

THE WORD IN

Song



Hymn of the Day Studies for

THE SEASON AFTER
PENTECOST

SERIES B



THE
LUTHERAN CHURCH
MISSOURI SYNOD

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Come, Holy Ghost, Creator Blest

Lutheran Service Book 498/499 | study by J.H. Sorenson

Introduction

“We don’t pray for the Holy Spirit!” said the young man to his pastor. The pastor was startled at first and wondered where this was coming from. He wondered if this man was paying attention to the service on Sunday morning and doubted the depth of his confirmation instruction, but of course did not say so out loud.

- How would you respond to that statement?
- What are some ways in which we do pray for the Holy Spirit?
- What does the Holy Spirit use to get through to people? (Hint: Means of Grace.)

Exploring the Scriptures

In John 14:16–26, Jesus promised to send His faithful disciples “another Helper ... the Spirit of truth,” who would remind them of everything He told them and be with them always.

- When was this promise first fulfilled?
- How does the Holy Spirit speak to us today?

In Rom. 8:5–11, Paul teaches that the Spirit gives life while the flesh means death.

- What does Paul mean by “life” in the Spirit?
- By contrast, what is “[living] according to the flesh”? Read Titus 3:5–7.

- What is the washing referred to here?
- Where does the power in Baptism come from?

This hymn is packed with biblical references. Every stanza has several, starting with Ps. 104:30.

- What other passages can you think of that tie the Holy Spirit to creation?
- What are the “graces sevenfold” (st. 3) in the hymn (Is. 11:2)?
- How do these differ from the “fruit of the Spirit” (Gal. 5:22)?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

“Come, Holy Ghost, Creator Blest” is one of the oldest and most highly respected of the ancient Latin hymns. It was written in the ninth century, but scholars are not sure of its author. The most likely one is Rabanus Maurus (c. 776–856), a monk, scholar, abbot and archbishop of Mainz in Germany.

This hymn found its way into many books of daily prayer and orders of worship over the centuries. To this day, it is prescribed or recommended to be used in ordination rites in Roman Catholic, Episcopal and Lutheran churches, including the rite in *Lutheran Service Book Agenda*. It is also used for the dedication of churches and several other occasions, such as the coronation of kings and queens of England.

- What makes this hymn an appropriate choice for the Holy Trinity?
- What is the value in a hymn being used by many denominations of Christians?

- Why do you think this hymn is widely used at ordinations?

Text

Many translations of this hymn have been made. Among them is one by Martin Luther into German. Our translation is by Englishman Edward Caswall (1814–78). The tune in 498 is a version of the one Luther used. The one in 499 comes from the ninth century.

- Why do you think the hymn reads “Holy Ghost” instead of “Holy Spirit”?
- Might the use of such traditional language fail to communicate with people today?

As the first stanza links the Holy Spirit to creation and filling the hearts of believers, stanza 2 calls on the Spirit as “Counselor,” or “Helper” (ESV).

- What event does “tongues of fire” refer to?

Romans 8:26 reads, “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.”

- What comfort and hope does this passage give you?
- Who is “our wily foe” (st. 5)?

In John 14, Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit will teach us all that we need to know.

Making the Connection

No more comforting and encouraging words have ever been spoken than Paul’s passage on life in the Spirit in Romans 8. This hymn reflects not only that passage, but most of the scriptural teachings and reflections on the Holy Spirit. The point of view of this hymn is corporate. It is a prayer on

In Closing

The pastor talking to the young man about prayer for the Holy Spirit rightly understood that he had other “issues” besides prayer for the Holy Spirit. He recalled the prayer said every Sunday at that time, “Grant to Thy Church Thy Holy Spirit and the wisdom that cometh down from above ...” He remembered that every service began “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” The catechism teaches that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one God, and all interact together. The Word and the Sacraments bear the Spirit’s power to create and strengthen faith.

- Why is it especially meaningful to call on the Holy Spirit to enliven the Church’s mission today?
- How does the Holy Spirit move and motivate Christian people to their mission in our time?
- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 498 or 499.

- What doctrine do we ask to be taught in stanza 6?

Stanza 7 is called a “doxology,” a stanza of praise to God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Such stanzas are marked with a small triangle in *LSB*. Many congregations stand to sing these stanzas.

- Is this a good or not-so-good idea?

behalf of “us,” meaning the worshipping community gathered in prayer and song, but it applies to every worshiper as well, a heartfelt prayer for all the Spirit’s gifts and activity. This hymn is over a thousand years old, but its thoughts are current and important for today.

Prayer

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

Sing Praise to God, the Highest Good

Lutheran Service Book 819 | study by Frank J. Pies

Introduction

No doubt you have asked it of yourself or talked about it with others. It is one of the most basic questions of humanity. It concerns the meaning and goal of life. In simple terms, it may be stated, “What is the ultimate purpose of my being, existing and living?”

If you were to answer this question solely on the basis of human intellect and logic, the focus would probably be an anthropocentric, man-centered one. If, however, you drew upon and listened to the revelation of the Triune God in Holy Scripture, the answer would be a theocentric, God-centered, Christocentric, Christ-centered one, the correct one.

- What are some of the things contrary to Scripture that people embrace as the main purpose of their lives?

Exploring the Scriptures

In the *LSB* catalog of hymns suggested for use in the Divine Service throughout the Church Year, “Sing Praise to God, the Highest Good” is selected as the Hymn of the Day on the basis of both the three-year and the one-year lectionaries for a total of five separate Sundays.

This frequency is a testimony to the hymn’s biblical content and its expression of the central truths of the Faith woven throughout the fabric of Scripture.

The Psalms appointed for these Sundays are in wonderful concert and agreement with each other.

- What activity is “good” and “befits” God’s people? See Ps. 92:1 and Ps. 33:1–3.
- What, therefore, are we called upon to do? Read Ps. 103:1. Why? See Ps. 115:1.

To praise God in the biblical sense is chiefly to proclaim His person and marvelous works, reciting to Him what He reveals and first says to us.

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Johann Jakob Schütz (1640–1690) was a learned man, a licensed attorney who practiced civil and canon law in the city of Frankfurt, Germany. Though not a public servant of the Church, he was devoutly pious and zealous for the Faith. He authored our hymn, which first appeared in his 1675 tract, “A Small Book of Christian Encouragement.”

- According to the biblical witness in Is. 43:7, 20–21; 60:21; Rom. 11:36; and Col. 1:15–16, what is the end purpose of all creation?

The Lord God has made everything for His own sake. He has redeemed and sanctified His people for His glory and praise. Our ultimate goal in life is Christ (Phil. 1:21), to live in His forgiveness and love, to live unto Him as children of the heavenly Father by the Holy Spirit, all to the glory, laud and honor of His holy name.

In keeping with this purpose, Scripture repeatedly exhorts us to praise and extol our God. To this end, the Hymn of the Day serves us admirably.

- What does Mark 2:13–17, the Gospel for Epiphany 8B and Proper 3B, show us about Christ’s divine love for sinners and His rescue of them?
- How does Christ’s unequivocal promise in verse 33 of the Gospel for Epiphany 8A, Matt. 6:24–34, relate to the Father’s tender care of His people?
- According to Mark 8:1–9, the Gospel for Trinity 7, how did Jesus view the crowd and supply their pressing need? What does this show us about Him and the Father’s gracious will for us revealed through the Son?

In the Small Catechism’s explanation of the First Article of the Apostles’ Creed, the Christian confesses faith in God and in His unmerited kindness by which He gives and sustains life.

- How is this scriptural declaration in alignment with the end statement of the explanation: “For all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him” (*LSB*, 322)?

- Christians sometimes think that their service in the church is not as important or valuable as that of the pastor or some other public servant. Why is this outlook wrong according to 1 Peter 2:4–5, 9–10? How does Schütz’s contribution as a hymn writer exemplify the “priesthood of all believers”?

- What does Rom. 12:3–8 tell us about the place and service of each member in Christ’s Body, the Church? What gifts and abilities have you received from the Lord for use in His kingdom?

Though Schütz’s hymn was warmly welcomed in the Lutheran Church as a strong, doctrinally pure paean of praise, Schütz himself eventually drifted from Lutheranism and espoused teachings contrary to the Word of God.

- What warning emerges from this sad turn of events in Schütz’s life? How are Christians kept steadfast in the truth of God’s Word? See Eph. 4:11–16.

Text

It is generally agreed that one of the most memorable things about the hymn is its lovely, grand refrain, “To God all praise and glory!” The repetition of this reverent summons to God’s elect summarizes the hymn and reinforces its theme, helping the singer remember that all praise and glory belong to God.

- What is the significance of the adjective “all” in the refrain? Why does all the glory belong to God? See Gen. 32:9–10; Ps. 96:1–9; Is. 42:8; 1 Cor. 4:7.

The first stanza begins with an invitation to praise God, followed by the announcement of His perfect character and the manifestation of His goodness and love in His works of creation and redemption. Stanza 2 elaborates further on the Lord’s goodness in the kingdom of His might, His left-hand rule.

Making the Connection

It is not difficult to understand how this sturdy hymn has become part of the repertoire of congregational praise and thanksgiving. It catechizes the baptized, teaching us why God is worthy to receive all praise and glory. It effects this divine praise, serving as a tool by which we acknowledge Him as the highest good and place Him in His rightful, honored position among us. This magnification of the Lord is the ultimate end of our lives as His created, redeemed, holy people.

In Closing

The Latin phrase *Soli Deo gloria* is widely used in the Church as another way of declaring, “To God alone be glory.” God grant us His Holy Spirit that our lives may more fully be punctuated S. D. G. and our lips ever shout and sing, “To God all praise and glory!”

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 819.

- What light do Mark 10:17–18 and James 1:17 shed on the goodness of God?
- What are some of the ways that God’s goodness and power are manifested in His creation and preservation of all things? See Heb. 11:3; Ps. 100:3; Ps. 145:15–19; Matt. 5:44–45.
- What works of the Lord are the highest revelation of His goodness and love? See Heb. 1:1–3; Rom. 5:6–11; James 1:18.
- What comfort do you derive from knowing that God’s “eye is never sleeping” and that “all things are just and good and right” in His ordering of everything?

Stanzas 3 and 4 praise God for blessing His people in the kingdom of grace, His right-hand rule. The final stanza artfully amplifies the hymn’s theme by calling upon the entire confessing Church to glorify God and proclaim aloud the wondrous story of Christ.

- When the distressed sinner acknowledges his need for divine mercy and humbly seeks the Lord, what happens (st. 3)? See Matt. 11:28; John 6:37.
- What beautiful biblical images in stanza 4 portray the Lord’s blessings bestowed upon His people? See Ps. 23:1; John 10:11–16; Ps. 46:1; Ps. 18:2; Is. 66:13.
- In directing us to “Cast ev’ry idol from its throne,” stanza 5 simultaneously declares the reason for such demolition. What is it? See Is. 42:8; 48:11.

- How do you praise God when He fills your soul with “healing balm,” when He stills “ev’ry faithless murmur” (st. 1), and cheers you with His peace?
- How is the Lord praised when you “proclaim / Aloud the wondrous story” (st. 5)?
- Because of sin, our praise of God in this world is imperfect; yet because of Christ it is acceptable and pleasing unto the Lord. Where will our praises be perfect? See Rev. 4:1–11; 7:9–12; 19:1–8.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, God of all grace, govern our hearts that we may never forget Your blessings but steadfastly thank and praise You for all Your goodness in this life until, with all Your saints, we praise You eternally in Your heavenly kingdom; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen (Thanksgiving to God, *LSB*, 310).

O Day of Rest and Gladness

Lutheran Service Book 906 | study by Paul Gregory Alms

Introduction

We all have special days that we mark and remember. We observe birthdays, anniversaries, days that remind us of loved ones or memories. Countries have holidays that bind their people together. In the United States, we can think of the Fourth of July or Memorial Day. The Church also has special days. In fact, we have an entire calendar year full of them: the Church Year. Some days are “more special” than others, like Christmas or Easter, but the Church Year calendar is full of days we mark to remember and give thanks to God for His many and diverse blessings.

But there is one church day that is easy to overlook, even though it is the foundation and chief of all church days: Sunday. We can take for granted that Sunday is simply the day we “go to church” and never think about it again.

Exploring the Scriptures

There are many scriptural allusions and stories embedded in this hymn. The first is the theme of light. Read Gen. 1:1–5.

- How does the first day of creation open?
- How would you describe the scene?
- How does light enter? Where is God’s Word in all of this?

Another biblical theme in the hymn is rest. Read Deut. 5:12–15.

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Christopher Wordsworth (1807–85) is the chief author of this hymn text. (A modern author wrote stanza 3.) Wordsworth was a bishop in the Church of England in the 19th century. He was a rather prolific author and wrote books on church history, archaeology in Greece and biblical commentaries. He also wrote a book of hymns with one hymn for every Sunday of the Church Year (*The Holy Year*). “O Day of Rest and Gladness” takes up that theme of Sunday as the day of gathering and God’s actions for His people.

This hymn is placed in the *LSB* section for the “Beginning of Service.” It works well in that position since it explores the different ways God has acted and continues to act for His people on the first day of the week. Sunday is not

But there are depths of scriptural and theological meaning in that first day of the week. Christians have from the very first day of Easter been gathering on Sunday to be in the presence of Christ and receive His gifts. But Sunday is not a haphazard, arbitrary choice for a day of worship. Worshiping on Sunday connects us to every generation of Christians from every age and also to the very roots of the Bible.

- What days or holidays are especially meaningful to you? Why? How do you celebrate them?
- What sort of Sunday routines do you have? Early or late service? Brunch after church? Music to get ready with?

- What does God command the people of Israel to do on the seventh day?
- What reason does He give here in this text? (Notice this is different from Ex. 20:8–11.)
- How does Matt. 11:28–30 fit in for us as Christians?

Read Ps. 118:24.

- What day do you think this psalm has in mind?
- How does this “day” relate to Christ’s resurrection? To eternal life?
- How do we experience this new day?

legislated as the mandatory day of worship for Christians in the New Testament era, but the hymn does a good job of laying out the “specialness” of Sunday for us as Christians.

- Why do Christians worship on Sunday and not on Saturday?

Text

The first stanza of this hymn is a description of what happens on Sunday for Christians.

- What gifts are mentioned that are given on this day?
- How do we receive these gifts?
- Read Is. 6:3. How does this stanza see this text as part of our worship?

- When do we sing “Holy, holy, holy”?

Light is the main theme of the second stanza. However, it is not light in general, but light in three Bible stories that happen on the first day of the week. These three stories, says the hymn, give a “threefold light.”

- What three stories are mentioned?
- We have looked at creation already. Read Matt. 28:1–10. How does light play a part in this text?
- Read Eph. 5:6–14. How does this passage connect resurrection and light?

Making the Connection

This hymn text is a meditation on God’s actions for us that focuses on Sunday. Sunday is, of course, the day of gathering to receive God’s gifts. The themes of light and rest play a prominent part in the hymn.

- How do you experience rest during worship?
- How does God shine His light on you?

In Closing

Sunday is a glorious day in the history of salvation. Creation, Christ’s resurrection and Pentecost all occurred on that “day of joy and light” (st. 1). But our hymn makes clear that the most wonderful thing about Sunday is that Christ is present among us now, renewing us with heavenly might. God’s people respond, singing, “Holy, holy, holy,” with all the company of heaven. Truly Sunday is “Most beautiful, most bright” (st. 1)!

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 906.

- Pentecost is the third story of light. Read Acts 2:1–4. Where do you see light in these verses?

The third stanza describes “this blest day of light” from our perspective. The mighty light-bringing acts of God in the Scriptures are now present among us.

- What actions of God are mentioned?
- How do we mark our sanctuaries with lights (candles, etc.) that accentuate what this hymn proclaims?

The final stanza pictures God’s people on a journey toward “our rest ... / Our endless Sabbath day.”

- How does Heb. 4:1 describe that final destination?

Our life is a “pilgrim way” (st. 4), journeying toward our eternal life with Christ.

- In what ways does our gathering together on Sunday give us strength for the journey?

Prayer

Eternal God, Your Son, Jesus Christ, is our true Sabbath rest. Help us to keep each day holy by receiving His Word of comfort that we may find our rest in Him, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Proper 4B).

Rise! To Arms! With Prayer Employ You

Lutheran Service Book 668 | study by Bernard J. Schey

Introduction

The nature of warfare between nations changes from century to century. Spiritual warfare, however, never changes. Satan is always the enemy, and every human being is always the target. How can we fight him? While it is true that many modern Christians use prayer to replace the life-giving Sacraments, we must not neglect prayer in response to that mistake. The prayer of a Christian is indeed a weapon

to be used daily against Satan's fiery darts (Eph. 6:10–20) and his ravenous appetite (1 Peter 5:6–11).

- How has Satan attacked you recently? Is there a particular weakness you have?
- Is it possible to use prayer as an effective agent against Satan's wiles?

Exploring the Scriptures

The great apostle St. Paul was quite familiar with the uniform of a Roman soldier, and he uses that image to conclude his letter to the Ephesian Christians (6:10–20). He likens the physical equipment of the centurion to the spiritual defenses which we now have through the waters of Holy Baptism, and he calls upon us to use them.

- Get a picture of a Roman soldier in uniform and identify the parts of that uniform with the spiritual weaponry Paul describes. Does all of this resemble modern U.S. military battle gear or police officers in riot gear?

In another one of his letters, St. Paul assures the Roman Christians that absolutely nothing can separate them from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus, our Savior (Rom. 8:31–39).

- When you pray, do you think about the fact that Jesus is sitting at the right hand of His Father and ours, and that He is continually interceding for us? How is this a comfort?

St. Paul also compares spiritual warfare to a footrace, wherein many compete but only one wins the prize (1 Cor. 9:24–25). He's not saying that only one person will be saved, but he is exhorting each of us to keep our own eyes on the goal of heaven.

- Do you ever feel as though you're dragging behind in such a race? How can you get a "second wind," as runners call it? See 1 Cor. 10:11–13.

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Wilhelm Erasmus Arends (1677–1721) was a parish pastor in two small towns in Germany. He wrote this hymn a little over 300 years ago. He came from a school of Christian thought of his time known as "Pietism." This movement was a reaction against what was seen as a lack of Christian virtues among the Lutherans of Germany. While this is even now and always has been a problem for Christians (see Romans 7), the Pietists sought to deal with the problem by motivating through the Law and not the Gospel.

- Can this hymn, which calls us to prayer, be misunderstood and misused if we ignore the Means of Grace that Jesus has given us?
- Why is it important to call one another to more earnest zeal by using the good news of forgiveness rather than the Law? Do we use the Law at all when admonishing a brother or sister in Christ?

The Pietist movement was centered in the German city of Halle, and it is from this city that many missionaries were sent out, especially to North America. Henry Melchior Muhlenberg (1711–87), considered by many to be the patriarch of Lutheranism in the United States, who started the first organized Lutheran synod in America, was a student of the school of Pietism.

- Can you detect missionary zeal in the words of the hymn?

Text

This hymn is filled with what we call "imperatives," another word for "commands." Note how we sing "Rise!" and then "Wield God's Word" (st. 1) and "Wisely fight" (st. 3). There's no doubt that we are being called to action in this hymn.

- Do these imperatives/commands stir you to do what they call for? Or do they prompt other reactions?

The first stanza has the clearest battlefield imagery, with a call to action and the realistic portrayal of Satan's viciousness. Note the striking similarity of this stanza with stanzas 2 and 3 of *LSB* 656, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

- What do Is. 7:14 and Matt. 1:21–23 tell us about having the Champion of champions on our side in spiritual warfare? He is Emmanuel/Immanuel!

The second stanza is the one that likens life in Christ to a footrace. One prepares for a footrace deliberately and for a long period of time; athletic skill doesn't just happen.

- Note how St. Paul uses both military and athletic images to make his point to Timothy. See 2 Tim. 2:3–5; 4:7–8; and James 4:1–10, especially verse 7.

Making the Connection

This hymn, coupled with a grand tune, calls us to deliberate spiritual warfare using all the weaponry that Christ has given to us.

- How can you "Wield God's Word" in your life to fight Satan and intercede for others?
- Is prayer a part of that study/knowledge of the Word of God?

In Closing

As was said before, the nature of warfare between and within nations changes from age to age, but the nature of spiritual warfare never does. The chief weapon against our adversary, Satan, is the Word of God and all the blessings that are contained in it. Jesus has conquered Satan by destroying his power (John 19:30; 2 Tim. 1:10).

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 668.

The third stanza is an exhortation to be wise, first in terms of how long it will be until the Lord returns and second in terms of how short a time each of us has upon this earth. Arends was not limiting God's grace to just so many chances for each of us, but he was rightly suggesting that we humans are here for such a very short time, just as Moses taught in Psalm 90.

- What does Rom. 13:11–14 teach us about our allotted time here, and of the fact that God has set a time for His Son's return in glory? It is true that the "time is fleeting." Yet we need not despair, since we know what God in Christ has done for us to make us His own. See Rom. 8:1–2.

- How difficult is it to put temptation away from one's life? See Gen. 4:6–7.

- What is "heav'nly treasure" (st. 2)? How are the Sacraments (Holy Baptism, Confession and Absolution, the Lord's Supper) to be used in this spiritual warfare? Remember also that "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" are sung prayers as well as being confessions of the faith that saves us (Col. 3:16).

Prayer

Almighty and eternal God, Your Son, Jesus, triumphed over the prince of demons and freed us from bondage to sin. Help us to stand firm against every assault of Satan, and enable us always to do Your will; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Proper 5B).

Creator Spirit, by Whose Aid

Lutheran Service Book 500 | study by Gifford A. Grobien

Introduction

In the Small Catechism, the three articles of the Creed are categorized as “Creation,” “Redemption” and “Sanctification,” respectively (*LSB*, pp. 322–3). Sometimes this leads us to think that creation is the work only of God the Father, redemption is the work only of God the Son, and sanctification is the work only of God the Spirit. But this is wrong! These categories have to do with the works of God, not splitting God up into three categories. God the Holy Trinity — Father, Son and Holy Spirit — is active in all of His works for mankind. All three persons work to create, redeem and sanctify.

Today’s hymn is a prayer to the Holy Spirit, calling upon Him not only as sanctifier, but as the one true God who creates and redeems, along with the Father and the Son.

- Do you often think of the Holy Spirit as “Creator”? What does it mean that He is Creator? What does He do as Creator?
- Think of the Explanation to the First Article of the Creed in Luther’s Small Catechism. What are the benefits we receive from God as His creatures?
- Is what we think most of the Spirit giving, namely, faith, also properly part of God’s creation?

Exploring the Scriptures

The Scriptures speak extensively about the person of the Holy Spirit. Read Gen. 1:1–3, the first place He is mentioned.

- What is happening in this passage? Who is referred to?
- How does God create? Does it seem like the Spirit is actually doing anything in this passage?

Many other passages refer to creation, and some expand on the work of the Holy Spirit. Read Ps. 104:24–30.

- What is the Spirit’s role in creation in this passage? Does this help explain what the Spirit is doing in the Genesis passage?
- Does this passage describe only what happened in the beginning, or is this creative work ongoing? How does this relate to the Explanation of the First Article of the Creed?

Although we have emphasized the creative work of the Holy Spirit, that is not His only work. Read Eph. 1:13–14 and Rom. 8:8–17.

- What is the work of the Spirit according to these passages?
- What are the different ways that the Spirit causes us to persevere in salvation?

Finally, let’s try to connect the hymn to the Gospel for the day, Mark 4:26–34.

- Does the Holy Spirit have anything to do with Christ’s preaching? What about His preaching in parables?
- In the parables about the growth of grain and the growth of a mustard seed, Christ compares the kingdom of God to this kind of growth. How does this suggest a comparison between the creative work of the Spirit (like the growth of seeds) with the redeeming and sanctifying work of the Spirit (like the spread of the kingdom of God)? How is all of this work, in a sense, *creative*?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Poet John Dryden published this hymn translation in 1693. It is actually a paraphrase; he rendered the medieval Latin hymn *Veni Creator Spiritus* (“Come, Creator Spirit”) in his characteristic style of rhyming couplets. The Latin hymn was popular and often translated. In fact, *LSB* includes three other paraphrases of the text: hymns 497, 498 and 499.

- Briefly compare Dryden’s translation with the other renditions. What differences in style do you notice? Are there different emphases in content? If so, what are they? How does the couplet style serve and shape the themes of the hymn?

Veni Creator Spiritus dates from the ninth century. Historically, it was sung at Vespers, services of ordination and for church building consecrations.

- When is “Creator Spirit, by Whose Aid” usually sung in your congregation?
- How do the themes of “Creator Spirit, by Whose Aid” relate to the themes of Vespers: the completion of daily work, rest and approaching night?

Text

Although this hymn has been often translated, Dryden highlights the Spirit’s creative work by calling Him “Creator Spirit” in the first line and title. Besides His work in creating the world, which we studied earlier, He creates faith and spiritual gifts in the Christian.

- How does Dryden express this truth in stanza 1?
- Where in the hymn as a whole does Dryden refer to the creation of spiritual life and the flourishing of the gifts of that spiritual life?

Making the Connection

“Creator Spirit, by Whose Aid” extols both the divinity and work of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit is the presence of Christ in our lives, not only working faith and sanctification, but assuring us of this salvation.

- Share with the group a few lines in the hymn that express the way the Holy Spirit is working these things in your life.

In Closing

God’s work of creation, redemption and sanctification is accomplished by all three persons of the Holy Trinity. In this hymn, we have considered especially how the Holy Spirit is involved in the works of God. As Creator, He is present and moves over all creation as the Giver of physical and spiritual life. As Redeemer, He preaches the truth of Christ and assures you of your salvation, calling to remembrance through the Word all that Christ has said and done as Redeemer. As Sanctifier, He gives you a variety of gifts to strengthen you in your faith and life — especially the forgiveness of sins, which is at the heart of Luther’s explanation of the Spirit’s sanctifying work.

The striking phrase “May we Your living temples be” at the end of stanza 1 refers to 1 Cor. 3:16–17.

- What is a temple? What makes a temple holy?
- What makes us holy: our own works and actions or the sanctifying presence of the Holy Spirit?

The phrase “Your sev’nfold gifts to us supply” (st. 3) speaks of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, which are listed in Is. 11:2–3.

- Read these verses. What are the gifts of the Spirit mentioned here? (If you only found six, there’s no problem with your Bible. The seventh gift comes from the ancient Greek translation but is not in the Hebrew versions.)

In stanza 4, Dryden says, “To You, O Paraclete, we raise / Unending songs of thanks and praise.” *Paraclete* is a Greek word that means “advocate,” “helper” or “comforter.”

- In John 14:16–17, 26; 15:26; and 16:13–15, what is the work of the “Helper,” or Holy Spirit?

We believe and confess that the Holy Spirit is God, one of the persons of the Holy Trinity.

- Discuss why the Holy Spirit’s divinity is necessary for the work that He does in your life.
- How is the truth of His divinity a great comfort to you in your situation today?

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 500.

Prayer

Almighty God, You gave Your only-begotten Son to take our nature upon Himself. Grant that we, Your adopted children by grace, may daily be renewed by Your Holy Spirit; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen (For spiritual renewal, *LSB*, p. 312).

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.

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).

Evening and Morning

Lutheran Service Book 726 | study by Larry A. Peters

Introduction

We work hard to distance our lives from suffering, yet it still comes near us. Some face it with anger and resentment; others with grim resolve. Some seem to meet suffering with surprising joy and peace. How can we learn to meet suffering and trials with faith? Where do you obtain that peace and joy which are not diminished by the troubles of this mortal life?

If you knew of the life of hymn writer Paul Gerhardt (1607–76), you might find him a model for maintaining the holy joy of faith amid trials. Although his life was marked with personal suffering and loss during the Thirty Years' War, his hymns radiate joy. Despite a pastoral vocation lived out among persecution and conflict, his heart overflowed with faith and the peace that passes understanding.

Exploring the Scriptures

The readings for today all speak to the storms of life and the God who is with us in these storms and even stills them. Read Ps. 107:28–32.

- How do verses 28–30 preview the Gospel for the day?
- How might the disciples have benefited from these words prior to entering that boat with Jesus?

Now read Psalm 124. Notice how our enemies are described in this psalm as a raging flood that seeks to sweep us away and kill us.

- When have you felt like this was happening to you? What were the enemies that threatened you?
- In what context might Israel have seen these images of enemies, raging waters and escape?

Job is the classic example of faith under duress. Read some of Job's questions during his trials and God's answers (Job 38:1–11).

- Is God's answer simply a dismissal of Job and his hurt?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Paul Gerhardt wrote 12 stanzas of hope and confidence in God's mercy while living through the destruction of war, the terror of death and disillusionment in his personal life. He has been called the greatest of the Lutheran hymn writers, and truly his gift flowed from a strong and vibrant faith in

Today we focus on one of his lesser-known hymn texts, "Evening and Morning" — a hymn that sings of "Joys e'er increasing / And peace never ceasing" (st. 3).

- Do you believe in fate? In destiny? In divine providence? Is there a difference?
- If we cannot escape from suffering in this life, what resources has God supplied the Christian to help us respond to suffering and trials in our daily lives?
- We do not believe God abandons us to face life's sufferings alone. How have you experienced God's providential care during moments of struggle?

- Does it sometimes seem that God is oblivious to our struggles?
- When God speaks of "limits" in verse 10, what did that mean for Job? What does it mean for you? Has God placed limits upon our enemies and on what we must endure?

Read Mark 4:35–41. This is the account of Jesus stilling the storm. Take note of the details Mark includes.

- Was Jesus asleep because He was oblivious to the storm, or might there be another reason?
- How did the disciples interpret Jesus' sleep during the storm? What was their fear (v. 38)?
- Was Jesus castigating His disciples (v. 40), or was He urging them to bring their faith to bear upon their doubts and fears?
- What does Jesus identify as our greatest resource when struggles and suffering cause us to fear?

God's grace and benevolent will. Read through his other hymns and you find a constant strain of joy and peace no matter how difficult the circumstances of life. In this hymn, he invites us to see suffering through the eyes of faith and trust in God.

- What is the typical response to suffering or tragedy?

- We often cry out, “Why?” Does knowing why help us to respond to the terrible events in life?
- Think of a moment when you felt wounded by life’s struggles and cried out to God. Were you seeking explanation or consolation?

Text

As you read through this hymn, notice the concrete images used by Gerhardt. This is not about feelings or sentiment, but the consolation that is real and genuine. Take note of his first-person perspective.

The first stanza begins from the perspective of God the Creator (Job 38:1–11). The times and seasons of life and the physical blessings of life are all God’s works to us. The Lord is the source of all that is good.

- See how His “Comfort in sadness” is identified as one of His treasured gifts to us. Is this of greater or lesser importance than the physical blessings?
- The old saying goes, “There but for the grace of God go I.” How much of God’s preventative grace do we see? How much is hidden?

The second stanza reads like a prayer. Look at the various petitions expressed here: We pray for God to listen, forgive, calm, cleanse and guide us.

- How can our errors (sins) contribute to our fears in times of struggle? Are we tempted to believe that sufferings are God’s punishment for our sins? Is this consistent with or in conflict with the cross where Jesus paid for all our sins?

Making the Connection

Scripture reminds us that God’s mercies are new to us each morning. We must be reminded of this, because our tendency is to focus on all that is wrong. Scripture also reminds us that it rains on the unjust as well as the just. In other words, mercy is different from justice. Though we often think we want justice, God offers us mercy. This mercy is the greater gift, though it is often hidden in moments of suffering, trial and trouble.

In Closing

In the Our Father, we pray, “Deliver us from evil.” Though we mean “do not let evil (suffering) touch our lives,” we know that as long as we wear this flesh, we will face struggle and endure suffering. If these will not go away, what does God supply us to deal with them? The hymn reminds us that the gifts of God in the midst of the storm are His presence, mercy, pardon, calm, guidance, joy and peace in Christ. He will not leave or forsake us — ever!

- Another hymn from this era states, “What pleases God, that pleases me” (*LSB* 719:1). Here we sing to God, “As it may please Thee.” What Scripture comes to mind in all of this?

We find the things that afflict us “for a little while” (1 Peter 1:6) and the eternal treasures prepared for us in Christ contrasted in stanza 3. First Peter 1:3–9 speaks to this very well.

- How does faith enable us to see beyond the moment (whether sorrowful or joyous) to eternity?
- What is the storm mentioned here? How are the struggles of life like storms? What is the sunshine that follows them?

The final thought (st. 4) is one of praise and thanksgiving. Read through the words to see what God desires from us for all that He has done to deliver us from the storms of this life.

- What is the gift God prizes? Think how our Lutheran Confessions echo this when they say that the true worship of God is faith (Ap IV).
- In the last line, we are reminded that the temple of God was a place of incense. Israel was comforted by seeing the smoke of the incense rise. What did seeing smoke and smelling incense bring to mind? Does this imagery still work for us today? Read Psalm 141. Have you ever seen incense used in a worship service?

- How does God deal with suffering? Does He not come to take on our sufferings in Jesus Christ?
- How does God’s mercy shine in the darkest moments of our lives?
- What does God desire from us except the faith that receives this mercy (“A heart that believeth” [st. 4])?

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 726.

Prayer

Almighty God, in Your mercy guide the course of this world so that Your Church may joyfully serve You in godly peace and quietness; 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 7B).

In the Very Midst of Life

Lutheran Service Book 755 | study by Scott R. Schilbe

Introduction

We don't have to look too far beyond ourselves and our loved ones to understand that death surrounds us. The pressures of feeling age limiting our bodies or of seeing our loved ones mentally or physically decline burden us with feelings of hopelessness. We feel hopeless because we can do nothing to escape the situation. Our bodies, not to mention the natural disasters we witness through television and the internet, point us to the reality that the present world is fading away. We truly are living in the midst of death's vale.

Today's hymn, "In the Very Midst of Life," forces us to confront living in a sinful world, while also providing assurance that our holy and mighty God is the only one who eternally saves us from it.

- In your life, do you feel that the "Powers of hell" (st. 2) overtake you? How?
- To what refuges do you think people turn in times of need? Are these refuges outside the church?

Exploring the Scriptures

In the Bible are many accounts of individuals who felt death surrounding them and their families.

- Read Luke 7:1–10 and Mark 5:21–43. In each account, identify the person feeling burdened and the serious situation that was faced.
- According to 2 Cor. 1:8–10, for what beneficial purpose can God use our burdens?

- How does Heb. 2:14–15, 18 help you when you struggle with sin and death "In the very midst of life"?
- How does a faith that rests on Jesus speak in situations of apparent despair and tragedy? Read Lam. 3:22–33.
- Despite the unpleasant reality of living on earth, what eternal hope do Is. 51:11 and Rev. 21:1–4 offer you?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

According to tradition, stanza 1 existed before Martin Luther (1483–1546) wrote stanzas 2 and 3. These two additional stanzas clearly confess the Christian's refuge during gloomy times of life: Jesus and His mercy.

Discuss how Luther's call to take refuge in the holy and all-merciful Savior becomes more personal after reflecting upon the following significant situations of Luther's life:

- His conflicts with the Roman Catholic Church and the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire after posting the 95 Theses, conflicts resulting in his condemnation after the Diet of Worms.
- Luther's family tragedies, especially living under the threat of deadly disease in 1527, and enduring the death of two daughters, Elisabeth in 1528 and Magdalena in 1542.

Text

This hymn provides interesting ways of describing death. In stanza 1, death is described as an enemy, a snare eager to trap us into fear and despair. However, repentant of our sinfulness, we flee to the only hope, the only holy God. Because of our holy and merciful Savior, we have nothing to fear.

- How did Noah witness the snare of death surrounding him? Read Gen. 7:21–24.
- How did God deal with Noah's environment? Read Gen. 8:1.
- How did Noah react to his situation? Read Heb. 11:7; Gen. 8:10.

In stanza 2, death is portrayed as a valley through which we currently walk.

- How do the famous words of Ps. 23:4 help you realize that "death" is much more than the moment of physical death?
- What, according to Paul, is the source of this "vale" (Rom. 8:20; Rom. 5:12)? Who is your hope while living in this vale (Rom. 5:15–17; Ps. 23:4)?

In stanza 3, death is portrayed as utter woe. Again, Luther indicates that death is more than physical death; it is utter devastation.

- Contemplate times of your life when you've felt deeply distressed.
- Briefly review Jesus' passion. How did Jesus Himself experience utter woe and devastation? For what reason did Jesus experience it?

Making the Connection

As you examine the hymn, note that each stanza begins by sounding the realistic note of despair, yet each stanza ends by clearly pointing the singer to the merciful Savior. In this way, the hymn text parallels our natural feelings when confronting a crisis. It first gives voice to our hopelessness but then provides needed focus by pointing to Jesus.

The hymn guides us as we cope with suffering either in our lives or in the lives of others. It guides us to Jesus and to His atoning work. And it also guides us to repent of our fears and to cling to the ways in which God preserves us.

In Closing

Indeed, we constantly endure the sadness of living in a sinful world. This hymn helps us confront that reality, while at the same time it helps us look beyond that reality and cling to Jesus. Our holy and righteous God does show His mercy to us and saves, preserves and keeps us!

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 755.

Examine these two hymn phrases and discuss the related questions.

- “We mourn that we have greatly erred” (st. 1). In what ways do you express your contriteness over sin?
- “Lord, preserve and keep us / In the peace that faith can give” (st. 3). By what means does God preserve you in the faith?
- Choose a perplexing phrase from the hymn and discuss its meaning.

Prayer

Almighty, everlasting God, Your Son has assured forgiveness of sins and deliverance from eternal death. Strengthen us by Your Holy Spirit that our faith in Christ may increase daily and that we may hold fast to the hope that on the Last Day we shall be raised in glory to eternal life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen (Hope of eternal life in Christ, *LSB*, p. 313).

O Christ, Our True and Only Light

Lutheran Service Book 839 | study by Allen D. Lunneberg

Introduction

This hymn by Johann Heermann (1585–1647) is the Hymn of the Day for all three years for the Third Sunday after the Epiphany, as well as for Proper 9 (July 3–9) of year B. It is primarily associated with the famous call of Isaiah 60 (“Arise, shine, for your light has come”) as God’s beacon of salvation for all nations, as well as with the beginnings of Jesus’ earthly ministry, His choosing of the first disciples and especially His rejection at Nazareth. The hymn is a

prayer for the mission of the Church, that the light of Christ may enlighten and shine on all who are yet enslaved by the spiritual blindness of the fallen nature.

- How is Jesus “our true and only light”? Are there other false lights?
- What is the darkness that we pray Christ will enlighten and overcome?

Exploring the Scriptures

Read Is. 60:1–3. The gracious good news of salvation is announced as light shining in darkness. The darkness of spiritual blindness and death is described in the previous chapter. Read Isa. 59:9–10. The fact that thick darkness covers the earth and all people emphasizes the universal fact of the fallen nature of all people. Sin and death are our lot until we are released and freed from their slavery by the gracious action of God. His salvation is as universal as our need, in that “nations” (60:3) shall come to the light.

- Define sin according to 1 John 3:4.
- Sin is not only wrong acts but also a condition. According to Eph. 2:3 we are sinners also by our very _____.
- How is sin described in the following passages? Rom. 13:12; Eph. 5:11.
- What is the light the prophet speaks about? See Luke 2:32; John 1:9.

- Who is speaking and who is being spoken about in Luke 1:78–79? See John 1:6–8.

Read John 8:12. Jesus declares Himself to be the light of the world, and that those who follow Him will live in the light.

- How do the following passages describe the follower of Christ? Matt. 5:14; Eph. 5:8; 1 Thess. 5:5; 1 Peter 2:9.

Read Eph. 5:8–14. According to this passage we not only were *in* darkness, but *were* darkness; and now we not only walk *in* light but *are* “light in the Lord.” Read John 12:35–36.

- How does darkness and light describe us as sinners and saints in our daily life?
- What is the “fruit of light” (Eph. 5:9)?
- What are “the unfruitful works of darkness” (Eph. 5:11) that we cannot mention without shame?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Johann Heermann wrote this hymn in the midst of the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648). But Heermann seems to be looking beyond the current disruption and destruction of peaceful daily life to the realm of people’s spiritual condition. We are told that the hymn is modeled on a prayer in a booklet by Philipp Kegel (Hamburg, 1592), a prayer for those who have never yet known Christ as well as those who may be misled by false teachers.

Interestingly, it is doubtful that Heermann knew that Kegel’s prayer reflected one by a Jesuit priest seeking the return of misled Protestants! Heermann’s hymn and prayer sings from the light of the truth of pure doctrine as contained in the Lutheran Confessions.

“Mission and Witness” is a main aspect of the Church’s work, especially as it is directly related to our Lord’s “final sign” to be fulfilled before His return: “And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Matt. 24:14).

- Everyone agrees to the necessity of reaching out with the Gospel to the unchurched, to those who have never heard. To what extent do we agree, however, to reach out to those who are being misled by false teachers?
- What are some false religions or teachings today?
- Should these false teachings be addressed by the pastor in his sermons?

Text

Stanza 1 identifies Jesus Christ as Isaiah's "light" (Is. 60:1). This is true of Christ according to both natures. We confess Him as the divine Son of God in the words of the Nicene Creed, "Light of Light, very God of very God," and the incarnate Son, Jesus, says of Himself, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12). It is He who "enlightens," that is, reveals the truth to His disciples. See Luke 24:45.

The second stanza's claim that they are "lost in error's maze" or in "Some dark delusion" certainly may come to some people as a surprise.

- What is the difference between the Holy Spirit who calls, gathers and enlightens sinners and the Son of God who opens and enlightens minds?
- Aware of his sin, how did the prophet Isaiah describe his condition at his famous confrontation with Holy God, Isa. 6:5?
- How is this spiritual lostness different from that referred to in the last phrase of the last stanza of *LSB* 700, "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling"?

Stanza 3 is our prayer for every sinner, that they be gently called to salvation, peace and rest.

Making the Connection

This hymn should, among other things, draw together the concerns for both the truth of sound doctrine and outreach to the lost. For it is only as we believe, teach and confess the truth that we have any power for reaching the lost with the glorious Gospel of salvation. There may be other ways and other messages that "reach" or draw people, but the question is always, to what end? If the issue is looked at as merely a question of "marketing," one will certainly want to downplay the "negative" diagnosis of our audience as those who are lost, in darkness or in error. If, however, the issue is

- With what "gentle" word do 1 Peter 2:25 and Isa. 53:6 refer to people who do not know Christ?
- How does Matt. 11:28 suggest we should approach and invite unbelievers to Christ?
- According to Heb. 9:9–14, what is it that gives the conscience peace and rest?

Stanza 4 speaks of the "darkened" and "cold," the "wand'ers," and those who "walk apart." This seems to identify those who are led astray by false teaching or doctrine. Those who "walk apart" are distinguished from others, that is, those who "walk together," which is the definition of the word "synod," walking the same road (of confession). We continue to pray and work for the unity of the Church across so-called "denominational" lines to agreement in the truth.

Stanza 5 speaks of the grand goal of the unity of the "una sancta," the one holy Church of every time and place, at the final marriage feast of the Lamb in His kingdom which has no end.

- To what extent should ecumenism, or work for outward unity, insist on doctrinal agreement?
- Read John 10:16 and 1 Cor. 1:10. To what extent is the unity of the Church a reality?

bringing people to repentance and saving faith, we need to face up to the truth of the spiritual condition of all people according to our common, fallen nature, and then deliver the glorious good news of God's gift of salvation.

- What, according to Matt. 28:19–20, are the two primary means by which we are commanded to "make disciples"?
- What do we call the orderly system or arrangement by which the Church attempts to teach "all things" as the years pass by?

In Closing

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, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Mission Observance).

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 839.

Prayer

O God, Your almighty power is made known chiefly in showing mercy. Grant us the fullness of Your grace that we may be called to repentance and made partakers of Your heavenly treasures; 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 Proper 9B).

Jesus, Priceless Treasure

Lutheran Service Book 743 | study by Paul F. Becker

Introduction

The Lutheran Confessions describe the priceless treasure that has come to us in the Gospel of Christ Jesus. “Since the promise can only be received by faith, the Gospel (which is properly the promise of forgiveness of sins and of justification for Christ’s sake) proclaims the righteousness of faith in Christ. The Law does not teach this, nor is this the righteousness of the Law. For the Law demands our works and our perfection. But, for Christ’s sake, the Gospel freely offers reconciliation to us, who have been vanquished by sin and death. This is received not by works, but by faith alone. This faith does not bring to God confidence in one’s own

merits, but only confidence in the promise, or the mercy promised in Christ” (Ap IV 43–45).

Today’s hymn is addressed to Jesus, the source of true and lasting joy, and alternately to all counterfeits, which are renounced in no uncertain terms.

- Given the natural belief that we can and must do something to save ourselves, discuss the fact that there are ultimately only two religions in the world: the religion of the Gospel and the religion(s) of Law(s)?
- What earthly treasures are people willing to fight and die for? How does new life in Christ change our perspective?

Exploring the Scriptures

Given Peter’s bold statements — “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16); followed by “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you” (Matt. 16:22); to the night of Jesus’ betrayal, “Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!” (Matt. 26:35); and finally post-resurrection, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you” (John 21:17) — how would we expect him to describe the treasure of grace in Christ?

Read 1 Peter 1:17–19.

- Discuss how the image of the lamb would remind Peter’s readers of John the Baptist’s cry, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).
- What phrase does Peter use to describe what we were *not* redeemed with? What significance do such things have in our lives as believers?

Almost everyone nowadays has insurance on things they hold that are of value. What “insurance policy” does God offer us?

Read Rom. 8:35–39.

- What sort of things threaten to separate us from the love of Christ? What makes us “more than conquerors” (v. 37) in the midst of these troubles?
- What has God done to persuade you that even the most terrifying things we might imagine cannot separate us from His love?

At one point in Jesus’ ministry, many of His disciples left Him because of His “hard sayings.” Peter has another opportunity to stake his claim in Christ.

Read John 6:66–69.

- How does someone get to the place where he has evaluated various truth claims and can say with Peter, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (v. 68)?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Johann Franck (1618–77) published this text after the Thirty Years’ War (1618–48), during which his hometown suffered invasion from both Saxon and Swedish armies. Franck embarked on a distinguished civic career as an attorney, city councilor and mayor. He wrote both secular and religious poetry, including 110 religious songs.

- How can we encourage believers to embrace their vocation in this world as service to Christ?

Text

The first two stanzas express a creative tension between boundless confidence in Jesus as my “truest friend” and “purest pleasure” and a sense of distance from God. Though the very worst of this fallen world combine to seek our ruin, however, we children of God find safety when resting in Jesus’ arms.

- How has this fallen world hurt or disappointed you? In the midst of these difficulties, how did you come to know the truth that “Jesus will not fail me” (st. 2)?

- A sense of God's distance or absence could be seen as a sign of weak faith. What other explanations could you offer to help a friend?

Stanzas 3–6 address the realities that confront us in rather vehement, even violent, terms. Satan, death, earthly treasure, empty glory, pain or loss, evil world, sinful life, fear and sadness — all are told in no uncertain terms: Hence!

Making the Connection

Consider Franck's hymn in light of Peter's first epistle:

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith — more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire — may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him,

The dangers of being deceived by the evil world and blinded or bound by sin are recognized and dealt with almost in the spirit of an exorcism. "Get thee far behind me, / Come not forth again" (st. 5), Franck writes.

- In the face of evil, are believers ever tempted to think of themselves as weak, helpless victims? What kind of therapy does Franck offer those struggling in this way?

you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1 Peter 1:6–9)

- Why does God allow trials and fiery tests to come your way?

In Closing

- Read aloud or sing together *LSB* 743.

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, our support and defense in every need, continue to preserve Your Church in safety, govern her by Your goodness, and bless her with Your peace; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Proper 19B).

The Church's One Foundation

Lutheran Service Book 644 | study by Robert E. Smith

Introduction

The Romans were excellent engineers. Today ancient Roman roads still bear traffic, their aqueducts still bring water to European cities and the bridges they built still allow people to cross rivers. They understood well the importance of a well-laid foundation.

In ancient times, construction of important structures began with the laying of the cornerstone. Builders carefully selected this stone, shaped it for beauty and to have the correct angles. They took time to place it in the right location so that the rest of the foundation would be properly aligned. Cornerstones not only bore the weight of the structure, they joined two walls together. Finally, a dedication ceremony included a sacrifice to the gods to grant success.

St. Paul compares the one holy Christian and apostolic Church to a temple, where the teaching of the apostles and prophets is the foundation and Christ is the cornerstone. Read Eph. 2:19–22 and 1 Peter 2:4–10.

- How are we “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone” (Eph. 2:20)?
- How are we joined together to become a temple for God’s Holy Spirit?
- How are we a “royal priesthood” (1 Peter 2:9)? What are we called to do together?

Exploring the Scriptures

Samuel Stone’s beloved hymn, “The Church’s One Foundation,” tells a love story: the marriage of Christ and His Church. He brings together images located throughout the book of Ephesians.

Read Eph. 5:25–27.

- Why did Christ give Himself for the Church? How did He give Himself for us?
- How does Christ make His bride holy?

- When a groom sees his bride at the altar, what does he see? When Christ looks at His baptized bride, what does He see?

Read Eph. 4:1–6.

- How do we live together worthy of our calling as God’s holy Church?
- What things unite all Christians of all times, places, nations and languages?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

As Anglican priest Samuel J. Stone (1839–1900) visited the members of his parish, he noticed how pious they were. Many recited the Apostles’ Creed in their personal life as well as during worship.

Stone wrote twelve poems to aid them in their devotions and published them in a booklet, *Lyra Fidelium* (1866). “The Church’s One Foundation” was the ninth poem in it. The hymn was written to explain the phrase “The holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints.”

- Do you sing hymns during Bible study? Your family devotions? Personal prayer time? What does a hymn add to these occasions?

Stone was concerned about the spread of challenges to Christianity within the Anglican communion. Bishop John Colenso of Natal, South Africa, believed the Old Testament was fiction and taught that all people would be saved and

that the Sacrament was symbolic and not the body and blood of Christ. He also permitted polygamy in his African parish. Stone supported Bishop Robert Gray of Cape Town, South Africa who deposed Colenso. Echoes of this kind of conflict are present in the hymn.

- In the twenty-first century many non-Christian religions, false teachings and deceptive philosophers compete to lure faithful believers away from the faith. Read Eph. 4:11–16. How can we avoid false teachers and cling to our holy Christian faith?

Text

“The Church’s One Foundation” explores the doctrine of the Church. The first two stanzas focus on the invisible Church. All Christians belong to this Church, whether living on earth today or with Jesus in heaven.

- Read the first two stanzas of the hymn. According to this poem, how did the Church come to be? How does it describe the Church?
- Read Eph. 1:3–14. How can we be sure that we are a part of the invisible Church?

Even though the Church of God is the fellowship of “the holy believers and lambs who hear the voice of their Shepherd [John 10:11–16]” (SA III XII 2, p. 283), the visible church seems to the world “oppressed, / By schisms rent asunder, / By heresies distressed” (st. 3). As saints and sinners at the same time, Christians often hurt each other. In the midst of the church on earth are false Christians who

tear at the fabric of her unity. Heresies present false gospels and false christs that lure people away from their faith. From time to time, Christians feel harried and depressed and join the martyrs at the throne of God to cry out, “How long?”

- Read 2 Peter 3:9–13 and Rev. 6:9–13. Why hasn’t Christ returned yet to bring an end to sin, sorrow, grief, death and to judge those who did evil?
- Read Rev. 7:9–17. What is the “vision glorious” that helps the Church Militant wait “the consummation / Of peace forevermore” (st. 4)?

Making the Connection

In our world where Christians are criticized, where schools teach our children to forsake the teachings of Scripture, where society approves of sinful behavior that God condemns, it is easy to feel alone. But you are not alone. God calls us to live together in His one holy Christian and

apostolic Church. We are here to love each other and care for each other.

- Read Rom. 12:9–21; Rom. 15:1–2; Gal. 6:1–2; and 1 Thess. 5:12–18. How does God want us to support each other?

In Closing

You are a living stone, built on Christ our cornerstone, the apostles and the prophets into God’s holy temple. There the Holy Spirit comes to live. In Baptism, we are united with Christ in His death and resurrection. By God’s Word, our faith is strengthened, we are “built up” to become more and more like Jesus. When we confess our sins before God, our pastor forgives us our sins for Christ’s sake. In the Lord’s Supper, Jesus gives us His body to eat and His blood to drink. He gives us the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. He strengthens us so that we can strengthen our brothers and sisters in Christ, show the mercy and love of Jesus to all and share the good news that God wants to give all of this to all who believe it.

- Read together the Small Catechism’s Third Article of the Creed (*LSB*, p. 323).

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 644.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, though we do not deserve Your goodness, still You provide for all our needs of body and soul. Grant us Your Holy Spirit that we may acknowledge Your gifts, give thanks for all Your benefits, and serve You in willing obedience; 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 11B).

Entrust Your Days and Burdens

Lutheran Service Book 754 | study by Randy Wurschmidt

Introduction

Life is messy. This life, lived in this world, marred by sin, your sin and everybody else's sin, is unpredictable and sometimes stormy, even chaotic. Just when you think you've got everything under control, something happens that messes up all your plans. The car won't start. You are fired from your job. You are diagnosed with cancer. A loved one dies suddenly and tragically. "This wasn't part of my plan!" you cry.

"My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD" (Is. 55:8). What are God's ways, then? Who or what can we count on? Should we seize each day as it comes and simply hope for the best?

Exploring the Scriptures

The starting point for this hymn is Ps. 37:5, "Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him, and he will act." The hymn's author, Paul Gerhardt, used the German text of this psalm to form an acrostic, so that the first word of each hymn stanza is the next successive word of the psalm verse. Read Psalm 37.

- According to the psalm, why should we stop worrying about evildoers and wrongdoers?
- What will happen on the Last Day to all those who prospered in this life, but had no faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Paul Gerhardt (1607–76) is one of the Lutheran Church's great treasures. You likely know some (or many!) of his hymns. "A Lamb Goes Uncomplaining Forth" (*LSB* 438), "Evening and Morning" (*LSB* 726) and "Now Rest beneath Night's Shadow" (*LSB* 880) are among his best known. (If you have time, scan the index in your hymnal, p. 999). Pastor Gerhardt knew suffering firsthand. The Thirty Years' War, political and religious strife in the parish, and subsequent job loss were sources of conflict and anxiety for him. By 1669, Gerhardt had lost his wife and four of his five children.

And yet, despite these hardships, Gerhardt left us some of the greatest hymns of comfort ever written — hymns which preach the peace of Jesus that comes through the forgiveness of sins, hymns in which Christ crucified is at

Or is there something more concrete and more eternal in which we can place our trust? You know the answer: Entrust your days and burdens to God, who is the beginning and the end; His Word will stand forever (Is. 40:8). Where do we turn when things seem out of our control? Where do we look when everything is going wrong? "Lord, to whom shall we go?" Peter said. "You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).

We turn to Jesus.

- Do you have any favorite passages of Scripture for those times when nothing seems to be going right for you? Why do you think these help at such times?

St. Paul has much to say about relying on the Lord to know and provide what we need. Read Phil. 4:6–13.

- Are there times in your experience when God has provided for your needs in an unexpected way?
- Read the First Petition of the Lord's Prayer and its meaning in the Small Catechism (*LSB*, p. 323–4). Compare this to the passage from Paul above.

the center, changing our focus from "woe is me" to "I thank You, my heavenly Father." He found that meditating on the Scriptures was helpful in dealing with the suffering around him.

- What are the side effects of only worrying about yourself? How is this different from loving your neighbor?
- Why do you think God would allow unpleasant things to happen to you?

Text

In the First Article of the Creed (back to the Small Catechism!), we confess our belief that "God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, *and still takes care of them*" (*LSB*, p. 322; emphasis added). We sing this same belief in the first stanza: that God is

in charge of sky, sea and land; that God not only guides the tempests, but that He also guides you. Therefore, since we believe this, it also informs our prayers and our anxieties (or lack of anxieties).

- In the second stanza, we sing, “Rely on God your Savior,” rather than on our own thoughts and cares. Why is self-inflicted worry pointless? What would be a better solution than fretting?
- Jesus has something to say about being anxious in His Sermon on the Mount. Read Matt. 6:25–34. According to Christ, why should we not worry so much about the things of this life?

Making the Connection

In Luke 11:1–4, we read Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer. Though it is shorter than the familiar one from Matthew, it still includes these words: “Give us each day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation” (Luke 11:3–4). With these petitions, Jesus teaches us to trust in Him to provide for our daily needs, He promises to hear our prayers for forgiveness, and He keeps the evil one at bay.

And then Jesus says this: “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you” (Luke 11:9). We don’t ask ourselves or our hearts for guidance, for our hearts will only lead us astray. We don’t seek our will for our lives, but God’s will. We knock at the door of His Church, for it is there that we find Him: in the water,

Stanzas 4–6 point us out of this life and into the next, where we will neither hunger nor thirst, and where every tear will be wiped away. In this way, we avoid being caught up in the moment, and instead we are always thinking of the bigger picture. In other words, this life isn’t what it’s all about — eternal life is. Sing through these stanzas.

- How does it change your perspective to know that there is life beyond this life?
- When we get so wrapped up in what’s happening to us at any given moment, how does that become, in fact, idolatry?

in the bread and wine, in the words spoken, preached and sung.

It won’t stop the suffering, for as long as we carry our crosses in this life, there will be times of suffering; but relying on God will make it bearable. For Jesus is with us, and through our Baptism, we are both buried with Him and also raised to new life. In His body and blood, He strengthens our faith. In His Word, we hear the forgiveness of sins.

- Consider how God has acted in your life, even when things have not gone the way you would have liked. In what ways has your faith been strengthened?
- How does the liturgy help you know that God is for you and not against you?

In Closing

Entrust your days and burdens to the loving hand of God. It’s not Law; it’s Gospel. It is a promise. For God has made you and all creatures, the heavens and the earth, and He still takes care of them. He gives you your daily bread. He protects you from all evil. You will sometimes doubt this; you will certainly fail to feel it. But that doesn’t make it untrue, for He has promised to hear you, to forgive you, to save you and, on the Last Day, to bring you to heaven to praise Him there.

If you haven’t done it already, sing through the entire hymn together. Then take it home, sing it in your devotional time, sing it before you go to bed, learn it and take it to

heart. “Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him, and he will act” (Ps. 37:5).

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 754.

Prayer

Almighty and most merciful God, the protector of all who trust in You, strengthen our faith and give us courage to believe that in Your love You will rescue us from all adversities; 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 12B).

Guide Me, O Thou Great Redeemer

Lutheran Service Book 918 | study by Tim Pauls

Introduction

I wouldn't eat lima beans if they were the last food on earth. Actually, that's not true. If lima beans were the last food on earth, that's when I'd start to maybe consider the possibility of maybe eating lima beans. Maybe.

Though just in case you're a lima bean farmer, I'll hasten to add that this is my hang-up, not yours. Or the bean's.

You probably have favorite foods. You probably have a least favorite food that you'd never eat, either. It may be a bean or a sprout or lutefisk. You draw the line somewhere. We all do.

So, think of a food that you absolutely would not eat. Now, here's the question: When would you ever eat it?

Here's the answer: You'd eat it when there was nothing else to eat, and it was a matter of life and death. Hunger makes us far less picky.

Our hymn for this study takes us back to Israel's wandering through the barren wilderness, between the exodus from Egypt and the entry into the Promised Land. In so doing, it reminds us of what it means to be at the mercy of God.

- If you were among those Israelites in the Book of Exodus, what do you think would be the most difficult part of the journey?
- Is it a blessing or an act of desperation to put yourself at the mercy of God?

Exploring the Scriptures

The Old Testament lesson for today gives us an account of one of those days in the wilderness. Read Ex. 16:2–15. Keep in mind that it's only been about a month and a half since they left Egypt, crossed the Red Sea and watched the Lord wash Pharaoh's army away.

- Why are the people grumbling against Moses, Aaron and the Lord? In verse 3, for what would they exchange their freedom, and of what do they accuse Moses?
- What did the Lord promise to do to these grumbling, ungrateful people in verses 4 and 12?
- In verse 10, how did the people know that the Lord had not abandoned them?

John 6 contains another passage about miraculous food and feeding: Jesus feeds 5,000 men with five loaves of

bread and two fish. The Gospel lesson for today takes place the following day, when the crowds have tracked Him down on the other side of the lake.

Read John 6:22–35.

- According to verse 26, what do the people want from Jesus?
- What does Jesus want to give them instead (v. 27)?
- What is the work of God that Jesus gives them in verse 29? Is this God's work or their work? See Eph. 2:8–9.
- The manna was the sign that proved God's mercy and Moses' authority in the wilderness. What sign does Jesus give the people in John 6:32–35?
- What does Jesus have in common with the cloud in Ex. 16:10?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

"Guide Me, O Thou Great Redeemer" is one of the finest examples of Welsh hymnody. It was written in Welsh by the itinerant preacher William Williams (1717–91) in five stanzas. It was later translated into English and reduced to three stanzas. Though denied ordination into the priesthood of the Church of England, Williams took all of Wales as his parish. He traveled perhaps as much as 3,000 miles a year for 45 years as a Calvinistic Methodist preacher (*Lutheran Worship Hymnal Companion*, [CPH, 1992], 806).

- Which is significant in this hymn about the Lord's guidance through life's journey: Williams' experience as an itinerant preacher or Holy Scripture?
- Reading this hymn, would you have known that the author was a traveling preacher in Wales?

Text

This hymn begins by praying, "Guide me, O Thou great Redeemer."

- The Lord guided Israel in the wilderness in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. How does He guide you? See Ps. 119:105.
- God's guidance is far more than instructions from afar. What does John 1:14 say about His Word, and what does Jesus say about Himself in Matt. 28:20?

We are called “pilgrims” in this hymn, bound for the promised land of heaven.

- The Israelites were set free from slavery in Egypt. Read Rom. 6:17–23. From what have you been set free?
- If we are pilgrims passing through, what does this mean for our faith and life on earth? See Heb. 11:13 and 1 Peter 2:11.
- Read John 6:35. How are we sustained on our way to the promised land?

The second stanza calls upon God to “Open now the crystal fountain.” This is in reference to another event in the wilderness wanderings in Exodus 17. Once again, the people were grumbling, this time because of thirst instead of hunger.

- Read Ex. 17:6. How did God provide water for the Israelites?
- To whom did this event point (1 Cor. 10:4)?

Making the Connection

The blessing of wilderness life is that you find yourself at God's mercy. While we sometimes regard that as a last resort, it's a good thing. The Lord is merciful and He promises His help. As He guides you through the barren wilderness of this sinful world, He provides you with all that you need to live forever.

- Read John 6:47–51. What is the bread that God gives you so that you might have eternal life?

In Closing

Given my aversion to lima beans, I can understand the Israelites' grumbling about God's gifts of manna, quail and water — not because their grumbling is good, but because I'm a sinner too. In their case, their grumbling got in the way of two important truths: They were only *passing through* the wilderness on the way to the far better Promised Land, and the food God provided would keep them alive in the meantime.

You are passing through this wilderness on the way to heaven, and you'll be tempted to grumble plenty along the way. The devil will especially tempt you to grumble against the Means of Grace — because that is where God is present with you, and that is how He feeds and sustains you with

- Read John 4:14. How does Jesus compare Himself to that rock as He talks to the Samaritan woman?

The second stanza also refers to the “fiery, cloudy pillar” by which the Israelites were led.

- Was that pillar just a sign, or something more? What does Ex. 13:21 say?
- How is the Lord likewise present with you to be your strong deliverer, your strength and shield? Read Rom. 6:4 and 1 Cor. 11:23–26.

Stanza 3 begins by speaking of the river Jordan. For Israel, their journey through the wilderness began with the crossing of the Red Sea and ended when they crossed the Jordan into Canaan. See Josh. 3:14–17.

- To what is crossing the Red Sea compared in 1 Cor. 10:1–2? How did your pilgrimage as one of God's people begin?
- “Crossing the Jordan” for the Christian is sometimes a euphemism for death. It is the crossing from this sinful world to heaven. What is Jesus called in stanza 3 of the hymn?
- This title for Jesus is taken from Hos. 13:14 and alluded to in 1 Cor. 15:55–57. In Christ, how certain is heaven for you? Why?

- Where does the Lord give you this bread? Read 1 Cor. 11:23–24.
- How does the Lord use water to give you life? Read Rom. 6:3–4.
- Do you ever grumble or grow weary at God's means for keeping you alive in Christ? How does He respond?

His grace. Don't listen to the devil; instead rejoice that the Lord promises heaven for you. For Jesus' sake, that promised land is yours.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 918.

Prayer:

Merciful Father, You gave Your Son, Jesus, as the heavenly bread of life. Grant us faith to feast on Him in Your Word and Sacraments that we may be nourished unto life everlasting; 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 Proper 13B).

Lord, Enthroned in Heavenly Splendor

Lutheran Service Book 534 | study by John G. Fleischmann

Introduction

Jesus is our King. That is the emphasis of the readings, prayers and hymns for the Last Sunday of the Church Year.

The Explanation to the Small Catechism reminds us that there are three kingdoms over which our Lord reigns: the kingdom of power, which is the world; the kingdom of grace, which is the Church; and the kingdom of glory, which is heaven (*Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation*, Question 212).

Centered on the Holy Eucharist, this hymn praises Jesus for His reign in the Church through the Means of Grace and His reign at the right hand of God in heaven.

- How is Jesus present in the world today?
- When is a person brought into the kingdom of grace from the kingdom of power?
- How does Jesus reign in the Church today?
- When does the kingdom of grace become the kingdom of glory? How does this tie in with the theme of the Last Sunday of the Church Year?

Exploring the Scriptures

This hymn uses the wonderful worship imagery that is given to the Church in the Book of Revelation.

Read Rev. 1:5–6.

- What has God made us to be? Explain.
- What does the phrase “to him be glory and dominion forever and ever” mean?

Read Rev. 5:11–14. Here we have an illustration of the antiphonal worship that takes place in heaven.

- What is Jesus worthy to receive?
- Why?
- Where in the liturgy do we sing these words?

Read Rev. 7:9–17. The heavenly worship continues.

- Who is worshipping the Lamb?
- Who are those in white robes? Why are they singled out?
- What are the promises given about the kingdom of glory? What will God ultimately do?

Read Col. 1:13–20, the Epistle for this day.

- What has Jesus done for us (v. 13)?
- What do we learn about Jesus in verses 15 and 16?
- Of which kingdom do verses 17 and 18 speak?
- How did Jesus reconcile all things to Himself?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

This hymn was penned by the Rev. George Hugh Bourne (1840–1925), an Anglican priest and warden of St. Edmund's School at Salisbury.

The author desired to provide students with post-Communion hymns that would delve into the Eucharistic mystery. “Lord, Enthroned in Heavenly Splendor” was one of seven hymns included in a private publication in 1874. It was first offered to the Church in 1889 in the supplement to *Hymns Ancient and Modern*.

The imagery used by Bourne links the glories of heaven to the Eucharist on the altar in a beautiful way.

- How do hymns help you to better understand deep theological and biblical truths?
- As you read the stanzas of this hymn, how do they build upon each other?

Text

Stanza 1 begins by acknowledging that the Christ of Holy Communion is the same Christ who rose and is now reigning in heaven.

- What are the things that Jesus does for the Church at God's right hand now?
- How does Jesus lift up your head?
- What is the connection between Holy Communion and the phrase “Jesus, true and living bread”?

Stanza 2 makes the connection between the bread and wine on the altar and Jesus' lowly birth at Bethlehem. To the world, neither are spectacular or miraculous: the birth of a child; common bread and wine.

However, with the Word of God, bread and wine on the altar are no mere forms! They are the very body and blood of Jesus, given and shed for us!

- How do the angels hail Jesus here?
- What is the significance of the phrase “Branch and flow’r of Jesse’s stem”?
- What part of the Communion liturgy speaks of us joining our voices with the angels?

Stanza 3 takes us to the altar: the cross. It is there that the Paschal Lamb was slain for the redemption of the world.

- What comfort does the phrase “In its fullness undiminished / Shall forevermore remain” bring to you?
- According to the last line of this stanza, what is the effect of this once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus? See Heb. 10:10.

Stanza 4 makes the connection between the wilderness wandering of the children of Israel, the reign of Christ in heaven, and the lowly bread and wine on the altar.

- Read 1 Cor. 10:1–4. How did the Lord provide for the children of Israel?
- Read John 6:31–34. How does Jesus feed us in our journey to heaven?
- Read Ex. 17:1–7. How did God provide water for the children of Israel?
- How is Jesus the “Stricken rock with streaming side”?

This final stanza culminates with the heavenly worship of the Lord by all creation.

- How do we worship “with loud hosanna” as we celebrate the Eucharist?
- What certainty does the phrase “Ris’n, ascended, glorified” bring to you as you receive Holy Communion?

Making the Connection

This powerful hymn draws out the biblical imagery of heavenly worship and applies it to the Holy Eucharist.

As each stanza builds on the previous stanza, the words crescendo to the point where one can almost hear the angels joining their voices!

- How do the “praise songs” of today differ from the worship in Revelation and the words of this hymn?
- How does this hymn assist you in better understanding what takes place as you receive Holy Communion?

In Closing

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 534.

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, You reign among us by the preaching of Your cross. Forgive Your people their offenses that we, being governed by Your bountiful goodness, may enter at last into Your eternal paradise; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Proper 29C).

O God, My Faithful God

Lutheran Service Book 696 | study by Allen D. Lunneberg

Introduction

This hymn is a prayer for strength and guidance in the daily living of the Christian life. As such, it is about the doctrine of sanctification. The term “sanctification” has both a wide and narrow sense. In the wide sense, it includes all that the Holy Spirit does in creating faith in the heart and the living of a holy life. Luther, in the Large Catechism, speaks of sanctification in the wide sense simply by quoting the creed as the method and means by which the Holy Spirit makes a person holy, namely, by the Christian Church, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.

Exploring the Scriptures

The first thing that should be said is that sanctification, or holy living, is God’s will for His people. “For this is the will of God, your sanctification” (1 Thess. 4:3). As such, God also produces this as a gift through the means of grace.

“From this evidence the following is certain: as soon as the Holy Spirit has begun His work of regeneration and renewal in us through the Word and holy Sacraments, we can and should cooperate through His power, although still in great weakness. This cooperation does not come from our fleshly natural powers, but from the new powers and gifts that the Holy Spirit has begun in us in conversion. St. Paul clearly and eagerly encourages that “working together with Him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain” [2 Corinthians 6:1]. But this is to be understood in no other way than the following: the converted person does good to such an extent and as long as God by His Holy Spirit rules, guides, and leads him” (FC SD II 65–66, 532).

In the narrow sense, however, sanctification is the internal spiritual transformation of the believer. It begins with faith and only thereafter issues good works.

- How important is living a Christian life compared to simply believing in Christ?
- How do justification and sanctification differ?
- Does sanctification play a part in obtaining salvation?
- Is sanctification in this life perfect or imperfect?

It should always be remembered that, whereas justification, or salvation, is totally the gift and work of God without our cooperation, sanctification involves active cooperation. But the good works of Christians are done not in the hope of gaining salvation, but as a response out of love and thanksgiving for God’s gift of salvation.

Many Christian people complain, “I just can’t be patient.” Yet the truth is that this is part of the “fruit of the Spirit.” God desires to give and work in the Christian’s heart, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law” (Gal. 5:22–23).

- Does failure in holy living necessarily affect a person’s salvation? Can it ever?
- The essence of the marriage vow is, “I promise to be faithful to you.” Is it possible to keep this vow perfectly? Is unfaithfulness forgivable?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

This hymn was written by Pastor Johann Heermann (1585–1647) during a most difficult time in his life, between 1623 and 1630, when he was plagued by various bodily afflictions. It is a prayer, a genuine cry of faith from the Christian’s heart, based on the confession of God’s promised faithfulness and goodness. As a preacher he was also concerned with speaking the truth without unnecessarily offending the weak. We also have received from his pen the hymns “O Dearest Jesus, What Law Hast Thou Broken” (LSB 439), and “O Christ, Our True and Only Light” (LSB 839).

What is it about illness or other afflictions that move us to prayer possibly more than usual?

Text

The first stanza clearly states the basis for the prayer, confessing God’s faithfulness (James 1:17; Ps. 36:9). The prayer for “a healthy frame” is for physical health and strength. Sin is identified as the root cause of illness or trouble. Everything depends on the forgiveness of sins (James 5:14–16).

Stanza 2 continues as a prayer for strength to do everything required by “My calling,” that is, my vocation or station in life. The “success” promised is in the confidence that “for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28).

- To what extent do we take our health for granted and neglect giving thanks to God for His gifts?
- What are some of the duties of your vocation or station in life?

Whereas the first two stanzas are concerned about actions, stanzas 3 and 4 are concerned about the power of words and speech. Words that “later need recalling” and “idle speech” recall the ability of the tongue to inflict damage on the neighbor (Rom. 15:1–3; James 3:2–10). But words can be gracious and kind, serving to strengthen the neighbor (Eph. 4:29; Prov. 15:1).

Not that, however, “hard” words are never to be spoken. Part of the preacher’s task according to St. Paul is to “rebuke” (1 Tim. 5:20; 2 Tim. 4:2). The task is to speak with God’s grace attached, that is, always in hope that words of discipline will benefit the other.

- Think of a time you said something to someone that you later wished you had not said. Did you (or could you) later do something about it?

Making the Connection

Holy living, or the everyday life of the Christian, rests in his or her connection with and confidence in the faithfulness of God. It includes receiving the benefits of this life with thanksgiving and being a blessing to the benefit of others. While our sanctification is never perfect in this life and even can seem to disappear in the face of trials and troubles, God calls us to daily repentance, returning to our Baptism where He calls us forth every day anew. In this

In Closing

“For this is the will of God, your sanctification” (1 Thess. 4:3). We will never be perfect in this life. That’s why we have the daily forgiveness of sins. But we do live “set apart” (holy) as God’s people to bring His light and forgiveness and joy to others.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 696.

- What are some situations when you “must and ought to speak” “hard” words or “rebuke”?

The final two stanzas put the Christian life in perspective, that of our mortality and our hope for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come (1 Cor. 7:29–31; Heb. 13:14; Rom. 8:18–25).

Stanza 5 is a prayer that God would keep us faithful, even unto death (Rev. 2:10), even looking forward to that day as “a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works” (Heb. 4:9–10).

That our bodies should have “A quiet resting place / Within a Christian grave” and “sleep in peace” views death from our point of view. But is death such a “sleep”? Read 1 Thess. 4:13–18, especially the last phrase of verse 17.

Beyond death, Christian hope looks forward to the day of the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. That “final day” will see “all the dead” waking (Matt. 25:31–32). And we will hear the Lord’s voice, as Jesus promised, “Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live” (John 5:25). The hymn ends with a note of joy for those who have been baptized into the name of God.

- How does a biblical faith comfort and give confidence to you even concerning the death of a loved one or your own death?

grace we look forward to our eternal rest and the joy of life everlasting with the Lord.

- How does this hymn and prayer comfort or encourage you?
- What is more important, faithful living of the Christian life or reaching the goal of a Christian death?

Prayer

O Lord, grant that the course of this world may be so peaceably ordered by Your governance that Your Church may joyfully serve You in all godly quietness; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for the Fourth Sunday after Trinity).

Lord, Help Us Ever to Retain

Lutheran Service Book 865 | study by Shawn L. Kumm

Introduction

A couple of tablespoons of salt stirred into a glass of water quickly disappear. The salt is not visible, but the taste is still there. Now, how to make the salt once again visible?

Fill a metal spoon with the salty water, then heat the spoon over a candle. The water disappears and the salt is left behind.

There is so much in God's Word to teach: the history, the people, the places, the customs. There are the long books and the short books, the clear books and the obscure books. How does one make it simple and concise?

- There are many places to start in Scripture. What is your first memory of God's Word?
- Where was the first place you were taught God's Word? Home? Church? Sunday school? Elsewhere?

In putting together a book of instruction for the Christian faith, Martin Luther finally had to make some decisions. In effect, Luther had to say, "It's all important. There is so much to learn. This is what we need to see and know. This is what we need to taste first."

Exploring the Scriptures

Read the Psalm appointed for this day, Psalm 14.

- Which of the Ten Commandments does this psalm reflect?
- Compare verses 1 and 7. Which verse would you categorize as "Law," and which would you identify as "Gospel?"

The Six Chief Parts of the Small Catechism provide the Christian with a worldview, a way of making sense of life according to the Word of God. Each of the Ten Commandments, the three articles of the Apostles' Creed, the petitions of the Lord's Prayer, and the explanations of Baptism, the Office of the Keys, and the Lord's Supper all serve as "hooks" to hang your life on.

Read the appointed Epistle, Eph. 5:22–33. St. Paul packs an amazing amount of theology into a few verses.

- How many parts of the Small Catechism do you find reflected in these verses?

Now we move on to and read the Gospel for the day, Mark 7:1–13.

- The Pharisees and the scribes were well educated in the Old Testament. What is it, though, they are missing?

In the Explanation of the Small Catechism, we learn, "There are three kinds of laws in the Old Testament: the moral law, which tells all people their duty toward God and other people; the ceremonial law, which regulated the religious practices in the Old Testament; and the political law, which was the state law of the Israelites" (*Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation*, p. 55).

- Which one of the three kinds of laws are the Pharisees and scribes concerned with? How do they go beyond even that?
- Which kind of law does Jesus bring to bear on the Pharisees and the scribes?
- If the Pharisees and scribes would realize that it is not the defiling of their hands they should be concerned with but the defiling of their hearts, what tough question would they then have to answer? How does Jesus fit into all of this?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

The Lutheran Reformation was well underway by the time Ludwig Helmbold (1532–98) was born. His father manufactured woolen goods in the central part of Germany. Helmbold earned both bachelor's and master's degrees and during those years held positions in education, first as a headmaster and then as a lecturer. In 1563, the outbreak of the plague resulted in the deaths of more than 4,000 citizens in Erfurt and closed the university in that city. When

the university reopened two years later, Helmbold was appointed dean of the philosophy department.

In 1566, a year after serving as dean, Helmbold received a most prestigious appointment. Emperor Maximilian II, a Roman Catholic, crowned Helmbold, a Lutheran, as poet laureate. For four years, Helmbold held this position until the weight of the intense personal hatred and criticism leveled at him for being a steadfast Lutheran caused him to resign his position.

This resignation provided Helmbold, at age 39, the opportunity to pursue becoming a Lutheran pastor. For almost 30 years, Helmbold served as a faithful pastor in his hometown. His pen was rarely still, for Helmbold authored more than 400 writings, some of which concerned children and their Christian education.

- Who is the most memorable Sunday school teacher, pastor or school teacher in your life who opened up God's Word to you?
- Though citizens of the United States rarely suffer physical persecution because of their religious beliefs, have you ever experienced what Helmbold did — intense hatred and great criticism of your Christian faith?

Text

It may be a bit surprising to actually find — and sing — Luther's name in a hymn. Helmbold's concern was great for Christian education, and he held in high esteem the structure and content of Martin Luther's Small Catechism. Already considered the "Scriptures in miniature," the catechism was condensed to just four hymn stanzas by Helmbold.

Stanza 1 summarizes many things Luther said about imparting God's Word to youth. In the introduction to the Large Catechism, Luther writes:

Making the Connection

At the heart of Lutheran theology is Christ and Him crucified. Time and time again in all its parts, the Small Catechism brings us back to Jesus. This takes clear, concise, "salted" teaching.

- Read 2 Tim. 3:14–17. What important observation does Paul make about Timothy's life in Christ? Which words

In Closing

The Small Catechism is a most useful tool for explaining and sharing the Christian faith. St. Paul writes, "Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person" (Col. 4:6).

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 865.

This sermon [the Large Catechism] is designed and undertaken to be an instruction for children and the simple folk. Therefore, in ancient times it was called in Greek *catechism* (i.e., instruction for children). It teaches what every Christian must know. So a person who does not know this catechism could not be counted as a Christian or be admitted to any Sacrament, just as a mechanic who does not understand the rules and customs of his trade is expelled and considered incapable.

Therefore, we must have the young learn well and fluently the parts of the catechism or instruction for children, diligently exercise themselves in them, and keep them busy with these parts. (LC Shorter Preface 1–3)

Beginning with stanza 2, Helmbold follows the outline of the six parts of the Small Catechism.

- Which words in stanza 2 mirror the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:1–17) and the Trinitarian outline of the Apostles' Creed (Matt. 28:18–19)?
- How, in stanza 3, does Helmbold connect the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9–13) and Baptism (Rom. 6:3–4)?
- Stanza 4 concludes with the topics of Confession and Absolution (Ps. 119:67; Gal. 6:1; Matt. 16:19; 18:15) and the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 10:16–17). What is at the heart of both?

does Paul use to tell us Timothy's knowledge of doctrine was structured and well organized?

- Using the Divine Service as an example, how and where does the liturgy also teach the Six Chief Parts of the Small Catechism? Why is it important for children, from infancy onward, to be in Sunday morning worship?

Prayer

Almighty and merciful God, defend Your Church from all false teaching and error that Your faithful people may confess You to be the only true God and rejoice in Your good gifts of life and 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 Proper 16B).

By Grace I'm Saved

Lutheran Service Book 566 | study by Robert A. Sorensen

Introduction

The word “grace” has a broad range of meanings. For example, when someone is overdue with a credit card or mortgage payment, we sometimes hear about a lender willing to extend a “grace period.” We often hear references to the prayer that precedes a meal as “saying grace.”

When this word “grace” is used in connection with the Bible and Christian doctrine, however, it has a very specific meaning. Given the central place this word occupies in our

Lutheran understanding, it is crucial that we be able to answer questions such as these:

- In simple terms, what does the Bible mean when it uses the word “grace”?
- Do any of the examples above use the word in this specifically biblical and Christian sense? Why or why not?

Exploring the Scriptures

All three of today’s appointed Scripture Readings address the issue of our fallen human condition and our resultant standing before God. They make clear that we are not able to claim any merit or worthiness before God.

Let’s look first at Deut. 4:1–2, 6–9, today’s Old Testament Reading. It simply identifies the obligations God’s people owe Him by virtue of their covenanted status.

- What is the one thing God most desires from His people? How well do we give Him what He seeks?
- What are some of our most common failures?

In today’s Gospel, Mark 7:14–23, Jesus identifies the root cause of our failures to live up to our high calling as God’s

people. His words make clear that our problem is as personal as it is deeply seated.

- What is the root cause of our ethical lapses and offensive behaviors?
- Is this root cause a flaw in the way God created us? Explain.

After reviewing Eph. 6:10–20, consider these questions:

- What external forces assault the individual Christian and the Church? According to 1 Peter 5:8, what is the goal of such attacks?
- Have you ever felt as if you were undergoing such an attack? If so, when and how?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

The author of this famous hymn, Christian Ludwig Scheidt (1709–61), was not a pastor; he was a layman. His professional life was devoted to academic pursuits; he worked as a librarian and a university lecturer.

Despite the many changes in his life’s circumstances — Scheidt worked in a variety of institutional settings in both Germany and Denmark — the constant in his life was a steadfast faith in Christ. By his early 30s, he had published this classic hymn, “By Grace I’m Saved.”

Though successful in most of his professional endeavors, Scheidt experienced great heartache in his personal life. His wife bore eight children, and all died in childhood.

- Can you relate to the aforementioned trials and tribulations of this hymn writer?
- Or does a story about a couple losing eight children to childhood diseases sound more like the product of an age gone by? Explain your answer.

After their last child died, Scheidt discovered that his wife had committed adultery. Over against his desire to reconcile the marriage, the couple was finally divorced. Scheidt remarried but did not have many good years with his second wife. After suffering ill health over his last years, he died at age 52.

- What does it say about Scheidt that he wished to reconcile with his wife after her adultery rather than divorce her?
- How would you relate his desire to forgive rather than divorce to the hymn “By Grace I’m Saved”?

Text

Both in the original German and in the English translation, the first words of each stanza set the tone and theme. These words are “By grace.”

- In the biblical sense, exactly what is grace? What do Eph. 2:1–10 and Rom. 11:6 contribute to your formulation of an answer to this question?
- How does this concept of grace shape our Lutheran understanding of our status before God?

The second stanza of this hymn says, “Our works and conduct have no worth.” Carefully, taking into account the context, consider the following questions.

- Does this statement mean that all human conduct and attempts at goodness are worthless? In other words, is our striving to do good works a waste of time? Why or why not?
- What do Matt. 5:16 and John 15:1–8 contribute to this discussion?

Stanza 3 begins with these words: “By grace God’s Son, our only Savior, / Came down to earth to bear our sin.” This line beautifully encapsulates both the manner and goal of Jesus’ ministry.

Making the Connection

This hymn powerfully underlines both the nature and effect of God’s grace. In order to reinforce our understanding of the term “grace” — the undeserved, divine favor bestowed on us for Christ’s sake — please answer the following questions.

- “By grace God’s Son, our only Savior, / Came down to earth to bear our sin” (st. 3). Can you think of a Bible passage besides the ones referred to above, or perhaps a part of the catechism or liturgy, that testifies to the same truth?

In Closing

In its explanation of the First Article of the Apostles’ Creed, the Small Catechism has a long list of all the things that our heavenly Father has given and still provides for us. This list includes our body and all its members; food, clothing and shelter; wife, children, land and animals; and so forth. The catechism’s explanation then continues with this line: “All this He does only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me” (*LSB*, p. 322).

This last sentence emphasizes the undeserved nature of grace. Even more important to a Christian understanding of grace is the idea that God has not merely given us bodies, lives and daily needs; He has given us His own Son, that we might have forgiveness and the hope of eternal life in Christ. God’s grace is indeed amazing, far beyond our lowly capacity to comprehend it.

- With what other words and images does Scripture describe Jesus’ saving work? What are some of your favorite expressions of the Gospel message?
- What do Titus 3:4–7; Col. 1:13–14; 1 John 3:8b; and John 6:37–40 have to say in this regard?

The concluding two stanzas aver that only Christ’s grace can avail in “tribulation’s furnace” and at the hour of death. In fact, the hymn concludes on a rather triumphant note, exulting: “My heart is glad, all grief has flown / Since I am saved by grace alone.”

- Have you memorized any Scripture promises that make similar points? In other words, what Bible passages would you recite if you were in a foxhole?
- Some passages that fit the bill include the following: Psalm 23 (especially vv. 4–6); John 10:27–30; and Rom. 8:31–39. What is it about these verses that make them so comforting?

- “By grace, in spite of fear and trouble, / The Father’s heart is open wide” (st. 5). Describe a moment of forgiveness, reconciliation or divine grace you have experienced, either as a witness or as a participant.
- “By grace! On this I’ll rest when dying; / In Jesus’ promise I rejoice” (st. 6). Have you witnessed a Christian brother or sister exhibiting this kind of faith in the face of death? Or have you perhaps heard a story of such steadfastness?

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 566.

Prayer

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, Your mercies are new every morning; and though we deserved only punishment, You receive us as Your children and provide for all our needs of body and soul. Grant that we may heartily acknowledge Your merciful goodness, give thanks for all Your benefits, and serve You in willing obedience; 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 Lent 4C).

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, in Halle, Germany, 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 not let any of His children slip away. See John 10:27–30.

- Jesus fulfilled Psalm 1 perfectly. 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).

Praise the One Who Breaks the Darkness

Lutheran Service Book 849 | study by Paul Robert Sauer

Introduction

How would you describe yourself to a stranger? What would be the most important things to highlight? How do you boil down all of your interests and passions into just a few short descriptive words?

Who is Jesus? It is a question that Jesus Himself asks the disciples (Luke 9:18–20), and after some stumbling about Peter answers, “The Christ of God” (v. 20).

Today’s hymn seeks out other biblical descriptions of who Jesus is, in an attempt to fill in the picture of “Jesus, the divine Messiah” with “Jesus, the man who walked on

this earth and did great things,” so that a complete picture of Jesus, who is both truly human and truly divine, can emerge.

- What images come to mind when you think about Jesus? Are they mostly divine? Mostly human? A mixture?
- Who do “others” today say Jesus is? In the face of confusing and conflicting images of Jesus, where do we go for answers?

Exploring the Scriptures

In today’s Epistle, 1 Cor. 13:1–13, St. Paul speaks about how “faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (v. 13).

- Why might love be considered the greatest of these three?
- Is love simply an emotion? In what way does Jesus’ incarnation reinforce the greatness of God’s love?

Incarnation is at the heart of this hymn. Read John 1:1–14.

- How is Jesus’ incarnation described by St. John? What image is used?
- What does this incarnation give birth to (vv. 12–13)?

In today’s Gospel, Luke 18:31–43, Jesus breaks the darkness of a blind beggar by giving him sight.

- To what does Jesus attribute the man’s restoration of sight (v. 42)? What does the beggar do with sight restored?

In our churches there is rightfully a strong emphasis on the forgiveness of sins offered through Jesus Christ. Read Luke 4:16–21.

- How does Jesus describe His mission (by quoting from Isaiah)?
- Is the Christian life simply about forgiveness of sin? What else is included in the Gospel (Good News) that Jesus brings?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

In 1986, Lutheran pastor Rusty Edwards (b. 1955) opened his Bible with the intention of creating a Bible study on the actual life and unique ministry of Jesus:

What on earth did Jesus really do? As I prayed, studied, and thanked God for the life of Jesus, I began to write down some of his works. The list grew longer. Suddenly, I gazed down at the list and the list looked almost like a hymn. (Rusty Edwards, “Praise the One Who Breaks the Darkness,” *CrossAccent* 15, no. 2 [2007]: 39)

Edwards then set aside the Bible study and composed “Praise the One Who Breaks the Darkness,” a celebration of the marvelous works of the incarnate Son of God.

- If you were to describe Jesus to a friend, would you focus more on His theological importance or on His historical life?
- What do the historical life and works of Jesus contribute to our understanding of His theological importance?

Edwards titled his hymn after his favorite image of Jesus — the one who breaks the darkness in the world.

- What is your favorite image of Jesus? Why?
- Did Edwards leave out images of Jesus that you would include if you were writing the hymn? Which ones?

Text

This hymn is deeply descriptive of the life and works of Jesus. It is filled with biblical imagery. Yet Jesus is not explicitly mentioned by name until the third stanza.

- If stanza 3 were removed from this hymn, would it be as powerful? Would you still know who the hymn was about? How?

The hymn begins by celebrating the freedom that is brought by the “light” (John 1:4–9) who breaks the darkness. Out of that light comes freedom and all its benefits (described in st. 1). Read John 8:34–36.

- What is the slavery that John speaks of? Is it physical? Does it manifest itself in physical ways?
- How is creation itself affected by the freedom brought by the liberating light (st. 1)?
- Stanza 1 concludes with a reference to “the very Bread of peace.” What is this a reference to?

Making the Connection

This hymn calls to our attention the many works of the incarnate Son of God.

- What difference does it make to you to have a God who became one of us?

In Closing

The incarnation of the Son of God has changed everything. God is not content to allow His people to live apart from Him and His presence. God continues to come to His people through His Word, through the bread of life (Communion), and through water (Baptism).

Ultimately the incarnate Word draws us back to God through His role as Redeemer, “the One who makes us one” (st. 3) both with God and with each other as fellow members of the Body of Christ.

In the second stanza humanity (the children), the spiritual realm (demons), and the whole of creation (burning sand) are made whole by the one who is “living water.” Read John 4:7–15.

- Where do we go to get the living water?
- Is a celebration of Baptism present in this stanza? Why or why not?

The hymn concludes with the explicit identification of “the One” as the incarnate Word. We have been moved from table (Communion) to font (Baptism), and now the hymn concludes with a focus on the grace that table and font bring. Edwards saves the best for last. Read John 3:16–17.

- Why did God send Jesus? What is the greatest of the works done by the incarnate Son of God?
- Where is our unity found (Eph. 4:4–6)?

- How do we encounter the incarnate Word today?
- In what ways can we bring the incarnate Word to others (1 Cor. 12:27)?

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 849.

Prayer

O Lord, mercifully hear our prayers and having set us free from the bonds of our sins deliver us from every evil; 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 Quinquagesima).

Lord of Glory, You Have Bought Us

Lutheran Service Book 851 | study by Larry A. Peters

Introduction

Lutherans are understandably nervous about how we speak of our response to the Gospel. Not wanting to confuse what justifies us before God through Jesus Christ and our response of faith (and good works), we sometimes appear to downplay the importance of good works. In Eph. 2:8–9, St. Paul clearly states that we are saved by grace through faith — without adding anything to Christ’s saving work on our behalf. Yet in the very next verse, he gives this blunt reminder: “For we are [God’s] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

Today’s hymn, “Lord of Glory, You Have Bought Us,” captures well this connection between the Lord who bought

us with His lifeblood as the price and hearts moved by the Holy Spirit to give to others as Christ has given to us.

- How important is it that we shine with Christ’s light so that others may see our good works and give glory to our Father in heaven (Matt. 5:16)?
- Does this life of giving and good works flow automatically from faith, or do we need to be encouraged in this direction?
- How does the world tend to characterize Christians — loving or judgmental? Is this a true or false characterization?

Exploring the Scriptures

In the Readings for today, we see various aspects of this call to good works. By connecting the Readings together, we set the right context for the faithful and fruitful response of good works in the life of a Christian.

By the Introit Psalm (37), we are reminded that our delight is in the Lord (faith), and this is the starting point for good works (v. 4). If we commit our way to Him, He works in us and through us (v. 5) and brings forth our righteousness as the light (v. 6).

- In what way does this first speak of Jesus Christ?
- We receive Christ’s righteousness by Baptism and wear it by faith. Is this righteousness also light?

Psalm 54 speaks of the Lord as our “helper” (v. 4), as well as the free and sacrificial response born of our thanksgiving for His saving help (v. 6).

- Our offerings are to be freely given of a thankful heart moved by Christ’s own example. Can you recall a time when the motive for giving made all the difference before the Lord? Hint: Gen. 4:3–7 and Heb. 11:4.
- How is the offering of things related to the offering of our very selves (Rom. 12:1)? Which is first?

James enlarges this whole discussion. Read James 3:13–4:10. He tells us that this is not a simple matter of remembering to do good works. It is about the attitude of the heart. As long as our hearts are full of “me,” there is no acceptable offering possible.

- Good works are the fruit of what kind of heart (3:17 and 4:6)?

- Notice the flow. Peace from God leads to peace with others, a peaceful heart within us, and a “harvest of righteousness.” Can anything we do please God as long as selfishness and jealousy occupy our hearts?
- Is it possible to do the right thing for the wrong reason?

In Mark 9:30–37, Jesus is teaching His disciples what He must do to win salvation. Here the Gospel is succinct and concrete. “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise” (v. 31).

- Why did the disciples fail to understand Jesus?
- Was it a failure of understanding His words or hearing His words because something else was on their minds? What did they understand (v. 34)?
- Why were they reluctant to admit to Jesus what they had been discussing among themselves?
- Greatness born of selfless service — who is Jesus referring to in verse 35? What do we need from God before we can hear and understand this truth?
- Why did Jesus use the example of a child (vv. 36–37)? What can a child return to you for the kindness you show him?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Eliza S. Alderson (1818–89) wrote this hymn, requesting that her brother write the tune. He ended up adding the final stanza as well. Alderson reported that the practice of tithing (returning 10 percent of your income back to the Lord) was her inspiration, but nothing in the hymn explicitly mentions this. In fact, the hymn spends more time dealing with the motivation for giving than what we give. The hymn begins and ends by firmly anchoring our response solidly in God's work alone; there is no confusion of Law and Gospel here.

Text

In the first stanza, the author has set the stage for all that is to come in this hymn. What glory of the Lord is referred to here?

- Did Jesus withhold anything in His sacrificial offering on our behalf?
- Why did the Lord give Himself up so freely and willingly? Read Heb. 12:2.
- Jesus did not offer Himself because anyone deserved His sacrificial gift. He died for the unworthy and undeserving. What does this say about the way we return to Him or give to the poor and needy?

The second stanza takes the form of a prayer. We ask God to give us a heart like Jesus' own heart that we might give as freely as He has given to us.

- How does the hymn describe the condition of our hearts apart from Christ?
- Before we are "warmed" up to give to others, we must first be "warmed" up by the Spirit to believe. Only Jesus

can teach us the truth of how much more blessed it is "to give than to receive." The world teaches us that happiness comes from _____, while Jesus shows us it comes from _____.

Stanza 3 frames our stewardship as an honor and a privilege that God makes possible. The least little act of Christian kindness and the smallest good works do not pass before the Lord unnoticed — even though the world may never acknowledge them.

- How does this encourage us to good works? See Heb. 13:16.
- Whose face are we meant to see in the faces of the poor and needy? Read Matt. 25:31–46.
- What are alms? In what season of the Church Year are we particularly encouraged to alms-giving?

The final stanza brings back the first two lines of stanza 1. This resets the context for our faithful response and is a prayer for faith, hope and love (1 Cor. 13:13).

- Why does giving require a bold trust?
- What is it within us that resists this call to robust stewardship of all of Christ's gifts and resources?
- Think of Christ's conversation with His disciples in the Gospel lesson. Why is it so easy to be distracted from His call to serve as He has served us?
- How often does our love need renewing? Where does this renewal take place?

Making the Connection

Giving is not a one-way street. Jesus invites us to be lights shining with His bright light, showing forth the Gospel and displaying God's glory to the world around us. This is not a simple matter of picking up a few extra canned goods at the market. It begins with the transformation of our hearts. Our Lord enables our response by giving us the Spirit so that we might see, understand, believe and reflect His love. Notice

how the hymn writer has maintained this context throughout the hymn while calling us to act boldly.

- What are the good works that give glory to God?
- Are these good works accessible to every Christian or the domain of but a few?
- What does it mean when Jesus tells us to give as He has given to us?

In Closing

In the Our Father, we pray, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us," thereby connecting Jesus' forgiveness with the way we forgive others in His name. Here we connect the way we have received His giving love to the way we love one another and do the good works He has equipped us to do. Is it possible to acknowledge what Jesus has done for us and remain blind to the needs of those around us?

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 851.

Prayer

Father, grant that we may, with thankful hearts, receive Your mercies and express our gratitude not only with our lips, but in our lives. Help us to give ourselves to Your service on behalf of the poor and needy, and therefore walk in the way that You have made known to us. Grant us faith that works in love, hope that does not disappoint, and kindness that never fails; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Triune God, Be Thou Our Stay

Lutheran Service Book 505 | study by William M. Cwirla

Introduction

Dorothy Sayers once summarized the doctrine of the Trinity this way: “The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, the whole thing incomprehensible” (*Creeds or Chaos* [Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1999], 33). Indeed, the mystery of God’s “tri-unity,” three distinct persons in one divine being, is far above and beyond our experience. It stretches our vocabulary to invent new words like “triune.” While God’s “tri-unity” — His

“three-in-one-ness” — cannot be comprehended or explained, it can be confessed and worshiped and adored.

This hymn addresses God — Father, Son and Holy Spirit — in a threefold prayer for faith and protection as we run the race of faith set before us.

- How would you describe God’s tri-unity to someone who had never heard of it before?
- What puzzles you most about God being three persons in one being?

Exploring the Scriptures

Read the creation account in Gen. 1:1–2:4.

- In 1:1–3, how is each person of the Trinity described?
- In 1:27–28, how is the divine Trinity of persons expressed?
- The Latin church father Augustine said that the “external works of God are indivisible.” That being the case, what role does each person of the Trinity play in the work of creation?
- See John 1:1–3. What role did the Son (Word) play in the work of creation?

Read Matt. 28:16–20.

- In Jesus’ baptismal mandate to His disciples, how many persons are named? How many “names” are there? What does this say about the relationship of persons within the Godhead?

Read John 10:30.

- The word for “one” in the Greek of this passage is neuter, that is, “one thing.” What does this tell you about the unity of the Father and the Son?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

This hymn of Martin Luther (1483–1546) is based on a popular processional hymn that predates the Reformation. The traditional first stanza was addressed to St. Peter or to Holy Mary. Other saints were added as needed for length. In fact, the stanza specifically addressed to Mary appears to have been the model for Luther’s version, so that what was attributed to Mary is now attributed to the Triune God:

Holy Mary, stay with us
And do not let us perish.
Free us from all sins
And if we should die,
Defend us from the Devil;
Help us, chaste Virgin Mary,
To join the lovely Angel Host
So we will sing Alleluia,
Alleluia we shall sing
In praise of the Almighty God.
Grant to us, Lord, as our reward
The heavenly crown.

Lord, have mercy! Christ, have mercy!
All praise to you, Mary.

- What does Luther’s use of this old and popular hymn tell you about the nature of the Lutheran Reformation?
- Do you think it is possible to rescue old hymns and tunes that contain errors and put them to use in teaching proper doctrine?
- What does the original stanza tell you about medieval piety concerning Mary? To whom should this prayer properly be prayed?

Text

This hymn may be sung either as a single stanza to the Triune God in the unity of His divine essence or in three repeated stanzas, each addressing one of the Trinity of persons.

- Which way of singing this hymn do you think would be preferable, and why?

- How does the threefold repetition of the same stanza to each person of the Trinity illustrate Augustine's maxim that the external works of God are indivisible?

The hymn calls God our "stay." This is not our usual usage of that word. Read Ps. 31:1–3.

- What other words might you use in place of "stay"?
- The first sentence of the hymn asks God for seven specific things. What are they?

The second sentence of the hymn draws on Eph. 6:10–17 and the "whole armor of God."

- List the various components of the whole armor of God.
- Would you say that the "war" believers are called to wage is offensive or defensive? Explain.

The hymn speaks of the Christian life as running a race (Heb. 12:1–2).

- In what ways do the Father, Son and Holy Spirit enable us to run the race of faith?
- What role do the saints play in our heavenly race (v. 1)?
- Ultimately, how are we to shun "the devil's wiles and cunning"?

The Small Catechism says "Amen, amen means 'yes, yes, it shall be so'" (*LSB*, p. 325).

- What is our ground of confidence that God will hear our prayer in this hymn and grant what we ask?

Making the Connection

The Small Catechism teaches that we are to make the sign of the holy cross and say, "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" every day — in the morning when we arise and in the evening before we go to sleep (*LSB*, p. 327).

- How would remembering your Baptism in this way draw on the gifts prayed for in this hymn?
- How does regular participation in the Lord's Supper bring to you the gifts for which this hymn prays?
- What examples do you have in your life of the Triune God being your stay?

In Closing

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (Ps. 46:1). This hymn reminds us of all the eternal blessings and benefits we receive as we live in the triune name of God as His baptized children.

While we certainly cannot fully understand or comprehend the mystery of God's tri-unity, we can certainly enjoy His blessings of creation, redemption and sanctification that are ours thanks to the death and resurrection of Jesus and our Baptism into God's creative and redemptive work. This is a good hymn not only for one or two Sundays in the Church Year, but also for daily use as we run the race of baptized believers.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 505.

Prayer

Almighty and everlasting God, You have given us grace to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity by the confession of a true faith and to worship the Unity in the power of the Divine Majesty. Keep us steadfast in this faith and defend us from all adversities; for You, O Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, live and reign, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for the Holy Trinity).

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, we are not to

- 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?

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).

Thee Will I Love, My Strength, My Tower

Lutheran Service Book 694 | study by Shawn L. Kumm

Introduction

Whimsical scenarios are daily staged at one of the world's most photographed towers as tourists with extended arms pretend to hold up the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Had it remained upright, the tower would have been at best a minor Italian tourist stop. But because this tower in Pisa leans, well, now it's famous.

Sections of once-towering metal recently rested in a government laboratory as scientists and engineers studied

the beams for strength and weakness. The question: What would it have taken for the twin towers of the World Trade Center to withstand the violence done to them?

- What is the tallest structure you have visited? Did being there make you feel safe? If not, what about the structure frightened you?

Exploring the Scriptures

Foundational to understanding stanzas 1, 2 and 5 of "Thee Will I Love, My Strength, My Tower" is John 14:23, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him."

- What words does the hymn writer give you to sing as an appropriate response to Jesus' statement?

Read Mark 10:46–52.

- Which phrases in stanzas 3 and 4 reflect the sight-restoring miracle in Bartimaeus' life?
- How do we know that Jesus also healed Bartimaeus' spiritual blindness? Which words in stanza 4 reflect such healing?
- Imagine for a moment what it must have been like for Bartimaeus to see Jesus for the first time. In what ways had Jesus become Bartimaeus' "strength" and "tower?"

Read Matt. 22:34–46. Here we run into the Pharisees, men who see and yet do not see. In verse 36 the Pharisees show their hand right away. They were (in)famous for wanting to keep the Law.

- Does Jesus give them a Law answer or a Gospel answer?
- What question should the Pharisees be asking Jesus?

When the Pharisees do not ask Jesus who will save them from the requirements of the Law since they can't save themselves, Jesus asks His own questions in verses 41–45.

- About whom have the Pharisees forgotten?
- With which words does Jesus teach the Pharisees about the two natures of *the* Son of David, His humanity and His divinity?
- What theological conclusion can be drawn, then, if the Christ, the Son of David, is also "Lord?" What help and hope is there for you in keeping the Law?

Sadly, the Pharisees tightly squeeze shut their spiritual eyes and refuse to see the answer-to-the-Law incarnate, the very tower of salvation before them.

- We all have a "little Pharisee" inside of us. What does it take to break down that "little Pharisee" and see the Christ, the Son of David, the Lord who spoke to David's Lord as Savior?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

The biography of this hymn's writer is bittersweet to orthodox Lutherans. Johann Scheffler (1624–77) was born to Lutheran parents in Breslau, Silesia, or what is today Wrocław, Poland, located in the central part of Europe. Through his studies at various universities Scheffler prepared himself for a career in medicine, and became a private physician to Emperor Ferdinand III. It was during this time that the House of Hapsburg exerted considerable force through the Counter-Reformation for people to return to

Roman Catholicism. Scheffler fell under the influence of the Counter-Reformation, joining the Roman Catholic Church in 1653. He ultimately gave up his vocation of physician and joined a monastery in Breslau. At this time he became known by his pseudonym Angelus Silesius, which means "messenger of Silesia."

A man with a gift for words and writing, most of the over two hundred hymns penned by Scheffler were written before his conversion. This hymn is one to which Lutherans can sing their "amen."

- What are some of the qualifying traits a hymn needs to have before a Lutheran can say, “Yes, this is true; yes, this is what I believe”?
- Where in the present-day world is undue influence by the government exerted on faithful Christians?

Text

The German text for the first line of this hymn translates, “I will love Thee, my Strength.” The word “tower” is not explicitly mentioned. So where does the “tower” come in? Behind the German word for “strength” is the meaning of power, fortitude, yes, even towering height. Hence, in the poetic choices of Catherine Winkworth’s English, the phrase becomes, “Thee will I love, my strength, my tower.”

- Compare stanza 1 with the following psalm verses: Ps. 18:1; Ps. 59:16–17; and Ps. 61:3. In what ways does Scheffler use the language of the Old Testament hymnal in his own hymn?

Making the Connection

The blindness of both Bartimaeus and the Pharisees was curable, but not by their own doing. The Explanation to the Small Catechism reads, “Why do you need the Holy Spirit to begin and sustain this faith in you?” The answer? “By nature I am spiritually blind, dead, and an enemy of God, as the Scriptures teach; therefore I cannot by my own reason

Through faith and with great boldness and confidence Scheffler appropriates to himself the promises of Jesus.

- Which titles of Jesus in stanza 2 does the author claim with the use of the word “my”? How are these titles of Jesus pure Gospel and a comfort to you?
- In stanza 3, for what benefits of the Word of God does Scheffler give thanks?
- In what ways does the spoken word of absolution bring healing to the soul?

In stanza 3 the lips of the Lord revealed His healing word. In stanza 4, the effect of this healing word is stated.

- How are Ps. 141:3 and Micah 6:8 reflected in stanza 4?

The theme of light that was sung of in stanzas 1, 3 and 4 is summarized in stanza 5.

- Consider how stanza 5 reflects and summarizes the comfort you have in Is. 9:2 and 51:11.

or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him” (*Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation*, p. 147).

- What words would you use to describe how the Holy Spirit has cured your spiritual blindness so that you can see *your* strength, *your* tower, *your* Jesus?

In Closing

The God who spoke light into darkness is the same God who speaks faith into sin-darkened hearts. The towering strength of God’s love in Christ Jesus shines brightly in His Word and into your life. His love does not lean, His love does not fall. His love stands firm and stands strong for you.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 694.

Prayer

O God, the helper of all who call on You, have mercy on us and give us eyes of faith to see Your Son that we may follow Him on the way that leads to eternal life; 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 Proper 25B).

Hope of the World

Lutheran Service Book 690 | study by Gifford A. Grobien

Introduction

It is so easy to get caught up in the daily routines and stresses of our lives. It's not that we try to forget about God, but in our busyness and weakness, our trust is interrupted and disrupted.

We know that Christ offers us the certainty of eternal life, and that nothing can come between Him and us. This is typically the focus of the preaching we hear, and for good reason. The promise of forgiveness and eternal life is given and strengthened by this preaching. But sometimes we do not so clearly connect the promise of eternal life with our everyday routine.

- Briefly discuss what impact the assurance of eternal life has in your daily life, and the impact you think it should be having.

Christ's grace gives us peace that passes understanding, joy and contentment that gives perspective to our day-to-day struggles. Each of us has ups and downs. Sometimes, our difficulties can become severe, such as losing employment, a very hurtful relationship or extreme loneliness.

- What does God do in these situations? Does He actively work to improve our temporal situation? How?

Exploring the Scriptures

"Hope of the World" is grounded in Psalm 146.

- The psalm considers people or things in whom we might put our trust. Who or what are the options mentioned? In whom does the psalmist declare we should put our trust?
- Can you find the phrase in the psalm used as the basis for the title of the hymn? Hint: See verses 5–6.

We have general expectations about what a prince — or a president, legislator or judge — should do. We expect them to govern in a certain way and to pay attention to certain things.

- Share these expectations with one another.
- What expectations does the psalmist have for princes? Do these expectations match our own expectations for government? In what ways?
- What task for the prince is suggested by the psalmist that seems unreasonable (v. 3)? Why do you think the psalmist says this?

We don't expect our salvation to come from our president or other governing authorities. Yet, we don't always *behave* as if we realize this!

- What kinds of events in your daily life make you anxious or worried?
- How is this kind of anxiety a way of trusting in princes — or money, or approval from others, or something other than the LORD? Reflect on the First Commandment and its explanation in answering this question.

Among other things, the psalm depicts the LORD as one who executes justice, one who feeds the hungry and releases prisoners, one who heals and cares for those who are without other help (the sojourners, widows and orphans — v. 9).

- What is your reaction to this depiction of God? Do you expect these things from Him, or do you think that He only bothers with eternal concerns?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

"Hope of the World" was submitted to the Hymn Society of America in response to its search for new ecumenical hymns. "Ecumenical" means having to do with unity among church bodies, and it often refers to structural unity or joint participation in services or other activities. This hymn was chosen first out of over 500 submissions and sung at the Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1954. In penning this text for Christian unity, author Georgia Harkness (1891–1974) emphasized the place of Christ. The

theme of the 1954 assembly was "Christ, the Hope of the World," and Harkness places Christ's action at the forefront in each stanza.

- How is an ecumenical attitude a good thing? How can it be detrimental?
- Contrast an ecumenical movement that is focused on external, structural unity or improved human relationships with one that is centered on Christ. How does an emphasis on Christ and His work prioritize ecumenical endeavors?

Text

In the hymn, Harkness skillfully presents the troubles of the human condition to suggest that outward unity is not the Church's only problem.

- What are the troubles and sins that plague people, according to stanza 1?
- What is the remedy for these, according to stanza 2? Where and how do we receive the bread of life and the Spirit of Christ?

Christ comes to us in Word and Sacrament. His Spirit is ours through the Means of Grace: preaching, Baptism and eating the “bread of life” (st. 2) of Holy Communion. This message of Christ coming to our world to accomplish salvation for us and to be with us in our troubles becomes stronger with each stanza.

Stanza 3 includes the imagery of walking and traveling — of pilgrimage. Read these passages: Prov. 4:27; Is. 30:21; John 14:1–6; and Mark 8:34.

- What do these passages say about walking and the way in which we walk? What does it mean to walk straight and not veer to the left or right?

Making the Connection

The texts we have looked at show a rich, multifaceted understanding of Christ's ministry. He works forgiveness and eternal life, to be sure, yet also is concerned for our bodily and temporal needs.

- According to stanzas 4 and 5, what characterizes the life of one who has received mercy from Christ?

In Closing

God does not relieve our worldly troubles in a mystical, “magical” way. Not everyone's financial difficulty, familial conflict or loneliness will be addressed or healed in the same way. But God gives us brothers and sisters in Christ to stand with us and to help us overcome worldly struggles. Through others, God fulfills His promises in Psalm 146 and Luke 4!

Most comforting of all, the promise of eternal life and peace grants us peace even in the midst of this world's troubles. Christ Himself lives with us and stays with us on our journey that leads to eternal life.

- Can we find the way on our own? How do we come to know the right way to walk?

Jesus is the way, not in that we merely follow Him, but in that He is the one we cling to. He walks “beside us” (st. 3) by making Himself present in Word and Sacrament. When we hold to these, no matter what paths we stumble upon in life, we have His salvation.

- How does the hymn express our salvation through Christ in stanzas 4 and 5? What phrases and images are used?

The message of salvation is forgiveness of sins and eternal life through Christ's death and resurrection. Yet, we suggested earlier that Psalm 146 includes other aspects of God's work when it refers to God feeding the hungry, healing the sick, caring for the lonely and freeing prisoners. Read Luke 4:16–21.

- How does Jesus describe His own ministry in verse 18? How does this compare with Psalm 146?
- How does Harkness intertwine the themes of salvation and care for bodily needs, especially in stanzas 4 and 5?

Because we have received mercy from Christ through forgiveness, we show mercy to others in temporal ways.

- What are some ways that you regularly show mercy to others in your family? At work? At church? In the community?
- Recalling that the Church is the Body of Christ (Rom. 12:5), how do our works of mercy serve to carry out the works of the LORD from Psalm 146?

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 690.

Prayer

Almighty God, send Your Holy Spirit into our hearts that He may rule and direct us according to Your will, comfort us in all our temptations and afflictions, defend us from all error, and lead us into all truth that we, being steadfast in faith, may increase in all good works and in the end obtain everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen (For the Holy Spirit, *LSB*, p. 310).

From God Can Nothing Move Me

Lutheran Service Book 713 | study by John G. Fleischmann

Introduction

Worries. Cares. Fears. Life is full of them! Sometimes they distract us. Sometimes they may even paralyze us. Ever since sin came into the world they have been a part of every human life.

Our Lord Jesus made it very clear that we should not worry about anything (Matt. 6:31–34).

In this wonderful hymn from the pen of Ludwig Helmbold (1532–98), a lecturer at the University of Erfurt, in Erfurt, Germany, we are shown what it means to trust

the Lord and His promises especially when our worries and uncertain future take our eyes off the cross.

- Name some of your fears. What keeps you awake at night?
- How do these things distract you from trusting God's promises in Christ Jesus?
- Have the things about which you worry ever come to pass?

Exploring the Scriptures

Read Psalm 73 the basis for this hymn.

- In this psalm, what does the Lord tell us will happen to all evil?
- What promise of hope is given?

This hymn is also based on the well-known and often-cited passage from Rom. 8:38–39. Read this section of Scripture.

- What are the things Paul mentions that cannot separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus?
- Are any of your worries left off of this list?

God's chosen, Israel, often wandered from the Lord. Because they did not obey God, God dealt severely with them. Yet, even in their exile, God gave them tremendous

hope. Read the Old Testament lesson for Proper 25B, Jer. 31:7–9.

- What restoration does God promise?
- How have you wandered and disobeyed God?
- How has the Lord restored you?
- How do we walk in His ways?

Read the Gospel for Proper 25B, Mark 10:46–52. The account speaks of Bartimaeus, a “blind beggar.”

- What may have been some of Bartimaeus' worries?
- Who made his worries vanish?
- Martin Luther once said, “We are all beggars. We are saved by one who became a beggar.” Who is it that makes our worries vanish? How?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

This hymn was written during the plague that struck Erfurt in 1563. Ludwig Helmbold wrote this hymn for the rector of the university and his wife, Pancratius and Regina Helbich. They fled the city to escape the deadly spreading disease. It was intended by Helmbold to give them strength on their journey.

- Name times when your future was uncertain.
- Have you ever had to leave your friends and start a new life elsewhere?
- How did God's Word help you at those times?

Text

The stanzas of this hymn unfold the wonderful assurance of God's abiding presence in our lives at all times. Stanza 1 begins with the surety that God will never leave us. It then speaks of what God does in our lives.

- What does it mean that He “gently will reprove me”?

See Heb. 12:6, 10.

- “He stretches out His hand” is a powerful biblical image. What are some biblical examples of this? What does God do each time this happens?

Stanza 2 speaks about losing those in life who were regarded as “trustworthy and sure.” This can mean those whom we love that are left behind when life takes a different course. It can also refer to those who betray us.

- In either case, what is true about God?
- What are the “chains that bind me”?
- How does one receive “peace ... within”?

Stanza 3 speaks of the providence of God. We don’t plan our lives — He does.

- Why is understanding this truth so important?
- How does God change “All sorrow into joy”?
- How does God’s love “still” us?

Stanza 4 assures us that God’s will is done each day in our lives.

- Read the Third Petition of the Lord’s Prayer and its meaning in the Small Catechism (*LSB*, p. 324). What is God’s will?

- What is the most important gift the Father gives us according to stanza 4?
- What is meant by “The bread of earth and heaven”?

Stanza 5 speaks about our worship of God — our response to His grace, love and mercy.

- What is meant by the word “vocation”?
- How is our worship eternal?

Stanza 6 speaks of suffering and assures us that our deliverance is in Jesus.

- What is meant by “That day of bliss divine”?
- How do we look forward to that day?

Stanza 7 is a doxological stanza, that is, it gives glory to the Holy Trinity. It also sums up the hymn.

- What did the Father will?
- How did His Son fulfill this will?
- What does the Spirit give?
- What is our hope?

Making the Connection

We don’t know what happened to Dr. Helbich and his wife after they fled Erfurt. Their departure was a painful experience for them and those whom they left behind.

Likewise, we don’t know what life has in store for us this side of heaven. Without Christ the journey of life is dangerous and uncertain.

But we have been baptized into Christ! God’s promises stand. Nothing can separate us from His love.

As the biblical truths captured in this hymn brought the rector and his wife hope and encouragement, they speak the same to us.

- “The Lord my life arranges; / Who can His work destroy?” (st. 3). How, with the power of the Holy Spirit, can we reframe our thinking so that we understand this truth, causing worry to cease?
- “The bread of earth and heaven / Are by His kindness given” (st. 4). Why is the Eucharist so vitally important in our lives?
- “Praise God with acclamation / And in His gifts rejoice” (st. 5). What are the gifts of God that cause you to rejoice?

In Closing

So, what about those worries you shared at the beginning of this study? What assurance has God given you in the words of this hymn?

Worry and fear are sins. Jesus slew them on the cross. As we sing this hymn laden with the declarations of God’s grace and presence, we are moved to trust Him above all things, even our worries and fears.

It is through this life of uncertainty that “He leads us home to heaven. / O praise the Three in One” (st. 7).

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 713. Let the words speak to you.

Prayer

O God, the helper of all who call on You, have mercy on us and give us eyes of faith to see Your Son that we may follow Him on the way that leads to eternal life; 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 Proper 25B).

O God of Mercy, God of Might

Lutheran Service Book 852 | study by Kim L. Scharff

Introduction

“Deeds, not creeds!” Such has been the rallying cry for many Christians. A vibrant and full-bodied life of faith is the hope of such a cry. And, surely, the Christian life is one that is full of “deeds” that reflect a vital faith in the God of creation, redemption and sanctification, the blessed Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

But an interest in “deeds,” the works of a faithful Christian, does not require driving a wedge between what is believed and how that belief is practiced. To the contrary,

living out the Christian faith receives its motivation and direction from the content of that faith — the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the forgiveness of sins, the promise of blessing from God now and into eternity.

That is the very hope expressed in this hymn, “O God of Mercy, God of Might.”

- Read James 1:22. How does James connect the content of faith with faithful actions? What “spin” does Paul put on the same truth in Rom. 2:13?

Exploring the Scriptures

The Old Testament Reading for this day is part of Moses’ instruction to Israel as they were preparing to enter the Promised Land. Read Deut. 6:1–9.

- Why had Israel been kept from entering the Promised Land for 40 years? Read Deut. 5:32–33, the words that just precede the Old Testament Reading. What command and promise were given by Moses? How does Moses then express both the content and the practice of Israel’s faith in 6:1–9?

Read the Epistle lesson for the day, Heb. 9:11–14.

- In verse 11, what are the “good things” that have come through Christ? What was it that brought these “good things”? What comfort comes from having a purified conscience (v. 14)? What do you think are the “dead

works” the writer speaks of in verse 14? What flows out of a pure conscience?

Read today’s Gospel from Mark 12:28–37. The connection to the Old Testament Reading is clear. Jesus is showing its fulfillment in Him and the New Testament.

- What might have been the motivation for the question asked in verse 28? Given the response of the scribe in verses 32–33, what do you think Jesus meant by His statement in verse 34?
- Jesus indicates to His audience that all of this needs to be taken to another level of understanding. What is Jesus telling them in verses 35–37 that they must come to see? What had often been Israel’s problem in the Old Testament, a problem also common in Jesus’ day? Read Acts 7:51 and 2 Cor. 3:12–18.

Exploring the Hymn

Background

English clergyman Godfrey Thring (1823–1903) was the author of this hymn. The text was first included in the *Church of England Hymnbook* of 1880. It was located in the Offertory section, and Luke 10, the parable of the Good Samaritan, was cited as the basis for the hymn.

Besides being a clergyman, Thring was also a wealthy landholder who throughout his life gave generously from his own considerable means to support churches and schools. This hymn was a reflection of his devotion to living out his Christian faith by doing good with the blessings the Lord had given him.

- Read James 2:17. What do good works reveal? Ideally, what should our actions reveal about us? Apply Jesus’ words in Matt. 6:19–20 to this principle.

Text

Throughout this hymn, the author examines the relationship between justification and sanctification. His concern for good works is not found in an inadequate view of righteousness but in a clear understanding and confession of a Christ-centered, Word-bound faith.

Carefully read stanzas 1 and 2 of the hymn.

- In stanza 1, where is the strength gotten to live for God? Read 1 Cor. 6:20. What was the price that was paid

for you (1 Peter 1:18–19)? How do you understand the meaning of glorifying God “in your body”?

- In stanza 2, how will this world be able to truly live? Read 2 Cor. 5:14–15. Through faith in Christ, for whom do we now live? In light of this, thinking back to today’s Gospel, what is the relationship between the first and second great (important) commandments (Mark 12:29–31)?

Now read stanzas 3 and 4 of the hymn.

- What did Jesus “feel” for those purchased by His blood (Luke 23:34)? How are we to feel toward those same blood-bought souls, and how will that be revealed in us? The Parable of the Good Samaritan was the inspiration for this hymn. Revisit that parable in Luke 10:25–37. How does the Samaritan reflect the saving love of Christ? What is the lesson for you (v. 37)?

Making the Connection

Certainly, it goes without saying that having faith in Christ impacts the way we live. Being loved by God and saved by Him through faith in Jesus Christ is what constrains us to love our neighbor as ourselves.

- The *Book of Concord*, our Lutheran Confessions, serves us by teaching and confessing both the content of our faith and its proper application. Consider and discuss, as a group, the following quotation, attributed to Luther: “Faith and good works well agree and fit together; but

- Describe the powerful mission emphasis in stanza 4 of the hymn. Why is mission work a great good work? What is always the only motivation for seeking the lost?

Conclude your study of the hymn now by reading stanzas 5 and 6.

- Read Gal. 6:2, along with stanza 5 of the hymn. What burdens are you called on to bear? Christian vocation also comes into the picture here. How do Paul’s words in Galatians and stanza 5 of the hymn relate to our God-given roles as husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, etc.? The context is somewhat different, but how does Col. 3:23 help us understand stanza 5?
- How does stanza 6 of the hymn describe the work of the Holy Spirit? Recall Luther’s explanation in the Small Catechism (*LSB*, p. 323). Of first importance, the Holy Spirit brings us to faith in Christ through the Gospel. But what else does He do to enable us, as stanza 6 says, to “live in love”?

it is faith alone, without works, that lays hold of the blessing.’ [see LW 22:166] Yet it [faith] is never, ever, alone” (FC SD III 41).

- Our hymn is appointed for a Sunday very near the end of the Church Year. Describe why this hymn fits well at this point in the Church Year. Read Micah 6:8 and Matt. 25:40. Why are these texts appropriate summaries of the entire hymn, “O God of Mercy, God of Might”?

In Closing

“Deeds, not creeds!” That byword has a certain ring to it, to be sure. But when graded against Holy Scripture and the Church’s long and faithful confession of biblical truth, it doesn’t pass the test! Deeds — good works — flow from faith in Jesus Christ and the love for God and neighbor to which that faith gives and sustains life. “Creeds lead to deeds,” or, perhaps better put, faith in Christ leads to works faithful to God’s Word and to the good of our neighbor.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 852.

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, our great High Priest, cleanse us by the power of Your redeeming blood that in purity and peace we may worship and adore Your holy name; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Proper 26B).

Lord of All Hopefulness

Lutheran Service Book 738 | study by Paul Robert Sauer

Introduction

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus (535–475 B.C.) famously remarked, “You can’t step into the same river twice.” Or to put it in other terms, “Change seems to be the only thing that doesn’t change.”

Today’s hymn addresses the changes that occur for the believer throughout the believer’s day but also throughout life. And yet amidst the changes, one who is changeless in His love walks with the believer throughout the diversity of each day and, indeed, all of life’s stages.

- How has your relationship with God changed throughout your life? Are there high points or low points? What, if anything, has stayed constant?
- Often our needs in life change as we pass through life’s stages: childhood, adulthood, our last years. Does the way that God speaks to His people change to meet our changing needs? Does the content of God’s message change?

Exploring the Scriptures

The Psalms, like much of our modern hymnody, often speak to both the physical and spiritual needs of the believer. Read Ps. 55:16–17.

- In verse 17, at what times of the day does the psalmist call on God? Is there ever a time when it is not appropriate to call on God?
- The author of Psalm 55 utters “complaint and moan.” Is it appropriate to complain to God?

Honest need and honest frustration about life are common expressions of the psalmists. Read Ps. 55:22–23.

- Who sustains the righteous in times of trouble?
- In a world that often seems unfair, where does true righteousness and justice come from?

In the Epistle for today, Heb. 9:24–28, Jesus is described as a high priest who appears “in the presence of God on our behalf,” to put away the sins of the people.

- How does verse 28 describe the Second Coming of Jesus? What does it mean to be “saved”?

In the Gospel for today, Mark 12:38–44, Jesus warns against those who devour widows’ houses, and He describes a pious widow who gives all that she has in offering to God.

- What does it mean to bring an offering to God? Does offering to God only happen at church?
- Is offering merely the money we bring? In what ways can we “devour ourselves” (i.e., offer to God our whole selves)?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Jan Struther (1901–53) rose to prominence as a secular poet and the author of the novel *Mrs. Miniver*. In 1925, she was asked by an Anglican priest who lived next door to her and who knew of her fame as a budding young poet to compose hymn texts for a hymnal that would become *Songs of Praise* (1931). Despite being herself an agnostic, much of her fame today derives from her contribution to that hymn collection, of which “Lord of All Hopefulness” is the best-known hymn.

- Does knowing that Struther was an agnostic change your view of this hymn? Can God speak through non-believers? See Num. 23:5–12.

Text

This hymn uses the form of traditional Christian collect prayers to present four stanzas, each of which is a prayer for a period of the day — morning, noon, evening and end of day. While the words speak about an actual day, the imagery also speaks to the believer’s journey through life — as a child, a young adult, an adult and at life’s end — and the presence of God throughout those different periods.

- What kind of forms can prayer take? Does prayer have to be spoken or can it be sung?
- Do you pray using different forms? Do you have a favorite form for praying? What about it do you like?

Stanza 2 describes God as being “skilled at the plane and the lathe,” a reference to Jesus being the adopted son of the carpenter Joseph. Read 2 Thess. 3:6–13.

- What does St. Paul say about work and idleness? Is busyness the same as work?
- What is your greatest temptation to idleness? Who, according to the closing petition of stanza 2, provides strength in our hearts for the day’s work?

Stanza 3 speaks of a welcome home after the day’s work. Read Luke 10:8–9.

- Is the hospitality that Christians extend to one another simply about being “nice”?

- Is it always possible to love unconditionally? What obstacles get in the way of our love? Where does stanza 3 say that our love for neighbor comes from?

The hymn concludes with an emphasis on “gentleness,” “calm,” “contentment,” “balm” and a prayer for peace at the day’s end and life’s end as an antidote to the maladies of life’s end. Even with the sure and certain hope of the resurrection, Christians oftentimes still struggle with death — the fear of the unknown, the fear of frailty and loneliness.

- Where do you go to hear the “voice” of God that provides contentment? Where do you go to experience the real “presence” of God that provides balm?
- What is real peace? Can peace be found even in the midst of trials of body, mind and spirit?

Making the Connection

This hymn prays for the gifts that God provides to His people throughout life’s stages. Luther describes it this way in his explanation to the First Article of the Creed in the Small Catechism: “He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life” (*LSB*, p. 322).

- How does this hymn’s description of God help to provide meaning to the ordinary tasks and moments of our everyday life?
- Does your heart always need the same thing, or are there times when it is in need of extra “bliss” or “strength” or “love” or “peace”?

In Closing

The Small Catechism provides both a prayer to begin the morning and a prayer to close the day. Time itself is consecrated to the God who watches over us and is present with us each moment of each day of our whole life. The Morning Prayer concludes with the direction: “Then go joyfully to your work, singing a hymn, like that of the Ten Commandments, or whatever your devotion may suggest.” The Evening Prayer concludes: “Then go to sleep at once

and in good cheer” (*LSB*, p. 327). Go in the joyful and cheerful knowledge that God Himself goes with us.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 738.

Prayer

Pray together either the Morning Prayer or the Evening Prayer (*LSB*, p. 327).

The Day Is Surely Drawing Near

Lutheran Service Book 508 | study by Allen D. Lunneberg

Introduction

Whereas the Last Sunday of the Church Year will proclaim and celebrate the promised victory of eternal life for all who by faith confessed Jesus as their Savior, this next-to-last Sunday sounds a solemn warning to all who have not yet come to that faith and confession. Our hymn of the day describes the Last Day both as something to be feared for those who have neglected or rejected God's invitation of grace, and as a treasured promise and goal for those who

wait and pray in confident faith. In a day when so many are ignorant of or even reject God's plan revealed in His Word, the Bible, we point to Jesus who spoke plainly regarding His return, the Day of Judgment, and the deliverance available to all by faith in Him.

- How do you imagine most people think about the end of the world or the end of their lives? Or do they think about it at all? Why or why not?

Exploring the Scriptures

Read Matt. 25:31–46.

Angels show up at every major step forward in God's plan of salvation. Here they will accompany the return of Jesus on the Last Day as the last major step in God's plan. "All the nations" will be gathered, that is, everyone who ever lived will be raised with their bodies. Then "he will separate people one from another ... the sheep from the goats" (v. 32).

- When does "the judgment" actually happen? See 2 Cor. 6:2.

The proceedings begin with the sheep, the righteous. A summary of their good works is listed.

- How is this not to be interpreted as salvation by works? Why are the works mentioned? Hint, see James 2:18, 22, 26.
- What detail here shows that the good works of a Christian's active faith are almost automatic and certainly not kept record of by the Christian?

To the "goats" (unbelievers) on His left the King says, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt. 25:41). Sin results in separation. Unrepented sin results in eternal separation. What makes the judgment of hell most agonizing and fearful is that "the eternal fire" was not prepared for people to be there in the first place; a detail that supports the universal

claim of John 3:16, that God so loved the whole world, not just part of it.

Next, read 1 Thess. 4:13–18.

The question was, "When the Lord returns, when will the dead be raised, and will we who are still alive have to die first in order to be raised?" St. Paul uses the word "sleep" to describe the death of a Christian. His goal is "that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope" (v. 13). "Encourage one another with these words" (v. 18).

If you have a King James Bible (KJV), you need to know that the word "prevent" in v. 15 is a literal translation of the Latin *praevenio*. Whereas today the word prevent means to stop something, this word originally meant to precede, or go before. This is how modern translations have it. The point is that we who are alive when the Lord returns will not precede, or go before, those who have fallen asleep. It all happens at once, in the "twinkling of an eye." The dead are raised first, then we who are alive will be changed (1 Cor. 15:52).

- Describe what it means to grieve the death of a loved one but not "as others do who have no hope."
- Do you think the warning of hell and eternal punishment for unbelievers is necessary?
- Do you think the return of Christ is coming soon? See Rev. 22:7, 12, 20.
- What is the difference between the day of the death of a Christian and the Last Day?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

This hymn appeared first as an anonymous text in 1565. In 1586, however, a Lutheran pastor, Bartholomäus Ringwaldt (1532–99), revised it, calling it "a hymn about Judgment Day." It quickly became increasingly popular and sung

frequently, especially as the Thirty Years' War (1618–48) caused many to think that the Last Day was presently at hand.

- Is church attendance larger during wartime or peacetime? Why?

- What causes people these days to think that the world is coming to an end?

Text

The original seven stanzas have been restored to *LSB*. Only four of the seven stanzas, however, appeared in *Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978) and in *Lutheran Worship* (1982), namely, stanzas 1, 2, 6 and 7.

- What do the formerly missing stanzas (3–5) have in common?
- Why do you think these stanzas were removed in the 1978 and 1982 hymnals?

In stanza 1, that “fright shall banish idle mirth” almost goes without saying as the very “powers of the heavens will be shaken” (Luke 21:26). No one will be ignorant of what is happening when the Lord returns (1 Thess. 4:13–18; Mark 14:62; Matt. 16:27; Rev. 1:7).

Stanza 2 begins with the sounding of “the final trumpet,” the sound that accompanies the Lord’s return (Zech. 9:14; 1 Cor. 15:52; 1 Thess. 4:16). The resurrection of those who have died and the instant change of those who are still alive is described.

“The books” of stanza 3 refer to the record of human activity. See Matt. 25:31–46; Rev. 20:12–15; Dan. 7:9–10; Matt. 16:27; and Rev. 22:12.

- Will a person have to “wait and see” what the verdict will be? Why or why not?

Making the Connection

With its sobering imagery and words of warning for all who would ignore, neglect or reject God and His gracious plan of salvation, this hymn helps us sing with calm confidence in God’s promise of salvation by simple faith in Christ and reliance on His Word and grace. In this faith we remain vigilant and ready for our Lord’s return and the culmination of our deliverance from sin, the devil and death.

In Closing

With thanksgiving and faith in the whole story of God’s grace in Christ, which we have reviewed in the past liturgical year, we sing with confidence and joy of our final deliverance and hope of eternal life.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 508.

- What is the purpose of “the books”?

Stanza 4 is devastating Law describing the biblical truth for those who “scorned” the Lord and “despised His precious Word,” preferring “carnal pleasures” and “earthly treasures.” The “delivery” to Satan is described in Matt. 25:41 and Rev. 20:15.

- What “tool” or procedure does the Church have to call a Christian back from falling away and despising God’s Word? See Matt. 18:15–20; 1 Cor. 5:1–5; 2 Cor. 2:6–11.

Stanzas 5–7 spring from the Gospel. Stanza 5 describes the confidence of faith in the gift of Christ’s atoning sacrifice. For the Christian there is no more condemnation possible (Rom. 8:1–2) because of Jesus’ salvation (Heb. 2:14–15; Gal. 3:13; 1 Peter 1:18–19; 2:24). Since Baptism, our names have been recorded in the Lamb’s “Book of Life” (Rev. 3:5; 20:12; Dan. 12:1).

The confidence of faith begins to turn to prayer in stanza 6, relying on Jesus’ promise to intercede for us before the Father’s throne (Rom. 8:34; 1 John 2:1; Is. 53:12; Luke 23:34; Heb. 9:24). We are saved by the “blood and merit” of Christ (1 Peter 1:18–19) and numbered with “all His saints in that blest place” (Rev. 7:9–17) where “we shall see Him face to face” (1 Cor. 13:12).

Finally, stanza 7 is a prayer for Jesus’ return and our endurance.

- Do you think the return of Christ and our final endurance should occupy our attention and our prayers more than it does?
- Our receiving the Lord’s body and blood in the Sacrament of the Altar is a proclamation of His death until He comes (1 Cor. 11:26). How does it also speak of His resurrection, ascension and coming again?

Prayer

O Lord, so rule and govern our hearts and minds by Your Holy Spirit that, ever mindful of the end of all things and the day of Your just judgment, we may be stirred up to holiness of living here and dwell with You forever hereafter; 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 Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Trinity).

Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending

Lutheran Service Book 336 | study by Kim L. Scharff

Introduction

Every now and then we hear of someone who claims to know when our Lord Jesus Christ is going to return. Though Jesus Himself says that the day and hour of His return is known only to the Father (Matt. 24:36), still there are those who, from time to time, insist that they know the unknowable. Of course, they are inevitably proven wrong. An interest on the part of the Christian in the return of Christ is, however, a healthy thing. Jesus encourages us to

give attention to the “signs of the times,” that is, to pay heed to the things going on around us in our world, for they are indicators and reminders that He will return “to judge the living and the dead” (Apostles’ Creed).

- Would you like to know the precise day and hour of Jesus’ return? Why, or why not? Would knowing that day and time be beneficial for your faith, or might it actually be harmful?

Exploring the Scriptures

The Readings for Advent 2 are all focused, more or less, on the return of Christ at the end of the age, and help us better appreciate the text of our hymn. Read Mal. 4:1–6.

- How does the prophet describe the judgment that will come?
- What hope, however, does he hold out, in verse 2, for those who fear the Lord?

In the Epistle Reading, St. Paul speaks of a particular use of Holy Scripture, which, at that point in time, would have been the Old Testament. Read Rom. 15:4–7.

- According to the apostle, how are we now to use the Holy Scriptures? What is the nature of this encouragement, especially as we await the return of Christ?

- Note Paul’s emphasis on the harmony that is God’s gift to His waiting people. How does the remainder of the Epistle Reading, Rom. 15:8–13, illustrate that harmony? What role is played by the creeds of the Church in building and illustrating that harmony, and why is that important as we await the Lord’s return?

In the Gospel Reading, Jesus clearly describes the days that precede His return. Read Luke 21:25–36.

- There is both warning and promise in this reading from Luke. Describe each. Where do you see examples, especially of the warnings and dangers, in our world today?
- What is the clear hope given to Christians in these words?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

The text of this hymn, as it finally reaches us in *LSB*, has a somewhat complex history. The author, Charles Wesley (1707–1788), began with a hymn text by John Cennick (1718–1755), but then all but rewrote Cennick’s hymn. After Wesley’s publication of his text in 1758, Martin Madan (1726–1790), a London hospital founder and chaplain, further edited Wesley’s text, restoring some of Cennick’s original work. However, the text, as we have it in *LSB*, is largely that of Wesley, with a few important alterations.

Wesley was a prolific author of hymn texts, producing over 6,000 of them. The majority of those texts are no longer heard, but some have become among the most popular hymn texts ever written, being used in hymnals of many Christian traditions. Wesley’s best hymns are rich in theology and warm in evangelical character.

- *LSB* contains several Wesley texts. Take a quick look at a few of them: 338, 380, 457 and 469. Ask the following questions about each: (1) How is the Gospel explicitly portrayed? and (2) How is Christian hope illustrated?

Text

In keeping with the theme of Advent 2 in the One-Year Lectionary, the entire focus of the hymn is on the return of Christ at the end of the age.

- While the Advent season, as well as the close of the Church Year, is the time when the return of Christ is in focus, why is this theme important to us each day of our lives?
- In the Lord’s Prayer we pray, “Thy kingdom come.” In the Large Catechism, Luther says about the Second Petition, “From this you see that we do not pray here for a crust of

bread or a temporal, perishable good. Instead, we pray for an eternal inestimable treasure and everything that God Himself possesses” (LC III 55). What do you think God has in store for us on that day when Jesus returns?

Stanzas 1 and 2 draw on references, fittingly, from the Book of Revelation. Read Rev. 1:7 and 11:15.

- Is Christ’s return going to be isolated to a particular place or group of people? How is the answer to this question a confirmation of what the hymn states in stanza 2? While this fact may fill the heart of the unbeliever with terror, what do these words say to you as a Christian, especially in light of Rev. 11:15?
- Read 1 Peter 3:18. What comfort does this verse give you? What is your hope when Christ when returns?

Stanza 3 describes what our Savior endured that we might be His redeemed, beloved children, who look forward, with great anticipation, to His return.

- What are the “tokens of His passion?” The disciple Thomas often gets a “bad rap” for wanting to see and

touch the Savior’s holy wounds. But what will we see upon our Savior’s return? What is the significance of the fact that, even in eternity, Jesus will still bear “those glorious scars”?

Stanza 4 tells us that, when Jesus returns, we will worship like we have never worshiped before! Again, allusions to Revelation are prominent in the hymn text. Read Rev. 5:6–14 and 7:9–12.

- Describe the worship of heaven that is revealed to St. John. Do you notice any elements of the church’s liturgy with which you are familiar? Note the prominence of “Amen.” Recall Luther’s explanation of the “Amen” in the Small Catechism. Why is “Amen” so fitting in describing the worship that will take place on the day of our Savior’s glorious return?
- Read St. Paul’s perspective on that great day in Phil. 2:9–11. As we prepare for Jesus’ return in glory, what do the apostle’s words in verses 9 and 10 teach us about what the Church’s worship on earth now is to be like?

Making the Connection

With all the trouble our world faces at present, this hymn speaks of that day when all trouble will cease, and the glorious, eternal reign of Christ will begin. And so, the message of this hymn really transcends its use in the season of Advent.

- How might this hymn serve, especially, the mission effort of the Church, its reach into the world of unbelief? What

other times during the Church Year, or events in the Christian life, would this hymn well serve?

- In a world that offers little real peace, how does this hymn help give us the peaceful confidence that the Collect for Peace in the Office of Vespers (*LSB*, 233) describes?

In Closing

Contrary to those who wish to look into the mind of the Lord and find the day and hour of Christ’s return, Christians have no such need. We have the sure and certain promise of God that, when the appointed day and hour arrives, our Lord Jesus Christ will return. He will return visibly, and He will return to redeem His faithful children, once and for all, from this world of sin and sorrow. This great hymn of the Church, “Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending,” helps us both to confess and to be ready for that day!

- Sing or read together *LSB* 336, “Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending.”

Prayer

Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Your only-begotten Son, that by His coming we may be enabled to serve You with pure minds; 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 Advent 2).

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 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 capital 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 19th-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, 10 years had passed since Luther posted his 95 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, while 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 which 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]). (*Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, 2nd ed. [CPH, 2006], 33).

- 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.

- Read again the text of Eph. 2:8–10. What ancient and yet radically new theology is presented here?

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.

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

- 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*, 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?

- Why is it this way for us?
- Read Luke 15:3–7. What do these words reveal to us about others? About ourselves?

of justification for the believing heart, a heart now strengthened to cling to the Lord and not to self.

- 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?”

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.

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 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, 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 which reflected the ancient *Te 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

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?

- 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?

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 250–251.

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, p. 44).

- 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).