the faithful saying that St. Paul quotes to his young friend Timothy?
- What assurance do we have, along with the Christians at Philippi, of the grace of God that is ours in Christ Jesus?

- How does Christ as our cornerstone build us together with others into the household of faith that we confess to be the “Communion of Saints”?
- What does it mean to the Church that Christ continues to be the cornerstone?
- How is the singing of “Christ Is Our Cornerstone” most appropriate for the anniversary of a congregation? How does it serve well as a hymn for the beginning of a service?

Prayer

Almighty God, You have promised to be with Your Church forever. We praise You for Your presence in this place of worship and ask Your ongoing blessing upon those who gather here. Dwell continually among us with Your holy Word and Sacraments, strengthen our fellowship in the bonds of love and peace, and increase our faithful witness to Your salvation; 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 Anniversary of a Congregation).

May God Bestow on Us His Grace

Lutheran Service Book 823/824 | study by Thomas E. Lock

Introduction

When Martin Luther (1483–1546) wrote in 1522, “recently many islands and lands have been discovered, to which the grace [of God] has not appeared for these 1500 years,” he wrote of the discovery of the Americas (AE 16:135, fn 7). The next year, Luther wrote our hymn for today, “May God Bestow on Us His Grace,” a hymn of thanksgiving for the rich blessings of God. This paraphrase of Psalm 67 is also a hymn for missions; in fact, it was the first mission hymn of the Reformation. All Christians, including those living in these discovered islands and lands of the Americas, can

give thanks that they have been blessed with the bestowal of the Gospel, which converts and saves sinners.

- Of what types of grace was Luther writing in this hymn? Why was it important to ask for such bestowal of grace? Why is it important for you to ask for grace from God?
- How is the bestowal of God’s grace linked with Christian missions? How has — and does — God’s grace come to these discovered islands and lands?

Exploring the Scriptures

Our hymn is a paraphrase of Psalm 67. Read Ps. 67:1–2.

- For what does the psalmist ask in verse 1? This verse reminds you of what part of the Divine Service?
- In verse 2, what was to be made known among all nations of the earth?

Read the Holy Gospel for Sexagesima: the Parable of the Sower (Luke 8:4–15). This sower spreads his seed on differing soils in the hopes that all the soils will bear fruitfully.

- In verses 5–8, Jesus described the results from the sowing of the seed on the differing soils. What were the

four types of soil upon which the seed was sown? What happened to the seed on each type of soil?

- The disciples asked for an explanation of this parable. Jesus’ reply is given in verses 10–15. What is the seed that was sown? How do the differing soils describe hearers of the Gospel?
- The sower in this passage demonstrates recklessness by tossing the seed not only onto soil likely to bear abundantly, but also onto soils where he knows it will not come to fruition. Who is the sower? Why is he so reckless? Whose fault is it if the seed of the Gospel does not result ultimately in salvation — God’s or the hearer’s?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

After Luther was declared an outlaw by Emperor Charles V in 1521 (meaning anyone could kill Luther without fear of punishment), Elector Frederick the Wise spirited Luther away to Wartburg Castle near Eisenach. Luther returned to Wittenberg in 1522 to restore order within the congregations. He also soon began writing hymns for the people to sing. Today’s hymn is one of the first in that outpouring of new hymns in German.

- Imagine that the government was seeking your death. You would most likely try to hide out somewhere. Is there *any* reason why you would return to your hometown? What would motivate that return? When you returned, would you then start writing things for public consumption? Why or why not?

When Luther first reformed the Divine Service in 1523, he still retained the Latin, while removing those portions of the service that smacked of self-righteousness. Luther emphasized the work of God in the service. For the Benediction, Luther recommended that either the Aaronic Blessing (Num. 6:24–26) or Ps. 67:6–7 be used. The Aaronic Blessing was given by the Lord so that His name would be put upon the children of Israel (v. 27). On the other hand, Ps. 67:6–7 refers to God blessing the nations.

- What are the similarities and differences between the Aaronic Blessing and Ps. 67:6–7? What are their strengths and weaknesses at the close of the service? Why do you think Lutherans have retained the Aaronic Benediction?

Text

We have already discovered the recklessness of the sower, the one who casts the seed upon all nations and all people. In this first mission hymn of the Reformation, there are many references to the nations of the world.

- How many references to these nations can you find in this hymn?

Luther's understanding of right worship can be summed up with the German word *Gottesdienst*, that is, Divine Service. In this Divine Service, God first serves man, and then Christians return thanks and praise to God.

- Look at the first stanza. Which aspect of Divine Service is being described? How is God serving the people of the earth? What is the goal of that service?

Stanza 2 is the paraphrase of Ps. 67:3–4. The emphasis of the hymn text and of these verses from Psalm 67 is about praising God (the second aspect of Divine Service).

The second half of stanza 2 includes these lines:

For Thou shalt judge the earth, O Lord,
Nor suffer sin to flourish;

Thy people's pasture is Thy Word
Their souls to feed and nourish,
In righteous paths to keep them.

- Why should the people praise God?
- Where has the judgment of the earth and its sinfulness taken place in Christ? When will the final judging of the earth and its sinfulness take place? If sin will not flourish, how was it removed and how will it be removed?
- What is the connection between Psalm 23 and the last three lines of this stanza?

Stanza 3 is a paraphrase of Ps. 67:5–7. It also includes a reference to the Parable of the Sower: "The land shall plentiful fruit bring forth, / Thy Word is rich in blessing."

- Read a portion of the Old Testament Reading for Sexagesima: Is. 55:10–13. How are seed and the Word linked? What is the connection between this reading and the Parable of the Sower? Who converts the people? To whom, then, do the people give thanks?

Making the Connection

Read Rom. 1:8. What does St. Paul say about the faith of the Roman Christians? How far had the knowledge of their faith gone even in the time of the apostles? (If time allows, see also Col. 1:3–6 and 1 Thess. 1:8.)

- If the Gospel has already gone to all the nations, does that mean that we no longer need to send out

missionaries or bear witness of Christ to those who do not believe in Him?

- For what blessings of God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) do you give thanks? How can you show this thankfulness to God and to other people, both near and far away?

In Closing

The Holy Spirit distributes the rich blessings of Christ in His Word, Holy Baptism, Holy Absolution and Holy Communion in the Church, even as we confess in the explanation to the Third Article of the Creed from the Small Catechism (*LSB*, p. 323).

- Read this explanation aloud together.
- Sing or read aloud *LSB* 823 or 824.

Prayer

Almighty God, in Your kindness You cause the light of the Gospel to shine among us. By the working of Your Holy Spirit, help us to share the good news of Your salvation that all who hear it may rejoice in the gift of Your unending love; 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 Mission Observance).

Shepherd of Tender Youth

Lutheran Service Book 864 | study by Frank J. Pies

Introduction

If you were to rate the importance of a good education on a scale of one to 10, with 10 being the optimum, what number would you choose? Many people in our society maintain that an education is extremely valuable for one's life, if not indispensable. Children are taught their ABCs and the three Rs. Later instruction builds on that foundation, and continuing education in the adult years rounds out the ideal program.

- What are some reasons for getting a good education?
- Why might some people feel less strongly about the need for “higher education”? Do you agree or disagree?

Exploring the Scriptures

The Bible has much to say about the teaching of God's Word and the hearing of it, as evidenced in the lessons appointed for the celebration of Christian Education.

- In verses 4–7 of the Old Testament Reading, Deut. 6:4–15, whom does the Lord address through Moses? What task is assigned? What sacred subject is to be taught?

According to God's established order, parents are the primary, most important teachers of their children. This is the import of the statement in the Large Catechism, “all authority flows and is born from the authority of parents” (LC I 141). Where parents need assistance, they enlist the help of others.

In the Psalmody, Ps. 119:129–136, the psalmist extols God's Word and praises Him for it. He petitions the Lord to teach him its decrees.

- According to verse 130, what are some blessings God imparts through the “unfolding” (literally “door” or “opening”) of His words?
- What is the attitude toward God's Word expressed in verse 131, which all believers do well to emulate?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

The text of “Shepherd of Tender Youth” in *LSB* is actually a free paraphrase of one of the earliest known Christian hymns, “A Hymn to Christ the Savior,” which is attributed to Clement of Alexandria (c. 170–c. 220). One of the greatest of the early Eastern Church Fathers, Clement was the headmaster of the famous Catechetical School in

When the discussion shifts to the subject of Christian education, God Himself rates its significance at a solid, absolute 10. In the same breath that the resurrected Lord Jesus directed His apostles to make disciples (learners) of all nations, He authorized them to baptize and to teach. These are the means by which disciples are made (Matt. 28:16–20). This fact testifies to the high regard Christ has for the teaching of the faith. His people, young and old, baptized in the name of the Triune God, are to be instructed and trained to observe all that He has commanded them — both His Law and His Gospel. This is His holy will for His own. It is of this Christian catechesis that our hymn sings.

The Holy Gospel for the observance of Christian Education, Luke 18:15–17, is most appropriate. It is the account of Jesus and the infants and children brought to be touched and blessed by Him.

- What did the disciples do to those who brought the children (v. 15)? Why? What present-day attitudes are similar to this reaction?
- Why did Jesus lovingly receive these little children (vv. 16–17)? What does it mean to “receive the kingdom of God like a child”?

Children are dear to the Savior. It is His will to receive them — and all who are given by God childlike humility and trust — into His Kingdom and to bless them with all the benefits earned for them by His atoning work of redemption. Following the example set by Christ, the Church considers the spiritual education of her children one of her most important duties. Through her pastors and teachers, she strives to fulfill this task faithfully.

Alexandria. He was a diligent student of Greek literature and philosophy. His chief literary works were written to demonstrate Christianity to be true philosophy centered in Christ, the Word (*Lutheran Worship Hymnal Companion* [CPH, 1992], 574).

- Do you consider the antiquity of Clement's hymn to be an asset or a liability? Why?

- When only are the teachings of ancient teachers worthy of being transmitted and handed down? See Matt. 15:1–9 and 2 Thess. 2:15.
- Our Lutheran Confessions repeatedly and with approval quote the Church Fathers. What does this fact say about Lutheranism's acceptance of the biblical teachings of her spiritual ancestors?

Clement's original hymn is addressed to Christ and contains a number of titles and metaphors. The English text retains as much of the language of the original Greek text as possible.

Text

All five stanzas of this wonderful hymn are addressed to Him who is the object of our faith, our Lord Jesus Christ. The singing of His praise is combined with our humble plea for His aid to form a text of rich substance.

- Who are the “tender youth” and “children” of stanza 1, of whom Christ Himself is the Shepherd? Who guides in love and truth through the wandering pathways of life? See Is. 40:11; John 1:12–13; John 21:15–17; and Rom. 8:14–16.

The redemptive work of Christ, by which He rescues us sinners and the means by which He grants us His salvation, is emphasized in stanzas 2–4.

- What is the “strife” our Lord heals and “sin’s deep disgrace” from which He has saved our race? See Rom. 5:8–11 and 2 Cor. 5:19, 21.
- In what way did our Lord “abase” Himself and thus “give us life”? See Gal. 4:4–5 and Phil. 2:5–11.
- Stanzas 3 and 4 sing of the means by which our Lord helps us in our “mortal pain,” leads us where He has trod and makes our faith strong. Which are these? See 1 Cor. 5:7b–8a; 11:17–34; Ps. 119:105; and Rom. 10:17.
- What aspects of Psalm 23 are incorporated in stanza 4?

Stanza 5 concludes the hymn by returning to the theme of praising Christ that was introduced in stanza 1.

- What words in stanza 5 testify to the unity of all Christians, young and old, in praising the Lord for all His benefits?
- What words in the final stanza remind us that we are joyfully to sing our Lord’s praises throughout our earthly days? See Ps. 34:1; 146:2.

Making the Connection

This hymn leads us to reflect upon the necessity and value of Christian education in both the home and the Church for God’s people of all ages. It serves as an instrument by which we render to the Lord the praises due His holy name.

- “And here our children bring” (st. 1): In what ways do you bring your children to Jesus to learn His Word and sing His praise in your home? In your congregation?

In Closing

In the First Petition of the Lord’s Prayer, we pray, “Hallowed be Thy name.” The Small Catechism explains that God’s name is hallowed among us “when the Word of God is taught in its truth and purity, and we, as the children of God, also lead holy lives according to it” (*LSB*, p. 323). To which we resolutely respond, “Amen.” In Christ and His Word, we have what we need for the most important education of all. By His Spirit, may we ever bring our children to Him and come to Him ourselves that He might touch and bless us, to the glory of God the Father.

- “Jesus, O Christ of God, ... Make our faith strong” (st. 4): What is being done in your home for your growth in Christ and His Word? What opportunities for adult Christian education are offered in your congregation?

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 864.

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, You have entrusted to Your people the task of teaching all nations. Enlighten with the wisdom of Your Holy Spirit those who teach and those who learn that the joyous truth of the Gospel may be known in every generation; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Christian Education).

For the Fruits of His Creation

Lutheran Service Book 894 | study by Gregory Just Wismar

Introduction

Lutheran Service Book is filled with harvests! In 18 different hymns, the words “harvest,” “harvests” or “harvesting” occur at least 27 times. In an era when most people have become distanced from their agricultural roots, it is important not only to understand but to conserve the images of sowing and reaping, harvesting and milling that have been central to the lives of previous generations. Through the text of “For the Fruits of His Creation,” author Fred Pratt Green (1903–2000) brings his readers and singers back to their roots in a number of ways. Not only does he bring to mind the classic life of the farmer, he also expands on that image to make it applicable to all of God’s people. With

careful thought, the Rev. Green puts his two theme words in plural form, writing of “fruits” and of “harvests” in his text. All of us share in the goodness of God’s creation; each of us, in our own way, is a harvester of God’s blessings.

- What mental image or personal experience comes to mind when you hear the word “harvest”?
- Are there members of your extended family currently engaged in some form of agriculture? Have there been farmers in previous generations of your family?
- What traditions or customs that are part of your life now may have come from rural ancestors?

Exploring the Scriptures

The image of soil and seeds and growing plants is a familiar pattern in the teachings of Jesus. The best-known parable using a picture of growing plants is often called “the Parable of the Sower.” Read Mark 4:1–9. In the same chapter is the Parable of the Seed Growing. Read verses 26–27.

- What truth does the second “sowing” parable in Mark 4 disclose as to the ultimate source of all growth?
- What is the appropriate response of the sower who “knows not how” (v. 27) the growth occurs but shares in the bounty when “the harvest has come” (v. 29)?

Although the Christian group at Corinth was in a very urban setting, Paul had no problem using an agricultural reference in encouraging them to share the blessings they had

received as he gathered funds to be brought from Greece for the relief of the saints at Jerusalem. Read 2 Cor. 9:6–12.

- What word of promise does Paul give to those who are generous in their sharing of what God has given them?
- In 2 Cor. 9:9, Paul quotes Ps. 112:9. How can acts of charity “[endure] forever”?

The recurring exclamation in “For the Fruits of His Creation” is “Thanks be to God.” Read 2 Cor. 9:13–15.

- What is the inexpressible gift for which God is to be thanked?
- In what ways are the lives that we live day by day and year by year to be seen as gifts?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Which comes first or should come first: a hymn text or the tune to which it is sung? Usually a text is written and then an appropriate tune is found for it. In the case of “For the Fruits of His Creation,” the process was reversed. The Rev. Fred Pratt Green, an English clergyman, was asked to supply a text for a tune that had already been written. It was suggested that he produce a poem on a harvest theme, which is what he did. Interestingly, the tune for which he originally wrote the hymn text is not the tune to which most people sing the text today. The Welsh melody *Ar hyd y nos*, used for the text in *LSB*, was written centuries before the hymn text was composed.

- Green was specifically asked to write a “harvest” text in 1970. Are there topics underrepresented in our hymnals that could use some hymn texts? How might writers be encouraged to compose new texts for the special topics of our times?

Stanza 3 uses the term “harvests of the Spirit” and rejoices “that love has found us” as it expresses thanks to God.

- What are the “harvests” of our lives that we can share, no matter where we live?
- How does the love of God continue to seek us out and find us throughout our lives?

Text

The first stanza of the hymn celebrates “the fruits of [God’s] creation.” The goodness of God evident in all that grows began at the time of creation itself. Read Gen. 1:11–13.

- How does the creation of vegetation before the creation of animals demonstrate the creative wisdom of God?
- How are the “future needs” of the fullness of God’s creation secured in “earth’s safekeeping”?

Throughout the Old Testament there are celebrations of the extravagant goodness of God. Read Deut. 8:7–10; Ps. 67:5–7; Joel 2:23–24; and Ps. 65:9–13.

- What are some ways in which we receive the blessings of God that are new every morning?
- Does the fact that so much of our society is removed from the actual work of farmers and ranchers in some way lessen our appreciation for the processes that bring food to our tables and for the power of God that establishes all growth? How might we better keep the “providential work” of God in focus?

Making the Connection

The Topical Index of Hymns and Songs, beginning on page 993 of *LSB*, lists “For the Fruits of His Creation” as also usable under the topic of Stewardship (p. 997). In putting the words “fruits” and “harvests” in the plural, Green affirms that all of our lives are engaged in the process of sowing and reaping, planting and growing, and harvesting.

- What statements about fruit are made by Paul in Eph. 5:8–10 and Gal. 5:22–25? How is this fruit to be shown forth in our lives?
- What kind of fruit does James commend to followers of Christ in James 3:18? What are ways in which we can participate in the harvest that James writes about in his letter?

In Closing

Revelation 14:15 has a divine announcement that “the harvest of the earth is fully ripe.” In an individual way, each of our lives is a harvest ready for reaping by the Lord, who has planted every one with His blessing.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 894. The echo of the final words “Thanks be to God” can resound every day in all of our lives as the fruit of the Spirit is cultivated, displayed and distributed with ongoing gratitude.

In the Lord’s Prayer, we pray that God’s will be done; read Matt. 6:10. That passage is reflected three times in the second stanza of the hymn. There are many sections of Scripture that encourage us to find ways to meet the needs of our neighbors. Read Is. 58:9–10; Matt. 25:31–36; and Gal. 5:13–14.

- In what ways do our deeds of kindness show faith active in love?
- How is meeting the physical needs of others a special kind of “help we give our neighbor”?
- The hymn writer speaks of the “just reward of labor.” What are ways that Christians can be advocates for justice in the world of employment?

The hymn is brought to its conclusion in stanza 3 as the writer rejoices that “love has found us.” Read Rom. 5:6–8 and 1 John 4:7–10.

- How is the blessing that we are heirs of God’s love in Christ a “[harvest] of the Spirit”?

Reflecting the text of Mark 4, Green speaks of the “Silent growth while we are sleeping” (st. 1). Jesus tells us that the sower “knows not how” the seed grows and becomes a plant. He reminds us that we are not ever fully able to understand the mysteries of God at work. How did the psalmist exhort God’s people to respond to the wonderful and amazing acts of God? Read Ps. 107:21–22.

- How is the text of *LSB* 894 appropriate to any and every season of the year?
- What does the hymn call each of us to do?

Prayer

Almighty God, You crown the fields with Your blessing and permit us to gather in the fruits of the earth. As stewards of Your creation, may we receive Your gifts in humble thankfulness and share Your bounty with those in need; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Harvest Observance).

We Praise You, O God

Lutheran Service Book 785 | study by Carl C. Fickenschier II

Introduction

In our modern mental calendars (the printed ones, too), Thanksgiving always comes before Christmas. Two days off from school as a teaser for the two weeks coming next month. Weather starting to hint of winter with the prospect of real snow coming soon. The Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade always ending with the appearance of Santa Claus, officially kicking off the Christmas shopping rush.

In the bigger picture, though, Christmas must always precede Thanksgiving. The fact is, without the first Christmas, we'd have nothing for which to give thanks. Appropriately enough, therefore, on the church calendar,

Christmas comes near the beginning, while Thanksgiving in both Canada and the United States, though the dates are set by our secular governments, happens to fall near the end. In the United States in particular, Thanksgiving Day is always the Thursday immediately before or after the Last Sunday of the Church Year.

- Why does that — the end-of-the-church-year location of Thanksgiving — make sense? How does Thanksgiving give a sense of closure — especially with its long-standing agricultural significance?
- Why must all real thanksgiving follow Christmas?

Exploring the Scriptures

Thanksgiving is, of course, always a matter of looking back. Something thankworthy must have been done for us or given to us in the past before we can say thanks. The life of Old Testament Israel was always shaped by its history. God's people were constantly reminded that they had a unique story, that Yahweh had done great things to set them apart to be His and to receive His blessings.

Many biblical scholars point to Deut. 26:1–10 as a focal passage for Israel's liturgy of giving thanks. Read it, and consider how things done in the past give rise to thanksgiving.

- Moses writes Deuteronomy as the Israelites are very soon to enter a new chapter in their history. Where have they been? See Ex. 1:8–11; Deut. 26:5–6.

- Where are they now, and how did they get there? See Deut. 8:2–4; 26:7–9.
- Where are they about to go? See Deut. 26:1–3.
- What is to be Israel's response to this history of theirs? (Read again Deut. 26:1–4.)
- Offering a portion of their blessings, though, is only part of the thanksgiving. What else were God's people to do (Deut. 26:5–10)?
- How is the speaking also an important giving of thanks? (Read Ps. 107:31–32; Phil. 4:4–6; Luke 17:11–19.)
- What does one talk about when speaking thanks (see Ps. 44:1)?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Our great hymn of thanksgiving, too, arises from past events. From 1568 to 1648, the Protestant Dutch waged a long and bitter war for independence from Roman Catholic Spain. In 1597 Adrianus Valerius published the hymn "We Gather Together to Ask the Lord's Blessing" to pray God's help in the war against "the wicked oppressing" (st. 1). While it has held immense popularity as a Thanksgiving hymn, its words are quite specific to a military situation, and less celebrate what God has done than ask for future deliverance.

Thus in 1902, the organist at Brick Presbyterian Church in New York approached a 20-year-old member, Julia B.

Cory (née Cady) (1882–1963), about writing new words that would make the beloved tune more generally useful for a congregation's Thanksgiving service. From the original lyrics, the broad theme of praise carries over. In a lesser way, Cory continues the battle motif of the Dutch hymn (though her "battles we win" has been replaced with "struggles we win" in *LSB* 785:2). She also picks up the reference to God's guidance. Beyond these, the present hymn is clearly Cory's.

- At different times in our country's history — including very recent history — God's help in war has been reason for thanksgiving. Share any such experiences your family may be comfortable telling.
- With what broader struggles has God helped you?

Even in Cory's day, it seems, Thanksgiving preceded Christmas. Her hymn was first sung on that Thanksgiving of 1902, and a few weeks later her father asked her to pen also a stanza for their Christmas service:

Your love you did show us, your only Son sending,
Who came as a babe and whose bed was a stall,
His blest life he gave us and then died to save us;
We praise you, O Lord, for your gift to us all.

(*Christian Worship: Handbook* [Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997], 613)

Text

Read again Deut. 26:1–10 and visualize the scene: a worshiper coming with a basket of goods, presenting it to the priest, reciting the story of his fathers and what God has done for them, setting the firstfruits down before the Lord and worshipping. Now read all three stanzas of “We Praise You, O God,” *LSB* 785.

- Which phrases of the hymn picture a scene much like Deuteronomy 26? Which elements of our liturgy recreate this? What is the significance of *firstfruits*?
- Think of your family's Thanksgiving Day traditions. Which customs carry on the Israelites' example? How might your family better make Thanksgiving a Deuteronomy 26 tribute?

Thanksgiving is so often a family and extended family day. Stanza 2 observes, “We worship You, God of our fathers.”

Making the Connection

Look back on our, your, personal histories. Where have we been? Where are we now and where are we now headed? How have we gotten here?

- Consider this: Our sin separated us from God. Apart from God, what thankworthy things would we get? Jesus' coming to earth, His birth, living, dying and rising, has

- Why does that matter? “God of our fathers” is a statement about history. Is it about God's history or our fathers' (and mothers') or both? (See Ps. 44:1–3; 2 Tim. 1:3–5; 3:13–15.)

- What might the elders around your Thanksgiving table like to say about this?

Thanksgiving, too, we think of as a day of plenty — and ease, like kicking back to watch football. But each year also has “trial,” “tempest” and “perils” (st. 2).

- God's deliverance from what such misfortunes can you include in your thanksgiving?
- How does deliverance *from* something increase our sense of thanks *for* other things?

The hymn addresses praise to God as “Creator” (st. 1). How many of the blessings for which we've been giving thanks — including in our hearts during this study — have been “First Article gifts”? (The First Article of the Apostles' Creed, you recall, is our confession of God the Father, “maker of heaven and earth” [*LSB*, p. 322].) But our hymn begins and ends with recognition of God also as “Redeemer” (sts. 1 and 3).

- How has God redeemed us?
- Redemption must come before any earthly or eternal gifts. How is that true? Read again Julia Cory's Christmas stanza. Would we get even any First Article gifts without redemption first?

taken away our sins. With those separating sins removed, we're back together with God. What do we receive when we're with God? Think bigger!

- So then, as we give thanks for turkey and family and a safe and blessed year — as well as for eternal life — what events in history do we have to thank God for?

In Closing

Every good gift — physical and spiritual, temporal and eternal, earthly and heavenly — is a result of Jesus' cross. And because of Jesus' cross, we have every truly good gift. This means Christmas, which set Jesus on the way to the cross, is indeed before thanksgiving!

- Sing *LSB* 785 — and add the Christmas stanza (first!).

Prayer

Almighty God, Your mercies are new every morning and You graciously provide for all our needs of body and soul. Grant us Your Holy Spirit that we may acknowledge Your goodness, give thanks for Your benefits, and serve You in willing obedience all our days; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Day of Thanksgiving).

Our Father, Who from Heaven Above

Lutheran Service Book 766 | study by Bruce E. Keseman

Introduction

Dad walks into the house at the end of the day. His daughter runs across the room, jumps into her father's lap and exclaims, "Daddy, Daddy, listen to what happened to me today! Oh, but first would you help me, Daddy, 'cause I can't ride my bike by myself. I need you. And Daddy, I heard that a bad man attacked a little girl yesterday, so I'm scared. But I'm not scared when you're with me. Thank you for being here for me."

From the Small Catechism, read the Introduction to the Lord's Prayer and its meaning (*LSB*, p. 323).

- How does the story above help you understand what prayer is? In what ways might the story be inadequate to explain fully the privilege of prayer?
- What is your earliest memory of praying the Lord's Prayer? Who taught you to pray it?

Exploring the Scriptures

Read Luke 11:1–4, part of today's Gospel.

- What request do the disciples make that leads Jesus to teach them — and us — the Lord's Prayer?
- What differences are there between the words here and the words of the Lord's Prayer that you learned? Are any of the differences significant?

Now read Luke 11:5–11. Jesus' story isn't teaching us to pester God until He gives us what we want. Instead, His point is that if an ordinary man will give even to an "impudent" begging neighbor, how much more is our loving Father willing to give to us, His dear children, everything that we need. So, ask away!

- How might the promise in verses 9–10 affect how you pray?

Finish reading today's Gospel, Luke 11:11–13.

- Do even not-so-wise parents *try* to do what is bad for their children? Then what does Jesus' story teach us?
- What does Jesus call us in verse 13? Why? For what might that truth lead you to pray?
- Our Father not only *wants* what is best for His children, but, unlike the rest of us parents, He also *knows* what is best for His children and always *does* what is best for us. How might that certainty affect the way you pray?
- Why might Jesus particularly teach us to ask God for the Holy Spirit in verse 13? The catechism's explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed (*LSB*, p. 323) may provide some hints.

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Martin Luther (1483–1546) wrote "Our Father, Who from Heaven Above" to help us understand the Lord's Prayer. He also wrote hymns to teach other parts of the catechism: the Commandments (*LSB* 581), the Creed (*LSB* 954), Baptism (*LSB* 406) and the Sacrament of the Altar (*LSB* 617).

Stanzas 2–8 of "Our Father" each explain the meaning of a different petition of the Lord's Prayer. So, singing this hymn is like singing the catechism! Luther and the reformers often used hymns to help plant the truths of Scripture into the hearts of the people.

- Educators say that we retain information that we sing better than information we speak. Why do you think that might be? How do you think that should affect the way we teach young Christians?

- Most of us agree that it is important for sermons to be doctrinally pure. Since we retain what we hear sung longer than we retain what we hear spoken, is it even more important for what we sing in worship — and for what our children sing in Sunday school — to teach nothing but the truth? Explain your answer.

Text

In your *LSB*, place ribbons at page 323 (the Lord's Prayer section of the catechism) and hymn 766, so that you can turn back and forth. Then read the Introduction to the Lord's Prayer and stanza 1 of the hymn. Notice that the catechism emphasizes that God is our *Father*, while the hymn emphasizes that He is *our* Father, that is, it focuses on our unity as one family.

- In what ways are each of those emphases important?

- How might each of those emphases influence your prayers?

Read Rom. 8:14–17. It says the Holy Spirit teaches us that we are God’s children and heirs.

- How does your Baptism make it possible for you to call God “Abba,” that is, “Daddy”? What does He give you as an inheritance?
- How might understanding God as “Daddy” alter the way we pray?

Now read the meaning of the First and Second Petitions and stanzas 2–3 of the hymn.

- Can we make God’s name holy? What are some ways you can treat His name as holy?
- What connection is there between the First Petition and the Second Commandment (*LSB*, p. 321)?
- What is God’s kingdom?
- How are you made a citizen of God’s kingdom? Look at Luke 12:32 and Rom. 10:17.
- What is God’s will for you and all people? See 1 Tim. 2:3–6. How does God accomplish His will in our lives?

Read stanza 5 and the Fourth Petition, where Jesus teaches us to ask God to supply our earthly needs.

- Look at everything the catechism and hymn call “daily bread.” How might you be prevented from eating a slice of bread if God didn’t provide all those gifts? Consider everything necessary to permit a farmer’s grain of wheat to grow and then be harvested, milled, processed, baked, distributed and bought so that you can eat that bread.

Making the Connection

The Lord’s Prayer is a model prayer, that is, Jesus uses it to teach us to pray (Luke 11:1–4). So, for each petition of the Lord’s Prayer, write at least three things for which the petition prompts you to pray. For instance, “Our Father” might cause you to thank God for your Baptism, “Thy kingdom

- In what ways can you express your thanks to God for supplying your daily bread?

Now read stanzas 6–7 and the Fifth and Sixth Petitions.

- What would happen to our prayers if Christ had not given His life for the forgiveness of our sins?
- What does the Fifth Petition teach us to do when it is difficult for us to forgive someone?
- Why do we need to pray, “Lead us not into temptation”? What are we asking God to do?
- How does our Lord rescue us when we are tempted? (For examples, see 1 Cor. 10:13 and Eph. 6:13–20.)

Read the Seventh Petition and stanza 8 of the hymn.

- In what way can this petition be called a summary of the entire Lord’s Prayer?
- Why might Luther teach us that “a blessed end” is the ultimate way God delivers us from evil? How does 2 Tim. 4:18, which was probably written by Paul from the equivalent of death row, assure you as you pray and as you live?

Finally, read stanza 9 and the Conclusion to the Lord’s Prayer.

- What does “amen” mean?
- How are Jesus’ death and resurrection essential for you to be able to say “amen” with confidence?
- How can you be sure that your prayers are pleasing to God and that He will answer them?

come” could lead you to ask that God protect missionaries as they speak Christ’s kingdom-expanding Gospel, and “lead us not into temptation” might prompt you to ask for help with a specific temptation in your life.

In Closing

- Look back at the story of the father and daughter at the beginning of this study. In order to better teach what prayer is, how might you change the story? How could the story better show how important Jesus’ death and resurrection are to your prayers?
- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 766.

Prayer

O Lord, let Your merciful ears be attentive to the prayers of Your servants, and by Your Word and Spirit teach us how to pray that our petitions may be pleasing before You; 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 Proper 12C).

O God, Our Help in Ages Past

Lutheran Service Book 733 | study by Robert E. Smith

Introduction

On a clear, cool, crisp Tuesday morning, children went to school, mothers and fathers went to work, farmers planned for the harvest. Everything was normal — until the news came that terrorists had flown airplanes into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and a field in rural Pennsylvania. No one alive then will ever forget where they were on Sept. 11, 2001. Life would never be the same.

Disasters almost always come without warning. They destroy lives and property and smash dreams. They bring worry, uncertainty and dread to everyone they affect.

Discuss a disaster or tragedy that affected you or your community directly.

- Where were you when the crisis came?
- “Where was God when this happened? If God is a good God, how could He allow this to happen?” people often ask at such times. How do you think we should answer these questions?
- How do Christians face a life where suffering, grief and death await them? Who or what can we trust in this world?

Exploring the Scriptures

Isaac Watts wrote “O God, Our Help in Ages Past” as a prayer for uncertain times. Read Ps. 90:1–6, which he paraphrased in this hymn.

- According to this psalm, where is home for God’s people? How long does this home last?
- When did God become our God? Will there ever be a time when He will cease to be our Lord?
- According to verse 3, what does God do with all people?
- In verses 4–5, what do a thousand years seem like to God? What is the life span of people like in comparison?

The rest of Psalm 90 explains why God returns us to dust and what this means for us. Read Ps. 90:7–11.

- Why is God angry? What does His wrath do?
- How does Moses describe this life under God’s wrath?

Now the psalm turns toward how God’s children can live in this broken world. Read Ps. 90:12–17.

- Why should we count our days?
- How does God’s grace — His steadfast love — make a difference in our lives? What makes the work we do succeed?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Dr. Isaac Watts (1674–1748), the father of English hymnody, wrote some 600 hymns, including “Joy to the World” (*LSB* 387), “Come, We That Love the Lord” (*LSB* 669), “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” (*LSB* 425) and 10 other hymns in *Lutheran Service Book*. He urged English churches to use songs that were not strict translations of the psalms, and he tapped into Christian understandings of the Scripture and emotions.

- Why do you think Watts’ hymns are still so popular, even after 300 years? How do they compare to hymns like “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” (*LSB* 656) and “If God Himself Be for Me” (*LSB* 724)?

In Watts’ lifetime, churches and pastors that operated outside of the Church of England faced persecution as mild

as being barred from university studies and as severe as imprisonment. Queen Anne of England (1665–1714) tolerated these “dissenting” congregations and pastors. As her death approached, however, many of her subjects worried that her half-brother, James Stuart (1688–1766), a Roman Catholic, would be the next king. Watts and his Puritan colleagues feared a return to serious attacks on their fellow clergy and congregations. Watts wrote “O God, Our Help in Ages Past” to comfort his congregation in this anxious time.

- As Americans who enjoy religious freedom, it is hard for us to imagine that the government would harass and punish its citizens because of their faith. Do you think it is possible that the American government might require churches to act sinfully? If this were to come to pass, how should a Lutheran respond?

Text

Watts wrote this hymn as an extended prayer in collect form. A collect is a formal prayer used in the liturgy. This kind of prayer has four traditional parts: the invocation of a member of the Holy Trinity, a clause describing God, a petition asking God for a blessing, and a closing phrase bringing in the other two persons of the Godhead.

- Read through the text of “O God, Our Help in Ages Past.” Which member of the Trinity does the hymn address (st. 1)? How does Watts have us describe God (sts. 2–5)? What is the petition this collect requests God to grant us (st. 6)?

Weather can change very quickly. One minute the sun can be shining, and the next a thunderstorm can break with heavy rain, thunder, lightning and strong winds. When you see the storm coming, you look for a shelter — strong,

dry and able to take the wind. The first and second stanzas describe God as a shelter in the storms of life.

- Read Is. 25:4 and Is. 4:2–6. Who does God protect? What images does Isaiah use for His aid? How does God describe the security of life after Christ’s Second Coming? How is God a “shelter from the stormy blast” (st. 1) “while troubles last” (st. 6) for us?

In this hymn, stanzas 2–4 compare the eternity of God to the few short years of this mortal life. Watts’ original text included several other stanzas that emphasize the frailty of earthly powers. Like a storm that soon passes, the powers of this world, natural or human, will pass away as well.

- Read Ps. 103:14–19. How is God’s eternity a comfort for us?

Making the Connection

Your life is filled with moments of joy and sorrow. Sometimes disaster strikes with great loss, grief and suffering. In these moments, you may alternate between being helped and helping others. Jesus, our Emmanuel, is with us always, until the end of time itself (Matt. 28:20).

Read the following passages. How is God “our guard while troubles last” (st. 6)? How is He “our eternal home” (st. 6)?

- Matt. 6:25–34
- Matt. 25:31–40
- Rom. 8:16–18, 26–30
- 2 Cor. 5:1–10
- Phil. 3:17–21
- Phil. 4:6–7

In Closing

“Where was God on 9/11?” The question returns with every disaster, whether caused by humans or by a fallen world that seems out of control. God was there in the firemen, policemen, doctors, nurses, pastors and countless people who came to aid, to comfort and to heal. God suffers when we suffer. The Holy Spirit shares our pain and prays for us and with us when we cannot find the words.

- So, we remember with Luther what it means to pray, “But deliver us from evil.” Read together the meaning of the Seventh Petition of the Lord’s Prayer from the Small Catechism (*LSB*, pp. 324–25).

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 733.

Prayer

Most merciful Father, with compassion You hear the cries of Your people in great distress. Be with all who now endure affliction and calamity, bless the work of those who bring rescue and relief, and enable us to aid and comfort those who are suffering that they may find renewed hope and purpose; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Day of National or Local Tragedy).