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Title: Preaching Our Hymns

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From his preface to Georg Rhau's *Symphoniae Incundae* come these well known words of Luther: "Next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise. For whether you wish to comfort the sad, to terrify the happy, to encourage the despairing, to humble the proud, or to appease those full of hate-what more effective means could you find than music? The Holy Ghost himself honors her as an instrument for his proper work when in His Holy Scriptures he asserts, that through her, his gifts were instilled in the prophets" (Luther's Works, Vol. 53, p. 323).

Christ's Bride, the Church, is fed and nourished as we read, mark, memorize and weave her hymns into the preaching of the Gospel. Why, some might ask? "Theology is doxology. Theology must sing? Hymns must be spiritual, they must be confessional and biblical. They must speak of the hope that is in us; they must tell of the mighty deeds of God in Christ on our behalf." (Martin Franzmann, *Ha! Ha! Among the Trumpets*, CPH, p. 92). When confessional hymnody ceases to be taught, Christ's Bride will starve. Therefore the trumpet sounds to all who stand in the Office of the Holy Ministry: "Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord" (Col. 3:16).

The opportunity for the pastor to teach and admonish his flock in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs is endless: Sunday School openings, catechism classes, sick and shut-in visitations, youth group, women's and men's groups, and Bible Classes are all ways in which hymnody will become a part of the faith life. But the most effective way, and perhaps also the most neglected area of hymn teaching, is in the sermon. How often do we as pastors preach sermons without ever once consulting the hymn of the day or the hymns of the season in which we are preaching?

The following paragraphs analyze three Easter hymns and give homiletical examples and practical suggestions on how these hymns could shape and enhance the pastor's Easter preaching.

Come, You Faithful, Raise the Strain (LSB 487, LW 141, TLH 204)

This hymn was written in the eighth century by one of the greatest hymn writers of the Greek church- John of Damascus (c. 696 - c. 754). "The hymn is based on the first ode of the canon for St. Thomas Sunday (second Sunday after Easter) an ode based on the song of Moses in Exodus 15" (*Lutheran Worship: Hymnal Companion*, ed. Fred Precht, p. 158).

John of Damascus' hymn confesses two biblical realities: Israel's freedom from Egyptian bondage through the Red Sea waters and the Christian's freedom from the bondage of sin and death through Christ's resurrection. From John of Damascus' hymn the pastor can show how we take the same journey as the children of Israel did, for we have passed through the waters of Holy Baptism and are led by Jesus with unmoistened foot to salvation in the ark of the Holy Christian Church.

"Come, You Faithful, Raise the Strain" is certainly appropriate at any of the Divine Services for Easter, but perhaps the most significant time to weave it into preaching would be at the great Easter Vigil when the focus is specifically on the Sacrament of Holy Baptism.

A few preaching themes that could spring from this hymn include the following: "The Christians' Life-Death to Life," "The Prefiguring of Holy Baptism," and "The Unworn Strains of God's Baptized Children!"

Awake My Heart With Gladness (LSB 467, LW 128, TLH 192)

This familiar Easter hymn was written by the great Lutheran hymn writer Paul Gerhardt and first appeared in the third edition of *Praxis pietatis melica* (1648).

"Paul Gerhardt's hymnody is one the church's most important teachers. In his relatively small opus of hymn texts, the church has inherited a rich feast of theology. It is a feast that has helped her to better understand the incarnation, the atonement, the resurrection, the bearing of crosses, and the glories that await the saints in life to come" (Paul W. Hofreiter, *The Theology of the Cross in the Hymns of Paul Gerhardt*, p.6).

"Awake My Heart With Gladness" is currently the only Gerhardt Easter hymn in English Lutheran hymnals. "The keynote of the hymn is the victory which the prophet Micah foretold: 'Your hand will be lifted up in triumph over your enemies, and all your foes will be destroyed' (Micah 5:9); the victory of which the psalmist speaks: 'Shouts of joy and victory resound in the tents of the righteous' (Psalm 118:15); the victory that St. Paul boldly and joyfully proclaims: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory' (1 Cor. 15:54b) and for which he joyously asserts: 'But thanks be to God! He give us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ' (1 Cor. 15:57)." (*Hymnal Companion*, p. 145).

The pastor's preaching and the people's hearing would both be blessed with the inclusion of the language and imagery of Gerhardt's hymn in the Easter sermon. Homiletical thoughts which flow from Gerhardt's hymn include: "Christ the Victor!" (st. 2); "The Joy of the Resurrection" (st. 3); "The Defeat of Satan" (st. 4 and 5); "The Rod of Death is Shattered" (st. 5); "Jesus' Cross-My Crown!" (st. 6).

Lo, Judah's Lion Wins the Strife (LW 146, TLH 211)

This hymn of unknown authorship first appeared in Zavorck's Bohemian Neo-Utraquist Kancional in 1602. "The revised and updated translation that appears in *Lutheran Worship* (1982), was prepared by Jaroslav J. Vajda and is based on the John Bajus previous work in *The Lutheran Hymnal* (1941)" (*Hymnal Companion*, p. 164).

"Lo, Judah's Lion Wins the Strife" is rich in Old Testament metaphors and typology. In st. 1, Jesus is called Judah's Lion, the winner of the strife, the conqueror of death. St. 2 declares Jesus to be our David, the slayer of the Goliath of sin, death and the devil. St. 4 proclaims Jesus our Samson, the stormer of death's citadel, which is the gate of hell. The foreshadowing in sts. 1-4 is fulfilled in sts. 5-7 where Jesus is confessed as the victorious, resurrected Savior.

This hymn is a rich storehouse of imagery and metaphor for the Easter preacher. Because of the biblical references, it would serve as an excellent outline for an Easter sermon or as a sermon series based on these Old Testament narratives.

Conclusion

Christ's Bride, the Church, is fed and nourished as we read, mark, memorize and weave her hymns into the preaching of the Gospel. This is most certainly true! "For, when all is said and done it needs to be recognized that hymns are important, not for their own sake, but as the vital indicator of the spiritual and theological health of the church and the confession which created it."

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