



ONE-YEAR LECTIONARY

THE WORD IN

Song

Hymn of the
Day Studies for

TRINITY



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Missouri Synod

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To God the Holy Spirit Let Us Pray

Lutheran Service Book 768 | study by Thomas E. Lock

Introduction

Lutherans often are accused of speaking little of the Holy Spirit. The Third Articles (Holy Spirit) of the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds are shorter than the Second Articles (Christ) (*LSB*, p. 322–23). The focus of Lutheran preaching is Christ and His salvation of man, not the works of the Holy Spirit shown in our own works. What frequently is overlooked is that whenever we speak of the Church of all believers, we speak of the Holy Spirit. Without the work of the Holy Spirit, no one could be saved. As Martin Luther wrote in his Large Catechism:

The work of redemption is done and accomplished [John 19:30]. Christ has acquired and gained the treasure for us by His suffering, death, resurrection, and so on [Colossians 2:3]. But if the work remained concealed so

that no one knew about it, then it would be useless and lost. So that this treasure might not stay buried, but be received and enjoyed, God has caused the Word to go forth and be proclaimed (LC II 38).

The task of the Holy Spirit is to sanctify us by revealing and delivering Christ with His blessings to sinners. Our prayers rarely are to the Holy Spirit. Yet, in today's hymn, we do pray to the Holy Spirit that He would keep His Church — and all her members — in the true faith that is created only by the Spirit.

- Whose work creates and sustains faith in man? Does man contribute anything to his own conversion? Why is it right that we pray to the Holy Spirit for faith to remain among us?

Exploring the Scriptures

The Holy Gospel for the First Sunday after Trinity is the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. This story is spoken against the Pharisees, who are described as “lovers of money” (Luke 16:14). Read Luke 16:19–31.

- At the beginning, how are the “comforts” of the rich man described? Could Lazarus take care of himself? Upon whom did Lazarus rely? Could it be said that Lazarus was placed at the rich man's door to give him an opportunity to prove his faith and love?
- At death, where did these two men end up? Was it the man's riches or Lazarus' poverty that determined their place?

Abraham, one of the richest men in the Bible, is described as the father of all the faithful (John 8:48–58; Romans 4; Heb. 11:8–10).

- What riches (not money) did Abraham have that would gain heaven for him?
- The rich man is told that a great gulf separates him in torment from Lazarus in blessing. What had the rich man and his brothers not trusted? What person of the Holy Trinity reveals and delivers to sinners Christ and all His blessings of forgiveness, life and salvation? What is the Church (guided by the Holy Spirit) to proclaim?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

The anonymous first stanza of today's hymn is a Pentecost carol from the thirteenth century. This stanza was mentioned twice in a sermon by 13th century Berthold of Regensburg in which he encouraged his hearers to sing this hymn in the service on Pentecost. This encouragement is remarkable since congregational singing was rarely allowed (except for Easter/Christmas carols) in Roman Catholic congregations.

The singing of this stanza remained popular in German lands. Martin Luther (1483–1546) loved this stanza and encouraged its frequent singing. In 1524 Luther was in the midst of theological conflicts with many who believed

that the Spirit guided people directly — apart from, and in contradiction to, God's revealed Word. One of the false teachers was Luther's former colleague at Wittenberg, Andreas Carlstadt (c. 1486–1541). Carlstadt's primary focus was on what the Christian did, not on what Christ had done and what the Holy Spirit was doing by His Word. One of the ways Luther confronted this false theology was by this hymn's use; Luther also added three new stanzas to focus on the true work of the Holy Spirit.

- Are there false teachers in these days who emphasize the work of Christians over the work of God?

Text

This hymn is sung by people the Holy Spirit has already brought to faith in Jesus Christ. All works apart from Christ (especially a so-called decision to believe in Christ) are impossible (see John 1:12; 15:5; and Eph. 2:8–9). As Luther teaches in the Small Catechism: “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith” (*LSB*, p. 323).

The first stanza is a prayer that the Holy Spirit would keep Christians in the only true, saving faith — the faith in Christ.

- Why do people need the Holy Spirit to be brought to faith in Christ? What dangers in this world tempt Christians to depart from this faith? How does the Holy Spirit defend Christians from leaving the true faith?

Stanza 2 addresses the Holy Spirit as “sweetest Love.” The Spirit is the one who makes Christians holy, granting His fire so that we show this love to one another. Read Acts 4:34–35.

Making the Connection

There are many in this age de-emphasizing the work of Christ and His Spirit done in the Word, Holy Baptism and Holy Communion; these false teachers deny the very things given by the merciful Lord to the Church for her good.

- Do you look away from the Holy Spirit’s gifts in Word and Sacraments and toward your own good (or bad) works?

In Closing

We confess: “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian Church,” and the like (*LSB*, p. 323). The Holy Spirit is given so that all would hear and believe in Jesus Christ unto salvation. The Word and the Sacraments are the Spirit’s gifts so that people would believe in Christ and be strengthened in that faith by ongoing forgiveness of sins. When you confess the Holy Spirit, you confess the Christian Church, and vice versa. Lord, continue to have mercy on us all and bring us at last to our heavenly home!

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 768.

- How was the love of Christ, bestowed by the Holy Spirit, revealed in the Church? What can your congregation do for those in need within the Church and for others?

Stanza 3 calls the Holy Spirit “Comfort.” In the King James Version of the Bible, He is called “Comforter” by Jesus in John 14:16, 26; 15:26 (some translations use “Helper” instead). Read John 14:18–27.

- Against what does the Church of all believers need comfort? What comfort does the Comforter/Helper give?

Previously we saw from the Small Catechism that the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, sanctifies, and keeps us in the true faith. Luther continued by declaring that this Spirit still does these things for the whole Church on earth, keeping her with Jesus Christ (*LSB*, p. 323). In this Church the Holy Spirit delivers forgiveness with the promise that all believers in Christ will live with Him in eternity.

- How does the final stanza describe the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church?

What comfort can be found in the Holy Spirit’s gifts of faith and guidance?

- Upon whom shall all Christians rely on the Last Day? Each stanza ends with the cry of the Church, “Lord, have mercy.” How is God (through the Holy Spirit) showering you with mercy?

Prayer

Almighty and ever-living God, You fulfilled Your promise by sending the gift of the Holy Spirit to unite disciples of all nations in the cross and resurrection of Your Son, Jesus Christ. By the preaching of the Gospel spread this gift to the ends of the earth; 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 Pentecost Tuesday).

A Multitude Comes from the East and the West

Lutheran Service Book 510 | study by Marion Lars Hendrickson

Introduction

In the Early Church, the believers “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). It is revealing within that description that the fellowship of the believers is found between the Word and the Lord’s Supper. This is true for the Christian congregation still today. Fellowship always springs forth from the Gospel of Christ and finds its fulfillment in the Sacrament of His body and blood. The whole

of the Christian fellowship lives between the Word and the Sacrament, anticipating with eager expectation the glorious wedding feast of heaven.

- The first man, Adam, was alone until God created Eve. Who has God created as Bride for the Second Adam, Jesus?
- Why is the Christian never alone?

Exploring the Scriptures

This hymn is appointed for three different Sundays in the Church Year. While the Gospel Readings for each of these Sundays are different, the three also bear similarities.

Read Matt. 22:1–14 (for Proper 23A). In the banquet parable Jesus urges His listeners to repent. The generosity of the king’s invitation is matched with the severity of the king’s judgment.

- What does the king do in response to the rejection of his invitation (v. 7)?
- What made the initial recipients of the king’s invitation unworthy to attend (v. 8)?

Read Luke 13:22–30 (for Proper 16C). In this banquet parable Jesus speaks of the struggle of repentance. The struggle is not in getting through the narrow door itself, but rather

between faith and the sinful nature, a struggle that the Lord’s call produces in the human heart.

- What does the master of the house mean when he says, “I do not know where you come from” (v. 25)?
- A multitude joins the patriarchs in the kingdom of God, but some will be cast out (v. 28). Who are the first? Who are the last (v. 30)? Why?

Read Luke 14:15–24 (for Trinity 2). This is a banquet parable that begins with a blessing (v. 15) and ends with a warning (v. 24).

- In verse 17 the master’s invitation says, “Come, for everything is now ready.” Do the invited guests have any requirement to fulfill in order to attend?
- From his words in verse 23, what is the master’s desire for this banquet?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Magnus Brostrup Landstad (1802–80) knew human suffering and the trials of life by personal experience. He grew up in the far north of Norway, a place of solitude, storm and darkness. War, hunger and inflation added to the trials of his childhood. Not surprisingly, Landstad could long for heaven, as he writes in this hymn, when “all trials shall be like a dream that is past” (st. 3).

- How do times of trial change in faith, when we consider that Christ comes to share them with us?

Landstad also put into poetic expression the deprivations of sin that the faithful can see within themselves. Called a “penitential hymn poet,” Landstad could plumb the depths of repentance in a hymn such as “To Thee, Omniscient Lord

of All” (*LSB* 613). Yet this hymn of repentance does not dwell so much on the sorrow of the repentant as on the joy that comes in Christ to the penitent. It is because of Christ’s lavish grace that Landstad wrote how he was always eager to sing a penitential hymn with joy.

- St. Paul wrote, “For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:10). What does he mean?

In many ways Landstad writes his hymns for a pilgrim on his or her way toward heaven. While he writes about storms and trials, it is not to use fear to drive the pilgrim onward. Rather, Landstad’s portrayal of the pilgrim way is one of an eager longing and a hopeful expectation for that which lies ahead.

- St. Paul wrote, “One thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:13–14). How is it only the grace of God in Jesus Christ that allows us to say this along with the apostle?

Text

While the three parables discussed above all have the elements of blessing and judgment, the hymn text focuses solely on the blessing of the Lord’s invitation.

In the distinction between Law and Gospel — the Law commands but cannot give; the Gospel bestows what it promises — how is this focus on the blessing in the parable a focus on the Gospel itself?

Read the closing refrain, “Have mercy upon us, O Jesus!” in light of the hymn’s focus on the blessing of the invitation.

- Is this repeated refrain a confession of sin or a cry for help in need? What difference does this make?

Stanza 1 also draws upon Matt. 8:11–12. Commending the faith of the Roman centurion, Jesus includes this Gentile

Roman among those reclining at table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

- Does the hymn limit saving faith to the New Testament saints? Read Hebrews 11.

Stanza 2 sings of God as the Shepherd of His people. Read Ps. 107:2–9 and compare the imagery in that psalm with Psalm 23.

- What is the urgency described in stanza 2 (“while there is time”)?

Stanzas 3 and 4 carry the singer to the communion of saints in glory, where “All trials shall be like a dream that is past,” where “the blest” receive the crown of life. Read Rev. 7:9–17 and Rev. 2:10.

- Is the Sacrament of the Altar also a sharing in the eternal feast? Why or why not?
- How does the promise of life forever with Christ, given in the Lord’s Supper, sustain us now in our times of trial?
- What would you say in response to the skeptic who understands these stanzas only as “pie in the sky”? Read St. Paul’s response in 1 Cor. 15:12–34.

Making the Connection

The sick person, the one who endures persecution for his or her faith, the prisoner, the lonely and many other sufferers each see in a fellow Christian the presence of the gracious God. Both the one who visits and the one who is visited recognize each other as “little Christs” (Luther’s term) of the Christ who is present with each and, more so, with both together.

- What does a Christian lose when he absents himself from the fellowship of believers in worship?
- Does the blessing of Christian fellowship deny a blessing to Christian solitude? Why or why not?

- What are some of the challenges when pondering the Christian fellowship on earth in light of the fellowship of saints in heaven?
- If “The heavens ... ring with an anthem more grand / Than ever on earth was recorded” (st. 4), name two or three temptations to despair because of the weaknesses of the earthly fellowship of believers. In what way is the earthly fellowship the means to sustain one another in those temptations to despair?

In Closing

Jesus promised His fellowship of disciples “that where I am you may be also” and “I will not leave you as orphans” (John 14:3, 18). So we Lutherans believe, teach and confess that one Holy Church will remain forever. The Church is the assembly of believers among whom the Gospel is purely taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered according to that Gospel (AC VII).

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 510.

Prayer

Almighty God, You invite us to trust in You for our salvation. Deal with us not in the severity of Your judgment but by the greatness of Your mercy; 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 23A).

Lord Jesus Christ, You Have Prepared

Lutheran Service Book 622 | study by Aaron A. Koch

Introduction

Good food and good conversation seem to go naturally with each other. That's why when friends and family get together, they'll usually do so around a meal. A certain bond is strengthened when people talk and eat with one another.

Jesus often conducted His ministry in this way, both by preaching and also by eating with people. In fact, this is what sometimes got Him into trouble with the religious leaders, especially when He didn't practice table fellowship with the "right" kind of people.

- Can you think of some examples where Jesus both taught people and ate with them?

Exploring the Scriptures

The first three Gospels record Jesus' words instituting Holy Communion. Paul's epistle to the Corinthians recounts these words of Jesus that he received, while adding some additional helpful commentary. Read 1 Cor. 11:23–28.

- When did Jesus institute Holy Communion? Since this is Jesus' "last will and testament" before His death, how should His words be understood?
- Where do we first hear of bread in the Scriptures? Is it originally a sign of blessing or curse?
- How does Jesus use this bread to bring blessing? What does He declare the bread to be? Who is it for?
- What did Jesus declare the wine in the cup to be? What blessing does this bring? See also Matt. 26:28.
- What is it that makes the body and blood of Christ present for us, our faith or His Word?
- What does it mean to eat and drink "in remembrance" of Jesus?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

This hymn was written by Samuel Kinner (1603–68), the son of a man who was also a hymn writer, Martin Kinner. After university study, Samuel became a doctor in Breslau. Kinner later served as court physician and counselor to the Duke of Liegnitz-Brieg until his death.

- How might Kinner's vocation as a physician have served him well in the writing of this hymn on the Sacrament?
- How is the Lord's Supper a holy medicine?

- What parallels to that ministry of Jesus might there be in Divine Service today?

Our Lord still talks with us, preaching and teaching His words in the Scripture Readings and the sermon. And He still is with us at His table, giving Himself to us in Holy Communion, strengthening our fellowship with Him and with each other.

- What advantages did the people have who sat at table with Jesus in biblical times?
- What advantages do we have now?

- How does our eating and drinking proclaim Jesus' death until He comes again visibly in glory?

Some, even within the Christian Church, have tried to suggest that Jesus' words are only meant to be taken symbolically — as if the bread and wine only *represented* His body and blood. Read 1 Cor. 10:16.

- How does this passage serve to emphasize that Jesus' words are *not* to be taken figuratively or symbolically?

The word "participation" in this verse is the same word from which we get the translation "communion." This bread is fully communing/participating/in fellowship with the body of Christ, so that they are one and the same thing. The same is true of the wine in the cup and the blood of Christ.

- Why is it a good practice for us to refer to the consecrated elements as the body and blood of Christ and not simply as bread and wine?

Text

Just as ordinary food strengthens our body, so the Lord's Supper also strengthens our soul. Stanza 1 draws upon this imagery of the weary soul needing rest. Read Matt. 11:28–30.

- According to stanza 1 of the hymn, what is it that our souls are weary and burdened with? How are the other stresses and strains of life that weigh on us related to this?

- What is the true rest that Jesus gives to us? Does that rest even have a bodily, physical benefit, too?

Stanzas 2 through 5 deal with the mystery of the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Sacrament of the Altar. Read Eph. 4:10.

- Since Jesus ascended bodily, as a true human being, does He “fill all things” only as true God or also as true man? Why is this important for the Sacrament?
- Stanza 3 says that the Savior is “not confined” to any limited spot. Why is that so? Why might using this language be a good way of defending the scriptural belief of the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper against those who reject it?

Making the Connection

Having confessed the doctrinal truth of the Supper, stanzas 6 through 8 now deal with the more personal aspects of our receiving of the Lord's gifts in His Supper.

- “Grant that we worthily receive / Your supper, Lord, our Savior” (st. 7). According to the Small Catechism, what is it that makes a person worthy and well prepared to receive the Sacrament?
- “Lord, I believe what You have said; / Help me when doubts assail me” (st. 6). Is it possible to have true faith in Christ and His words and still struggle with doubts from time to time? See Mark 9:24.

In Closing

Our Lord comes to us in a very tangible, ordinary, common way in the Sacrament of the Altar to give us the uncommon, extraordinary gift of forgiveness and eternal life with His body and blood. In this Supper He speaks to us His words of mercy and gives us a meal that refreshes and strengthens and comforts us. And, as the liturgy reminds us, we look forward to celebrating with all the faithful the marriage feast of the Lamb in His kingdom, which has no end.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 622.

- Stanza 4 refers to how “all things are possible with God” (Mark 10:27). Do we have to understand *how* Christ's true body and blood are present for it to be so?

- The hymn writer declares in stanza 5, “Your Word alone suffices me.” Why are the words of Jesus regarding the Sacrament sufficient for faith? How are His words different from the words of man?

Though Jesus has ascended to the right hand of the Father, that does not mean that His body is confined like a prisoner in some spot above the clouds somewhere. If God is everywhere, then so is His right hand of power. Jesus' human nature has been eternally joined to His divine nature. Therefore, He is present as both God and man in all places, and He is most certainly able to be present with His body and blood by the power of His Word in Holy Communion.

- How does the Lord's Supper refresh you and calm your fears “in this vale of tears” (st. 6)?
- How does a desire to lead a holy life “prove” or show our thankfulness for God's grace given in the Sacrament (st. 7)?
- In stanza 8, the hymn writer asks that the Sacrament might be a comfort to him, not only when living but also when dying. What special comfort would the Lord's body and blood offer to you if you were near death?

Prayer

O Lord, since You never fail to help and govern those whom You nurture in Your steadfast fear and love, work in us a perpetual fear and love of Your holy name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for the Second Sunday after Trinity).

Prayer

O Lord, our God, in Holy Baptism You have called us to be Christians and granted us the remission of sins. Make us ready to receive the most holy body and blood of Christ for the forgiveness of all our sins, and grant us grateful hearts that we may give thanks to You, O Father, to Your Son, and to the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (For right reception of the Lord's Supper, *LSB*, p. 308).

Lift High the Cross

Lutheran Service Book 837 | study by Paul J. Cain

Introduction

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

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

Exploring the Scriptures

Read John 12:27–36 and John 3:14–21.

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

Read Heb. 13:10–21.

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

Read Is. 11:1–16.

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

Exploring the Hymn

Background

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

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

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

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

Read Matt. 16:24–28.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Text

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

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

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

Making the Connection

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

In Closing

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

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 837.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Prayer

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

Lord, to You I Make Confession

Lutheran Service Book 608 | study by Scott R. Schilbe

Introduction

Has a friend or family member ever exposed a harmful action that you've committed? Their firm but loving rebuke often stings you with the reality that you've hurt someone by your actions. It's not fun to realize that you're the reason why someone else is unhappy.

- When was the last time a friend or relative confronted you with your hurtful behavior? How did you feel?

Like with a friend or family member, it isn't fun to realize that God is unhappy with us because of our sinfulness. But that's what our sinfulness does — it ruins our relationship with God and it totally corrupts our body and soul. Without Jesus, God is indeed unhappy with us, unhappy to the point that God should rightfully punish us with His everlasting wrath.

Exploring the Scriptures

Today's Gospel, Luke 15, includes three familiar parables: the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin and the parable of the prodigal son. These three stories teach us that sin disconnects us from God, but that God — according to His mercy — rejoices when we return to Him in repentance.

- Read Luke 15:3–7. Who does the lost sheep represent? Who does the shepherd represent?
- Read Luke 15:8–10. Who does the coin represent? Who does the seeking woman represent? How does the image of a coin differ from that of a sheep and in turn better communicate our total sinful corruption?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Johann Franck (1618–77) was not a member of the clergy. He was a layman, more specifically, a man who worshiped God by serving his neighbor as a Christian lawyer. Out of the heart of this Christian came not only this hymn of confession, but also such hymns as “Soul, Adorn Yourself with Gladness” (*LSB* 636) and “Jesus, Priceless Treasure” (*LSB* 743). Stanza 1 of “Lord, to You I Make Confession” was first published in 1649; four years later the original eight-stanza hymn was published.

In today's featured text, Franck conveys his contrition and sorrow over sin. Yet he also conveys God's promise “that for Christ's sake, sins are forgiven” (AC XII 5). In

Thanks be to God that He shows us our sins by His Law. “We believe, teach, and confess that the Law is properly a divine doctrine [Romans 7:12]. It teaches what is right and pleasing to God, and it rebukes everything that is sin and contrary to God's will” (FC Ep V 3). God — by using the Law — rightfully stings us with the reality of our sinfulness and how that has hurt Him and others. That reality isn't necessarily fun to hear, but it's the truth. Yet once we believe this stinging truth and are sorry for it, we flee to God's mercy and hear that our sins are forgiven for Jesus' sake.

Today's hymn expresses our response to God's Law after it leads us to recognize our sins. Our only rightful response is to “flee for refuge” to God's “infinite mercy, seeking and imploring [His] grace for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ” (*LSB*, p. 184).

- Read Luke 15:11–24. Who does the father represent? Who does the prodigal represent?
- In all three parables, what is the reaction once the sheep and coin are found and once the prodigal returns home? How is this reaction reflected in repentance and absolution? See Luke 15:7, 10.

God indeed is delighted when we return to Him, confessing our sins, trusting that “God, who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (*LSB*, p. 151, quoting 1 John 1:9).

other words, his words express his personal feelings over his sinfulness.

- Does someone have to be an ordained servant of God to give a clear Christian witness of biblical teaching, as Franck did by his hymn?
- What would an unbeliever learn about Christianity by reading Franck's hymn?
- Have you ever kept a diary or written poems to help you express your feelings?

Text

Confession and Absolution language, which this hymn contains, permeates the Bible. One such example is in Psalm 51, a well-known psalm that expressed David's admittance of sin and his plea for God's grace. The psalm is probably related to 2 Samuel 11 and 12, the account of David and Bathsheba.

- Read Ps. 51:3 and 2 Samuel 11 and 12. Based on the 2 Samuel chapters, identify the transgressions David is confessing.
- Confronted with the stinging indictment of his sins, where does David flee? See Ps. 51:1 and 2 Sam. 12:13.
- While probably not related to the historical events of 2 Samuel 11 and 12, how does David follow the same pattern in Ps. 32:1–5 that he used in Psalm 51?

Looking at stanza 1, the phrase “Chosen for myself my way” stings us with the reality of our corrupted nature. Instead of following God's way and desires, we — at times — all too eagerly fall into the trap of gratifying our sinful cravings.

Making the Connection

In the Small Catechism, Luther challenges us to consider our “place in life according to the Ten Commandments” (*LSB*, p. 326).

- As you sing this hymn, take Luther's challenge. Reflect upon your sinfulness and how you've hurt God and people by the things you've done and by the things you haven't done.

In Closing

The life of a Christian is one of constant repentance. Today's hymn relates that ongoing action of Christians and that ongoing action of God, who keeps forgiving those who draw near to Him. The Law of God may sting us a bit, but God's mercy upon us for the sake of His Son soothes us with forgiveness, life and salvation.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 608.

- Why is choosing “for ourselves our way” so harmful for Christians? Why does such choosing defy what Paul writes in Rom. 6:6–14?
- Which “way” does our society more highly value: “my” way or God's way?
- How can you strive to avoid choosing your own way in life? Read Eph. 6:10–18.

Again looking at stanza 1, the phrase, “Led by You to see my errors, / Lord, I tremble at Your terrors,” credits God with enabling us to recognize our sin.

- Read Rom. 3:20 and Rom. 7:7. How does God lead you to see your sins?

Review stanza 3. This stanza presents a clear description of Jesus' sacrificial work on our behalf.

- Who gave the Son as a sacrifice for sin? Read John 3:16–17.
- From what has Christ set us free? Read Eph. 2:1–5, Rom. 6:23, Gal. 3:13 and the Small Catechism's Second Article and Explanation (*LSB*, p. 322).

While our sinful humanity is clearly expressed in Franck's hymn, the gracious absolution that “our sins are forgiven before God in heaven” (*LSB*, p. 326) is also clearly expressed.

- Look at stanza 4. How does God let you know of His gracious pardon today? How does God cleanse you from iniquity?

Prayer

Almighty, everlasting God, for my many sins I justly deserve eternal condemnation. In Your mercy You sent Your dear Son, my Lord Jesus Christ, who won for me forgiveness of sins and everlasting salvation. Grant me a true confession that, dead to sin, I may be raised up by Your life-giving absolution. Grant me Your Holy Spirit that I may be ever watchful and live a true and godly life in Your service; through Jesus Christ, my Lord. Amen (Before confession and absolution, *LSB*, inside front cover).

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 treats of 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 (LC II:40–42).

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)

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, and 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

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?

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

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, but 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). So 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?

Baptism where He calls us forth every day anew. In this 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).

When All the World Was Cursed

Lutheran Service Book 346 | study by Steven P. Mueller

Introduction

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

past the big field of sorghum. That will take you right to the highway.” The driver thanked the farmer and, hoping he could figure it out, drove down the road muttering, “Johnson’s farm ... where the barn used to be. They could really use some signs around here.”

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

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

Exploring the Scriptures

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

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

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

- What did John call the crowds to do?

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

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

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

Read Luke 1:41–44.

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

Exploring the Hymn

Background

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

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

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

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

Text

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

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

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

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

Making the Connection

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

In Closing

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

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 346.

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

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

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

Prayer

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

Lord Jesus Christ, the Church's Head

Lutheran Service Book 647 | study by John T. Pless

Introduction

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

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

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

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

Exploring the Scriptures

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Exploring the Hymn

Background

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

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

Text

Confessing the Lord Jesus to be the Head of the Church and her only foundation, the hymn describes the posture of God’s faithful people as bowing in trust and waiting

for salvation. This trust is well founded, for it is built on Christ's Word, the "rock secure" (st. 1), which will not pass away. It is a characteristic of Mentzer's poetry that he draws together numerous biblical images.

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

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

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

Making the Connection

Luther characterized his evangelical theology as a "theology of the cross" in contrast to the ever-prevailing "theology of glory." The theology of the cross finds God in the suffering of Christ, in His lowliness to be our Savior. A theology

In Closing

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

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 647.

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

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

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

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

of glory attempts to discover God in human strength and achievement.

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

Prayer

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

“Come, Follow Me,” the Savior Spake

Lutheran Service Book 688 | study by Robert A. Sorensen

Introduction

The Christian Church has no shortage of stories involving people who hear Jesus’ call to follow Him and immediately leave their old lives in order to begin new lives of service to Him.

When Jesus called Peter and Andrew and James and John, they left their nets to become apostolic “fishers of men.” When Jesus later called Matthew, he walked away from his tax booth and so also became one of the twelve apostles. After the resurrection, Saul the persecutor came

face to face with the risen Jesus on the Damascus road and likewise heeded His call. He would become Jesus’ chief witness to the Gentiles.

- Do you know any people who have made a dramatic about-face in their lives for the sake of a newfound Christian faith?
- What circumstances led up to their turnaround, and what are the results of their commitment to Jesus?

Exploring the Scriptures

Both the Old Testament and Gospel Lessons appointed for this day recount stories about the Lord calling men into holy service. After reading the First Lesson, 1 Kings 19:11–21, consider these questions.

- What were Elijah’s circumstances and state of mind at the time this story takes place? What is his attitude toward his vocation at the moment?
- Was Elisha enthusiastic or hesitant about being called to take Elijah’s mantle and serve as Israel’s next prophet?

In the Gospel Lesson, Luke 5:1–11, Jesus calls Peter to leave his boats and follow Him, so that he might become a “fisher of men.” After rereading this passage, answer the following questions.

- Why does Peter express reluctance to remain in Jesus’ presence? Does his reaction seem justified?

- Put yourself in Peter’s place. How would you feel if someone asked you to abandon your present life and vocation in order to assume a new and unfamiliar one?

The Bible has similar stories about men exhibiting reluctance when called into the Lord’s service. Two famous examples are Ex. 3:1–12 and Jer. 1:4–10. After reading those passages, answer these questions.

- How are these stories similar? Why are Moses and Jeremiah reluctant to drop everything and undertake a new calling?
- What does it say about human nature that even great heroes of the faith at first tried to elude the Lord’s call into service? What does it say about the faith?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Johann Scheffler (1624–77), author of this hymn, “Come Follow Me, the Savior Spake,” knew firsthand the consequences of abandoning an old way of life and adopting a new one for the sake of religious convictions. This is because both Scheffler and his father walked away from privileged circumstances in order to live according to their religious beliefs.

Scheffler’s father was a Polish nobleman whose Lutheran convictions moved him to leave his Catholic homeland and relocate in the Protestant city of Breslau. One can only imagine the kinds of displacement that taking such a step would occasion.

- What kinds of things impel people to pull up roots and move to other places today?

- Are there some life changes that are simply not worth the trouble? What about Scheffler’s father?

Johann Scheffler, this hymn’s author, was born and spent his early years in Breslau. By about the age of 16, he began to write poetry. He later studied at several universities and became a medical doctor. Scheffler then served as personal physician to Duke Sylvius Nimrod of Württemberg-Oels. Johann never stopped writing verse, even while practicing medicine, and so eventually published some 205 hymns.

In 1653, Johann made a change just as dramatic as the move his father once made: he left the Lutheran church of his youth and became a Roman Catholic. In this regard, his conviction was so great that he later left his medical

practice and became a priest in 1661. His final years were spent in a Jesuit monastery near his native Breslau.

- Do you personally know any people who have left the faiths in which they were raised?
- How should a Christian react to a family member who converts to another Christian denomination? To a non-Christian religion? If you were Scheffler's family member, how would you react to his conversion to Catholicism?

Text

The words of this hymn text highlight the theme of leaving an old way of life in order to put into action one's faith convictions.

The first and second stanzas of this hymn both echo the famous words of Matthew 16. They include these words: "Deny yourselves, the world forsake, / Obey My call and guiding. / O bear the cross, whate'er betide." Review the very words Jesus spoke about discipleship in Matt. 16:21–28 and then answer these questions.

- Exactly what is Jesus demanding when He calls His followers to deny themselves and take up their crosses?
- What can we learn from Luke 9:57–62 and 14:25–33?

Making the Connection

Not every Christian experiences the call to follow and serve Jesus as dramatically as Peter once did. However, through our hearing of the Gospel and our Baptism into Christ, we too are called to follow Him, deny ourselves and take up our crosses.

In explaining the ongoing relevance of Baptism, the Small Catechism says that this Sacrament "indicates that the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and

In Closing

A famous missionary once said something like this: "Wise is the man that forfeits the lesser things he cannot keep in order to gain the greater gifts he cannot lose." That sentence puts into perspective Jesus' challenging call to come after Him, deny ourselves and take up our cross. The Spirit, working through the Word and Sacrament, empowers us to follow and serve Jesus, even unto eternal life.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 688.

The third stanza of this hymn has Jesus say, "And gracious words My lips express." We typically refer to such gracious words as "Gospel," of course.

- Where in this hymn does one find gracious and encouraging words? In other words, how does this hymn describe Jesus' saving actions on our behalf?
- Turning to Matt. 16:24–28, where does one find similar words of promise?

The fourth stanza puts these words on Jesus' lips: "I teach you how to shun and flee / What harms your soul's salvation."

- What sacrifices have you made in order to obey Jesus' call to discipleship? What particular temptations must you "shun and flee"?

The concluding stanza of this hymn exhorts the believer to follow Him who first died and then rose again. It concludes by assuring us that "those who bear the battle's strain / The crown of heav'nly life obtain."

- How and when do you "bear the battle's strain"?
- What do Eph. 6:10–18 and Rev. 3:10 have to say in this regard?

repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever" (*LSB*, p. 325).

- What, if any, is the difference between "daily contrition and repentance" and heeding Jesus' call to discipleship?
- What is the ongoing power behind Baptism, even if it was received many years prior?

Prayer

O God, You have prepared for those who love you good things that surpass all understanding. Pour into our hearts such love toward You that we, loving You above all things, may obtain Your promises, which exceed all that we can desire; 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 Fifth Sunday after Trinity).

From East to West

Lutheran Service Book 385 | study by Larry A. Peters

Introduction

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

Exploring the Scriptures

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

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

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Little is known about Coelius Sedulius (c. 450), the author of this hymn. He probably lived in Rome. A convert to Christianity, he most probably remained a layman (though some suggest he was ordained). Though his writings were well known and popular, only two of his hymns survive. This hymn text is part of an acrostic poem of twenty-eight stanzas arranged according to the Latin alphabet. We have an eighth-century edition of the full text. The poem gave birth to two hymns: *LSB* 399, "The Star Proclaims the King Is Here," and *LSB* 385, "From East to West."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Text

"From lands that see the sun arise / To earth's remotest boundaries" became "From east to west, from shore to

shore” when the Latin became an English text. Like the call of the psalmist, this hymn summons the singer to awaken to God’s merciful purpose hidden in everything that happens and to respond with the joyful praise of those who trust He knows what He is doing.

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

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

- Can one confess Christ without explaining the unexplainable mystery of the incarnation?
- How do we confess this in the creeds?
- Notice stanza 2; instead of explaining the how, why is confessed: “His fallen creatures all to save.”

Making the Connection

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

In Closing

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

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 385.

- How do we own this mystery?

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

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

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

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

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

Prayer

Almighty God, You chose the virgin Mary to be the mother of Your Son and made known through her Your gracious regard for the poor and lowly and despised. Grant that we may receive Your Word in humility and faith, and so be made one with Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for the Visitation).

All Mankind Fell in Adam's Fall

Lutheran Service Book 562 | study by Aaron A. Koch

Introduction

Many of us have seen videos on television of the following happening: A band is marching in formation on a high school football field. Musicians in a line are playing their instruments walking sideways and backwards, when suddenly one of them trips and falls. The next person in line doesn't see, and so he also falls. Before you know it, the entire section is crumpled in a heap on the field. Only one person tripped, but it affected the whole line.

Though scenes like that can sometimes be humorous, the theme of this week's Hymn of the Day is certainly no laughing matter. When Adam fell, it affected the whole line of

humanity descended from him. But this is not just a minor embarrassment. This fall into sin and death is something that we cannot pick ourselves up from. We need a second Adam, Jesus Christ, to lift and raise us up. As the work and the fall of Adam affect us all in the most negative way possible, so the work and the rising of Jesus affect us all in the most positive way possible.

- How are the verses of this hymn divided to reflect the biblical teaching of the first and the second Adam?
- Why do you think the hymn composer waits so long to get to the good news of Jesus?

Exploring the Scriptures

Read Rom. 5:12–21.

- According to v. 13, what has sin brought into the world? How is our mortality proof that we are all sinners?

In verse 14 Adam is described as a “type” of Christ. A type in the Bible is one who pictures or gives a pattern of our incarnate Lord in some way. Adam is the head of the human race. Jesus is the new head of the human race, but in an opposite way.

- Discuss all that the free gift of Christ brings in this passage that is opposite of what the trespass of Adam brought. Be sure to talk about what these words mean specifically for you.

- How are these things much greater than the heritage we have from Adam?

All of us are connected to Adam by virtue of our being his literal, physical descendants. However, all of us are also connected to Christ by virtue of the fact that He took on our humanity in the womb of the Virgin Mary and shares in our flesh and blood (John 1:14; Heb. 2:14).

- What special, saving connection do we have to Christ that today's Epistle Reading points out (Rom. 6:3–11)? What does this passage indicate must happen to our connection to Adam?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

The author of this hymn's text, Lazarus Spengler (1479–1534), was not a pastor but a layman. He served as a public official, the secretary of the city council of Nuremberg. As he began reading Luther's writings, he became convinced that they would be helpful to him for carrying out some of his duties. In particular Spengler was concerned about the city's religious life. He found in Luther's plan for reform answers to the spiritual problems of the day. Spengler and Luther corresponded regularly and shared their views on a range of matters relating to the Reformation. This hymn, written already in 1524, shows Spengler's clear understanding of Law and Gospel.

- How can a proper understanding of fallen human nature be helpful to those whose vocation is in civil government,

law enforcement or the judicial system? What danger is there in the civil realm if this is not properly understood?

- How can the proper exercise of the Law in the civil realm serve the Gospel? How does the preaching of the Gospel in the Church serve the civil realm?

It is worth noting that the Formula of Concord, one of our Lutheran Confessions of faith, quotes this hymn in its article on original sin. This shows how well known and how well respected this hymn quickly came to be.

Text

The opening stanza of this hymn makes clear that the consequences of Adam's sin reverberate through human history to this very day. “All mankind fell in Adam's fall” (st. 1).

However, we can't simply deflect all the blame to Adam for our problems, as if we have no guilt, since we ourselves have engaged in the same root sin. "One common sin infects us all" (st. 1).

Read Gen. 3:4–6, 9–12.

- The temptation here was more than a simple desire for this particular fruit. According to verse 5, what did Adam and Eve really want? Why?
- In what ways do we also exhibit that same desire?
- How did Adam try to deflect blame? When do we find ourselves behaving in the same way?

The second and third stanzas of this hymn drive home the point that sin is not just a matter of some outward flaws or behaviors that we need to get under control; it's a problem that flows from our very nature. "In guilt we draw our infant breath / And reap its fruits of woe and death" (st. 2). "From hearts depraved, to evil prone, / Flow thoughts and deeds of sin alone" (st. 3).

Read Ps. 51:5 and Rom. 3:10–12.

- What evidence can you point to from your experience that confirms this scriptural teaching that fallen human

beings are not spiritually good, or even neutral, but are inclined toward evil and away from God? For instance, do children need to be taught how to disobey, or does that come naturally? What happens when there is no one present to enforce laws or keep order?

- Hypothetically speaking, what would be the first thing you would do if you had the power to become invisible? Would it be something good or bad, ethical or unethical?
- What are some ways in which the sinful nature can be cloaked to make it appear to be good?

Thankfully, our Lord Christ has rescued us from our desperate circumstances. He replaces the first Adam and overcomes all that he has done by taking on Himself all the consequences of the fall. "But Christ, the second Adam, came / To bear our sin and woe and shame" (st. 4). This Jesus did ultimately in His death on the cross, taking our judgment to set us free from the curse. "So by one Man, who took our place, / We all were justified by grace" (st. 5).

Read Rom. 6:23.

- What is the difference between wages and a gift? On whom is eternal life dependent? What does that mean for the certainty of our salvation?

Making the Connection

Read 1 Cor. 15:21–22.

As Adam was put into a deep sleep so that Eve might be created (Gen. 2:21), so Jesus was put into the deepest sleep of death so that the new Eve, the Church, might be created. In His resurrection Jesus brought new life to humanity and has given us a new beginning. In this way Jesus became

"our life, our light, our way, / Our only hope, our only stay" (st. 4).

- What comfort does the work of Christ bring you?
- How does your being baptized into Christ cause you to see yourself differently — a new person with a new identity?

In Closing

Though we had fallen in shame and disgrace, Christ Jesus has raised us up and has given us to share in His own glory and honor. With Him as our new head, we truly have new strength for living until we reach our journey's end and behold our Savior face to face in heaven.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 562.

Prayer

Lord of all power and might, author and giver of all good things, graft into our hearts the love of Your name, increase in us true religion, nourish us with all goodness, and of Your great mercy keep us in the same; 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 Sixth Sunday after Trinity).

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 (1640–90) 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*, p. 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*, p. 310).

In God, My Faithful God

Lutheran Service Book 745 | study by Scott R. Schilbe

Introduction

Driving on an unfamiliar road at night can be a stressful experience. You're not too sure when your next turn takes place. Darkness permeates the landscape. Few cars — especially if you travel on a desolate and dark country road — provide clues of where to turn. How you wish you had guidance as you travel! At last, somehow you make it to your final destination.

Exploring the Scriptures

St. Paul lived a dangerous life. Many times opposition to the Gospel and even natural disasters threatened Paul's life. Many occasions must have caused Paul to think that great woes would overtake him. Read about these threats in 2 Cor. 6:4–5; 2 Cor. 4:8–11; 2 Cor. 11:24–29; and 2 Cor. 12:10.

- Based on the Bible verses above, with what attitude did Paul encounter these threats? Read also Phil. 1:21.
- How can Paul's attitude encourage you when you face life's dark road?
- According to 2 Tim. 4:6–8 and 16–18, what goal are we to keep in mind as we face danger in life?

How comforting it is to know that while we face dangers God does not abandon us. God is our faithful God and He will not forsake us!

- How can Heb. 12:3–11 help us cope with life's challenges? What comfort can verse 11 instill in us?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Very little is known about the hymn's author, probably Sigismund Weingärtner. The text first appeared in a collection of hymns in 1607, as one of two texts in that collection attached to the Weingärtner name.

Though details about the author aren't known, the thoughts conveyed in the hymn could very well have been written by any Christian. The author really isn't too important. What is important is the expression of trust and hope that the hymn gives those who face life's dark road of twists and turns.

- How can life be viewed as a dark, unfamiliar road?
- What are some situations you face in life for which you desire guidance?

Today's featured hymn compares life to a dark road of uncertainty. Yet as you travel this world, your faithful God guides you and embraces you with His abiding presence.

Life's dark road doesn't necessarily have to be one of danger and suffering. Life's dark road is also the "unknown." God doesn't necessarily reveal every detail to us about our life.

- Have you seen God working in your life? How?
- Look back over the past five or ten years. How has reality differed from your initial plans and expectations?
- Think about Abram. He certainly traveled the unknown road of life (Gen. 12:1–4). God changed the plans Abram had by telling him to go to Canaan. Whatever plans Abram had, God changed! How did Abram cope with such changes? Read Heb. 11:8–9.
- God's plan reminds us not to follow the example of the Pharisee in Luke 18:9–14. Instead of trusting ourselves, who does this parable teach us to trust?

- Returning to the comparison of life to a dark road who does the hymn identify as actually driving (guiding) your life?

- Are there moments in life when you question the driver's wisdom? Do you find yourself being a "backseat driver"? If so, how can the hymn calm your anxiety?

Text

Life can certainly lead us on a dark road of twists and turns. In stanza 1, the hymn writer discusses real woes that he experienced in life. When facing woes of your life, how

do the following psalm verses help you to sing “My troubles He can alter; / His hand lets nothing falter”?

- Ps. 7:1
- Ps. 25:4–5
- Ps. 25:9–10
- Ps. 27:1
- Ps. 139:3

Stanza 2 is a stanza of confession and absolution. In the stanza, we acknowledge our sins, including our lack of trust in God’s plan for us. Yet such acknowledgment need not lead to despair!

- According to stanza 2, to whom do we flee once we’re convicted of our sins? Read also 1 John 1:8–9 and Ps. 25:6–7.

Making the Connection

This hymn is a hymn of faith. Faith speaks of ultimate trust in our faithful God. Faith attached to Jesus’ righteousness allows us to simply say, “So be it,” whenever we’re faced with suffering and death. We can resolutely say, “So be it,” because by faith we know God’s grace will guide us through life and through death — until we praise Him yonder.

In Closing

Driving on a dark country road may be lonely and tense. But when it comes to driving life’s dark road, God’s presence guides you despite your not knowing all of the twists and turns that life takes. When you’re caught up in moments of darkness prompted by uncertainty, disease or impending death, remember that God is in control and that “for those who love God all things work together for good” (Rom. 8:28).

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 745.

In the Lord’s Prayer, we pray, “Deliver us from evil.” Read Luther’s explanation of this petition in the Small Catechism (*LSB*, pp. 324–25).

- When we pray this petition, what actually are we praying toward?
- How does stanza 3 remind us of the petition asking God to deliver us from evil?
- How is Phil. 1:21 reflected in the sentiments of stanza 3?

The Christian’s certain hope is that God makes us heirs of His eternal inheritance only for the sake of Christ’s righteousness, which covers all our sins.

- After reading stanza 4, how can you be sure that you are an heir of heavenly gladness? Read Titus 3:4–7.

- How do Rom. 11:33–36 and Rom. 8:37–39 reassure you that God is your life’s driver, and that He is in control of your life?
- How does God give you the power to confess, “Thy will be done”?

Prayer

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

Now All the Vault of Heaven Resounds

Lutheran Service Book 465 | study by Paul Gregory Alms

Introduction

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

Exploring the Scriptures

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

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

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

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

Exploring the Hymn

Background

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- One of the great strengths of the Lutheran Church has always been congregational hymn singing. What are some of your favorite hymns in *LSB*?
- The Church has never stopped writing hymns. Every age produces its own great hymnic testaments to the faith. Do your favorite hymns tend to be older hymns from the early centuries of the Church or the sixteenth century, or newer ones like this one?

Text

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

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

Making the Connection

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

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

In Closing

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

Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 465.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Prayer

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

Christ, the Life of All the Living

Lutheran Service Book 420 | study by Allen D. Lunneberg

Introduction

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

Exploring the Scriptures

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

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

John 1:4

John 6:33

John 10:27

John 14:6

Exploring the Hymn

Background

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Text

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

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

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

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

Making the Connection

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

In Closing

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

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 420.

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

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

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

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

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

Prayers

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

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

What Is the World to Me

Lutheran Service Book 730 | study by J. H. Sorenson

Introduction

A very wealthy man thought he had made a shrewd arrangement to “take it with him” by making a huge contribution to “the Building Fund.” He arrived at heaven’s gate lugging a large trunk. The gatekeeper said, “Sorry, you can’t take that in here,” but the man insisted he had permission. The gatekeeper said, “We’ll see. Show me what’s in the trunk.” He opened the trunk, and it was full of gold bars, a huge fortune. The gatekeeper said, “You brought paving?”

This modern parable illustrates something about the values of heaven and those of earth.

- What do you think is the main point of the story?
- Is anything like that story remotely possible?

This hymn emphasizes and underlines a teaching that few people ever really learn.

- What evidence is there that St. Matthew learned it (Matt. 9:9–13)?
- How did following Jesus change him?

Exploring the Scriptures

In Luke 16:1–13, Jesus told the parable of the dishonest manager to teach the importance of eternal values. In discussing the matter, He told His disciples and us, “No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money” (v. 13).

- What does the word “money” include?
- What are some of the “masters” we are susceptible to?

In 1 John 2:15–17, the apostle urges us not to love the world or the things of the world that appeal to our senses. In Phil. 3:7–9, Paul strongly and passionately says that he counts everything as rubbish compared to knowing Jesus Christ by faith.

- Do these two passages give a different message?
- Why is loving the “things of this world” not compatible with loving eternal things?
- What is the “tipping point” between love for God and love of money?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

The origin of this fine eighteenth-century hymn is a little bit cloudy. Most students of the matter agree that the author was Georg Michael Pfefferkorn (1645–1732), a teacher and pastor in Germany. However, the hymn first appeared anonymously, and lately it has been attributed to Balthasar Kindermann (d. 1706). It was translated into English by August Crull, who was born in Germany in 1845. He emigrated to the United States at an early age, and graduated from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, in 1862. He served as pastor and teacher in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Grand Rapids, Michigan, and died in 1923.

Text

Pastor Crull used his gift as a poet in translating the key phrase of the hymn as “What is the world to me!” Its literal meaning in German is “What do I ask of the world?”

- Does the translation change the meaning of the phrase?
- What is the answer to the question, either way?

Stanza 1 of the hymn makes a bold statement of the changed value system of the Christian life, contrasting the world and its “vaunted pleasures” against the peace and rest of having Jesus as treasure and soul’s delight.

- What are some of the “vaunted pleasures” of this world?

Stanza 2 considers the praise and honor of the “mighty” of this world, but finds them “frail and flighty” compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus.

- How are the “mighty” of this world “frail and flighty?”

In Stanza 3 the wealth of this world in money is contrasted to the wealth of knowing Jesus.

Making the Connection

Hard times often make people reevaluate their list of what is important in life.

- Have you had that kind of experience lately? Or ever?

Jesus said, “For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God” (Luke 18:25).

- Is it easier for a poor person to believe?
- How poor do you have to be?

“What Is the World to Me” is a hymn not only for the eighteenth century, but for the twenty-first century as well. It seems designed to make us think about what is important eternally, and who we have in first place in our lives.

In Closing

Another parable that teaches a point similar to the story about the rich man who thought he had a way to “take it with him” is Jesus’ parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:16–21). A man is so wealthy he has no place to store all his goods. He decides to tear down his barns and build bigger ones, thinking that then he will be at ease. “But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God” (Luke 12:20–21).

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 730.

- How much money is enough?

The fourth stanza brings the main message of the hymn together in a striking way with a list of important things that Jesus means to the believer — wealth, treasure, life, health, friendship, love, pleasure, joy and eternal bliss.

- Can you think of a few more things to add to the list?

In the lifetimes of most of us, we have seen unprecedented prosperity. Our nation, as a whole, is part of the wealthiest people the world has ever seen. Yet we have recently been hearing of the overwhelming greed of some of our fellow citizens — not only greed for money and possessions, but for power, for pleasure and whatever else the world may give.

- What are some of the signs of this trend?

Christians are not immune to these social trends, but by our Savior’s grace we are called to ask the question, “What is the world to me?”

- How does this trend toward the values of this world show itself in the church?
- What can Christians do to work against this trend?

Prayer

Almighty God, heavenly Father, You have called us to be Your children and heirs of Your gracious promises in Christ Jesus. Grant us Your Holy Spirit that we may forsake all covetous desires and the inordinate love of riches. Deliver us from the pursuit of passing things that we may seek the kingdom of Your Son and trust in His righteousness and so find blessedness and peace; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen (Against the love of money, *LSB*, p. 311).

The Church's One Foundation

Lutheran Service Book 644 | study by Robert E. Smith

Introduction

The Romans were excellent engineers. Even today, Roman roads still bear traffic, Roman aqueducts still bring water to European cities, and Roman bridges 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.

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?

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?

Samuel Stone was concerned about the spread of challenges to Christianity within the Anglican Communion. Bishop John Colenso of Natal believed the Old Testament was

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?

- 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?

fiction, 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, who deposed Colenso. Echoes of this kind of conflict are present in the hymn.

- In the twenty-first century as well, 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), 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 christes 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 and 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 there 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).

Oh, How Great Is Your Compassion

Lutheran Service Book 559 | study by Thomas E. Lock

Introduction

What is natural man's capacity to believe in Jesus Christ unto salvation? This question was one of the chief controversies of the Reformation, even as it is today. While some seek to make a "decision for Jesus" and others teach that man can prepare himself for saving faith, our Lutheran forefathers confessed:

[I]n mankind's nature since the fall, before regeneration, there is not the least spark of spiritual power remaining or present. No person can prepare himself for God's grace or accept the grace God offers... . He is sin's servant (John 8:34) and the devil's captive, by whom he is moved

(Ephesians 2:2; 2 Timothy 2:26). Therefore, the natural free will according to its perverted disposition and nature is strong and active only to do what is displeasing and contrary to God [Genesis 6:5]. (SD II 7)

- Before a person is converted to faith in Christ, to whom does he or she belong? Can that person break free from such slavery? Who is the only one who can break the chains that bind man to sin and the devil?
- What is the importance of a person being converted to Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit?

Exploring the Scriptures

Read Eph. 2:1–10.

- What is the original state of every person since the fall into sin (1–3)? Whose desires are really fulfilled when people walk in their trespasses and sins?
- God could have left people in their sin and death. However, He made you alive. What compelled God to enliven "dead people" (4–5)?

- God has made you alive and saved you that you may also live with Him in heaven (6–7). What two gifts were given to save people (8–9)?
- The gift of grace is unmerited forgiveness and salvation. The gift of faith is that which holds onto grace. Who does the work of salvation? What place has human pride or works in this salvation by grace and through faith?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Both parents of Johannes Olearius (1611–84) died in the space of one year before his twelfth birthday. He was befriended by a lawyer, Andreas Sartorius, and educated in Halle. In 1629 Olearius enrolled at the University of Wittenberg, where he received his MA in 1632 and became a Doctor of Theology in 1643. He began lecturing at Wittenberg in 1632. He married Catherine Elisabeth Merk. She bore him five sons, all of whom (like Olearius and his father) became pastors. In 1643 Olearius was appointed court preacher and father confessor at Halle for the Duke of Saxe-Weissenfels. By 1664 he was appointed general superintendent (overseeing pastor) of the church body there. In 1680 he was appointed to the same position in Weissenfels, serving until his death in 1684.

Olearius was raised and trained in a time of great turmoil within the Lutheran Church. Two theologies would drive a wedge in the Church in Germany: Pietism and Rationalism. Where orthodox Lutheranism put the seat of authority in (1) the revealed Word of God, and (2) the confession of faith derived from that Word of God (the Lutheran Confessions), Pietism placed the authority in the

heart of each person; Rationalism did the same, except that the authority resided in the mind of each person. Both Rationalism and Pietism deemphasized the Sacraments of Christ. Olearius was an orthodox Lutheran minister who fought against Pietism, having grown up and served in Halle, the home of Pietism. In his hymns he wrote consistently of the unmerited grace of God.

- God's Word, Holy Baptism, Holy Communion and Holy Absolution are not only the means for delivering God's grace to people, they are also witnesses of His work among us. Why is it important, then, to rely on His Word and Sacraments instead of one's own thoughts or feelings?
- How have the struggles of our current age (e.g., spiritualism versus Christianity; evolution versus God's creation of the world from nothing in the space of six days; reliance upon man's thoughts and feelings versus God's Word and Sacraments; man-centered worship versus Christ-centered Divine Service) found voice in the preaching and hymnody of the Church?

Text

Read the Holy Gospel for this day, Luke 18:9–14, the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector.

- Which one sinned? Actually, they *both* were sinners. What was the difference between the Pharisee and the tax collector? Read stanzas 1 and 2 of our hymn. According to the hymn, from where does salvation come, and what compels this gift? To where are people led? This use of “His supper” in the hymn calls to mind Luke 14:16–24, the parable of the great banquet. Where does this feast now take place?
- Read stanzas 3 and 4. In translated work, one cannot always see the nuances of the original text. The “Witnesses” in the English text are the “Sacraments and

Word.” However, the German text is more explicit, calling the witnesses “Holy Baptism” and “the Lord’s Supper” (*Tauf und Abendmahl*). How do Holy Baptism and the Lord’s Supper serve as witnesses of the Spirit? According to Acts 2:38–42, the lives of the baptized saints of God are focused around the Divine Service, where they receive the witness of the Spirit through the Word and in the Supper. Read Matt. 26:29 and 28:20. The promises in these verses are fulfilled in the Divine Service, where Christ is present with His saints. It is in the Divine Service that saints drink Christ’s blood with the wine in His “Father’s kingdom.” Will Christ ever leave His Church, His communion of saints?

- Read stanza 5. It is the same as stanza 1 except for which phrase?

Making the Connection

Great hymns of the Church do not sing only for certain times or ages. They are timeless. They confess the faith in song from generation to generation. What has been sung, you now sing, and those who follow will likewise sing. It is a wonderful thing to be part of such a heritage of faith.

- How have Holy Baptism and Holy Communion shaped your life of faith? How do they continue to shape that life?

- What do the tangible Word and Sacraments deliver to you? How do the giving and receiving of God’s Word and Sacraments relate to Eph. 2:8–9?
- Having studied of your salvation by God through the death of Jesus Christ — even against your own free will — are you now more willing to sing or say, “I will praise Your great compassion”?

In Closing

The free will spouts all sorts of evil and defiles each person. But God, out of His great compassion, has saved you. With that salvation comes also your enlightening by His gifts of His Word, Holy Baptism and Holy Communion; these grant you forgiveness of sins and strengthen the gift of faith, which holds onto unmerited, ever-gracious salvation. This is the message of the Church. This is the message Johannes Olearius placed on your lips for you to confess.

- In thanksgiving for these wonderful gifts, sing or read aloud together *LSB* 559.

Prayer

Almighty and everlasting God, always more ready to hear than we to pray and to give more than we either desire or deserve, pour down upon us the abundance of Your mercy, forgiving those things of which our conscience is afraid and giving us those good things that we are not worthy to ask, except through the merits and mediation of Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for the Eleventh Sunday after Trinity).

Ye Watchers and Ye Holy Ones

Lutheran Service Book 670 | study by Robert A. Sorensen

Introduction

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

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

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

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

Exploring the Scriptures

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

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

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

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

Exploring the Hymn

Background

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

Riley's most obvious borrowing is the tune. This hymn is set to *Lasst uns erfreuen*, a melody that has been a favorite since its appearance in Germany in the early seventeenth

century. In this regard, note that three other hymns in *LSB* (465, 493, 816) share this musical setting.

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

In simple terms, this hymn is structured as follows. The first stanza is addressed to the various orders of angels, urging them to praise the Lord. Here, Riley is indebted to the nine ranks of angels systematized by the *Celestial*

Hierarchy of the Greek father Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite (c. 500).

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

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

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

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

Text

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

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

Making the Connection

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

In Closing

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Prayer

Almighty God, You chose the virgin Mary to be the mother of Your only Son. Grant that we, who are redeemed by His blood, may share with her in the glory of Your eternal kingdom; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for St. Mary, Mother of Our Lord).

Word of God, Come Down on Earth

Lutheran Service Book 545 | study by Paul Robert Sauer

Introduction

There are few things as wonderful to parents as being told by their child, “I love you.” As great as those words are, however, when they are accompanied by a physical hug or a kiss, the words take on a new and powerful form.

In “Word of God, Come Down on Earth” we have a celebration of the incarnation — God’s Word taking on

human form and delivering a hug and a kiss of love to His own children.

- What is the importance of the incarnation — God becoming one of us?
- How would our relationship with God be different if the Word had not become flesh?

Exploring the Scriptures

The Gospel for this Twelfth Sunday after Trinity provides a helpful context for what the incarnation of Christ looks like in the lives of a believer. Read Mark 7:31–37.

- What is the physical means by which Jesus healed the man of his deafness and speech impediment? Do you think that Jesus could have healed him without the physical touches? Why do you think He chose to do it this way?
- What is the response of the one who is healed? Those who witnessed it?

In the Epistle for today, Rom. 10:9–17, St. Paul speaks of the challenge of individuals coming to faith.

- While we teach that the Holy Spirit calls people to faith, who does St. Paul say are the instruments that the Holy Spirit sometimes uses? Read Rom. 10:14–15.

- Does this mean that faith is dependent upon those who preach the Good News? Read Rom. 10:16.

Psalm 146 sings the praises of God, who takes care of His people in their every need. Unlike princes who cannot save (v. 3), God Himself intercedes to save His people. Read Psalm 146.

- What does salvation look like for the psalmist? Is it primarily physical salvation or spiritual or both?
- Does God care only about the “salvation of souls,” or does He care about the actual lives and the actual sufferings of His people?

In Isaiah 29, the prophet prophesies that the LORD Himself will redeem His people (with a strong emphasis on spiritual redemption!). Read Is. 29:17–24.

- How are the children of Jacob described (v. 23)? Who is it that sanctifies?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

James Quinn (b. 1919) is a Jesuit priest from Scotland who has spent most of his ministry at institutions of higher learning as a teacher and writer. With John 1:14 as the background, Quinn describes how this “Word made flesh” speaks to our broken world today.

- When you consider the world in which you live, what about it seems broken to you? How would the presence of Jesus in the midst of that brokenness change things?

In conjunction with his academic responsibilities, Quinn has served as a member of the advisory committee of the International Committee on English in the Liturgy (ICEL),

whose purpose is to provide English language texts for worship in the Roman Catholic Church.

- Can the translation of worship materials into the lives and cultures of a people be considered incarnational? In what way?

Text

Drawing heavily on the image of Jesus as the Word of God (not to be confused with the Bible as the Word of God), “Word of God, Come Down on Earth” is a hymn of prayer for the Word of God to intercede in the lives of God’s people, and a hymn of praise to that same Word of God who brings blessings to those for whom He has interceded. The

prologue to John's Gospel describes what the incarnation of the Word of God means. Read John 1:14.

- How does one see the glory of God the Father? How do we behold the Word?

Stanza 2 describes how the Word brings creation and salvation, and will bring restoration on the Last Day.

- How was the world created (Col. 1:16–17)?
- How was the world redeemed (Mark 10:45)?
- How is the world restored (1 Peter 5:8–11)?

Stanza 3 speaks of the healing that comes through the Word of God. Read Luke 4:16–21, where Jesus preaches one of His first sermons (a one-sentence sermon!) on a prophecy from Isaiah.

Making the Connection

In the Proper Preface in the Service of the Sacrament at Christmas the Church prays: “It is truly meet, right, and salutary that we should at all times and in all places give thanks to You, holy Lord, almighty Father, everlasting God, through Jesus Christ, our Lord; for in the mystery of the Word made flesh You have given us a new revelation of Your glory that, seeing You in the person of Your Son, we may know and love those things which are not seen. Therefore with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven we laud and magnify your glorious name, evermore praising you and saying ...” (*Lutheran Service Book Altar Book* [CPH, 2006], 226).

In Closing

The Word becomes flesh so that we might be able to know God better. Here in this season of the Trinity, we celebrate the incarnation (the Christmas) of Jesus, and all of the blessings that God brings to us as His Son takes on human flesh. God continues to sustain us by His real presence as He comes to us through Word and Sacrament.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 545.

- What prophecy does Isaiah make about the ministry of the Messiah? What will that ministry look like?
- Does Jesus “spin” the prophecy to focus on “spiritual things”? Do you think “spiritual things” are included in the work of the Messiah?

The hymn concludes with a connection between the Word of God and the Spirit of God whom the Word sends down to us. Read stanza 4.

- What is the connection between the Spirit and the Word (John 16:7–14)? Where do we receive this Spirit of God today?
- How does the Word of life feed us with one bread (John 6:53–58)?

- What do you think are the “things which are not seen” of which this prayer talks?
- The prayer concludes with the people of God singing the heavenly “Holy, Holy, Holy” song from Isaiah 6. Here, our thanks and praise in the Communion service join with all the company of heaven. Who is included in the company of heaven? Just angels? Saints? Our own personal saints — grandmothers, parents and others who have died in the Lord? What does it say about their presence with you during the Communion service?

Prayer

Almighty and merciful God, by Your gift alone Your faithful people render true and laudable service. Help us steadfastly to live in this life according to Your promises and finally attain Your heavenly glory; 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 Twelfth Sunday after Trinity).

God Has Spoken by His Prophets

Lutheran Service Book 583 | study by Aaron A. Koch

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

Exploring the Scriptures

Read Heb. 1:1–2.

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

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

Exploring the Hymn

Background

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

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

Text

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

Read 1 Sam. 15:29.

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

Read Heb. 1:3.

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

Making the Connection

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

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

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

In Closing

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

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 583.

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

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

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

Prayers

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

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

Jesus, Thy Boundless Love to Me

Lutheran Service Book 683 | study by Shawn L. Kumm

Introduction

The hymn we know as “Jesus, Thy Boundless Love to Me” was first written as a sixteen-stanza hymn based on a passage from a many-lined prayer, and subsequently translated into English from the sung German heard on a ship on its way to America. The present version in *Lutheran Service Book* now gives us four strong stanzas. When we sing this hymn we are like a family listening to a many-destinated travel account of a long-absent loved one. We say, “Wow! That was quite a trip. Welcome home!”

And as is the case with so many homecomings, the emotions run deep and the heart is warmed. Paul Gerhardt’s hymns and writings bring to the mouths of Christians the

“for you” of Christ’s work upon the cross. The “Thy” and “Thine” of objective theology receives its proper faith-fed response from the “my” and “mine” of the child of God.

- Think of a time when you waited for someone to return home or to visit after a long absence. You knew the objective truth: “I’m coming. I will be there on such-and-such a day at such-and-such a time.” What words couldn’t you wait to say when the person arrived?
- The very first words of this hymn — “Jesus, Thy boundless love” — describe the grace of God. In what ways are the next two words — “to me” — important to you?

Exploring the Scriptures

Today’s appointed Gospel tells of another trip, a trip that started out well, went terribly bad and ended with a surprise. Read Luke 10:23–37.

The lawyer in verse 25 saw himself on a trip: “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” The lawyer wanted to know how on his own he could get from this earthly life to eternal life.

- In the verses that follow, how does the lawyer see himself getting to heaven?

- Why does Jesus give a Law answer to the lawyer when the Law cannot save? See Rom. 3:21–28.

The Epistle for today picks up on this same theme. Read Gal. 3:15–22.

- What kind of covenant was the lawyer trying to make with Jesus?
- What kind of covenant does Jesus desire to give to the lawyer?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

The words “easy” and “comfortable” are not part of the vocabulary used to describe the life of Paul Gerhardt (1607–76). His father died before he could reach manhood, and during those same years of his youth the Thirty Years’ War (1618–48) raged around him. As he matured, Gerhardt’s years of religious training and teaching made sharp his skills as a preacher and poet.

Three years after the end of the Thirty Years’ War, Gerhardt was called to a small town south of Berlin. The people of Mittenwalde were still suffering the after-effects of the war when Gerhardt brought his comforting way with the Word of God to their broken hearts and lives. During his years there Gerhardt married Anna Maria Berthold.

Monetary problems and a jealous peer prompted Gerhardt to accept a call to Berlin. Though his life in the parish thrived, the continued bitter conflict between the Lutherans and the Calvinists flared up. Refusing

to compromise his faith by the signing of a document, Gerhardt was removed from office and forbidden to even exercise his pastoral duties in private.

Life was to become even more bitter for Paul Gerhardt. The death of four of his five children, the serious illness of his wife and her subsequent death, his theological battles with church and civil authorities over his Lutheran orthodoxy all pressed down upon his life and soul. Due to the death of his dear loved ones and the behavior of discourteous and insensitive people, Gerhardt’s remaining years were bitter as he lived them out in Lübben, Germany. Have you known a pastor like Gerhardt who has suffered so greatly in life and for the sake of the purity of the Gospel? At times pastors suffer great sadness and disappointment in their own lives. What are some ways the “neighbors” (Luke 10:29, 36) of the pastor can bring him the comfort of the Gospel and attend to his wounds? What things get in the way of this happening?

Text

From the heart of the child of God comes the pure request of faith in stanza 1. Gerhardt not only sees Jesus as the source of the faith in his “thankful heart,” but he also asks Jesus to complete and fulfill that love in him.

- Compare Gerhardt’s prayer in stanzas 1 and 2 with St. Paul’s prayer in Eph. 3:14–21. In what ways are they praying for the same thing?
- How does the Holy Spirit remove “coldness” (st. 2) from the heart?

In stanza 3 Gerhardt prays that the unwearied love of Jesus would renew his own hope.

Making the Connection

As we consider the details of Paul Gerhardt’s life — the early death of his father, the deaths of four of his children, the death of his wife, the frustration with church officials and brother pastors and parishes, we can understand why Gerhardt would, in stanza 3, sing of and “pursue” the “unwearied” love of Christ. Read the Psalm appointed for Trinity 13, Psalm 32.

- According to David, what one thing wearied him the most?
- Which words or phrases in this psalm indicate David had hope and strength in the Lord?

The last prayer service according to the monastic orders is Prayer at the Close of the Day, also known as Compline

In Closing

Read the Seventh Petition of the Lord’s Prayer and its meaning from the Small Catechism (*LSB*, pp. 324–25). With these words from the Lord’s Prayer in mind, recall the tragic events that occurred in Paul Gerhardt’s life. As you do so, marvel again at the beautiful words written amid such pain and sorrow, all of which point us to the boundless, unwearied, peace-filled love of Christ.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 683.

- Read Rom. 8:18–28. Which promises of God sustain you through the times of groaning in your life? Consider the Sacraments. How do they give you hope?

God’s people are not immune to suffering. The life of Paul Gerhardt clearly shows us that. In fact, he sings those words of suffering to himself; he sings those words of suffering to us in stanza 4. St. Paul writes, “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake” (Col. 1:24).

- Can you think of a time when your sufferings pointed someone to Christ?

(from the Latin root word meaning “complete”). Turn to page 253 of *Lutheran Service Book* to see the service in its entirety. This is the “bedtime prayer” of the Church, when her people, made tired through their vocations, worn out by others, fatigued by sin, look to Christ for forgiveness and peace. The journey through this particular day is over. The day is completed in Christ.

Read the prayer at the top of page 257 in *Lutheran Service Book*.

- Pray this prayer for a “neighbor” who, like the Good Samaritan, is in some way half dead and needs the rest only Jesus can give.
- Read Eccl. 1:8. How are these words reflected in stanzas 1 and 3 of our hymn?

Prayer

Almighty and everlasting God, give us an increase of faith, hope, and charity; and that we may obtain what You have promised, make us love what You have commanded; 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 Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity).

If Thou But Trust in God to Guide Thee

Lutheran Service Book 750 | study by John G. Fleischmann

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

Exploring the Scriptures

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

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

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

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

Exploring the Hymn

Background

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

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

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

It was at this time that Neumark composed this hymn.

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

Text

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Making the Connection

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

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

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

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

In Closing

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

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

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 750.

Prayer

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

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 the Epistle for Quinquagesima, 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 the Gospel for Quinquagesima, 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)?

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.

- Stanza 1 concludes with a reference to “the very Bread of peace.” What is this a reference to?

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).

What God Ordains Is Always Good

Lutheran Service Book 760 | study by Randall P. Wurschmidt

Introduction

We do not like to suffer — indeed we tend to avoid it at all costs. Why is this? It is certainly not very much fun; it causes heartache and pain. You may suffer from such things as depression or arthritis; you may suffer because your spouse is not a Christian, or your children have rejected their faith or belittled yours. You may also suffer because your car breaks down frequently, or your bank account is dwindling quickly, or because you've lost a job or a house. It is tempting at these times to think that God is punishing you for something, or that He has become distant or uncaring. However, Scripture teaches that suffering is to be expected

in the life of a Christian, and that sometimes God uses it for our own benefit, to strengthen us in our faith. At such times we have nowhere to turn but to the Cross, to rely on the promises God has made to us, namely, that nothing will ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:39).

- How does the world understand suffering — is it a good thing or a bad thing?
- When things seem to go badly in your life, whom do you blame?

Exploring the Scriptures

The Old Testament Lesson for today is a fine way to introduce this hymn. Read 1 Kings 17:8–16.

- Does the widow seem angry about her situation, or is she content?
- When Elijah brings her the word of the LORD, how does she react?

Even though it seems impossible, God continues to provide what she needs. In the midst of her suffering, she relies on God's promise to her. How can something good come out of such misery?

The whole premise of today's hymn is that God's work is always good, and that His will is "just and holy" (st. 1). This comes not by observation, but by His Word (2 Cor. 5:7).

- Read Rom. 8:18–28. Romans 8 describes the life of one in whom the Spirit dwells, that is, the baptized Christian. How does Paul understand sufferings in this life?

The Gospel Reading today, Matt. 6:24–34, also fits into this theme. Jesus says, "do not be anxious about your life" (v. 25).

Exploring the Hymn

Background

In 1675, when Severus Gastorius (1646–82), Kantor (church musician) at one of the churches in the German town of Jena, lay seriously ill in his bed, his friend Samuel Rodigast (1649–1708) came by to visit. Rodigast brought with him this poem, "What God Ordains Is Always Good," and read it to Gastorius, who found it very comforting and strengthening. Upon his recovery, Gastorius set his friend's poem to music; the hymn was first published together with this music in 1681. It was instantly popular, and important composers such as Johann Pachelbel (of "Canon in D" fame) and Johann Sebastian Bach used it as the basis for some of their own music. It was also a common funeral hymn for many years.

- Imagine you are in the hospital and very ill. What hymns or poems would you find comforting and why?
- List some qualities that you think would make a hymn a good choice at a funeral.

Text

Each stanza of this hymn begins with the words, "What God ordains is always good." To this confession, at the ends of the first and last stanzas, we respond, "To Him, then, I will yield me" and "So to my God I yield me." That is to say, "Everything God does is good," and, "Thy will be done." To a non-Christian, this might seem untrue or even arrogant or offensive.

- In what ways might someone try to argue that God is not always good?

But if God works all things together for the good of the Christian, then there must be something good in what God sends us, even if it seems bad to us at the time.

- Recall the account of Joseph in Genesis. His brothers had sold him into slavery and told their father that he was dead. Yet how does Joseph interpret this many years later? See Gen. 50:20.

- What afflictions have you experienced that seemed at the time bad, but later turned out to be a blessing?

In stanza 5, the author Rodigast refers to the cup that he is drinking. This imagery reminds us of Jesus praying in Gethsemane. Read Luke 22:39–42. For Jesus, this cup is the suffering He must bear. It is filled with God’s wrath for the sins of all people, even yours. Jesus bore this wrath as

Making the Connection

Sometimes people have the erroneous idea that if you have enough faith, bad things will not happen to you; instead you will be healthy, have an abundance of material wealth, a happy family and so forth. Such an outlook is sometimes called a “theology of glory.” Scripture, on the other hand, clearly teaches a “theology of the cross.” Here we learn that the Christian will suffer in this life. To carry the cross and follow Jesus means that sometimes He will give you a cup filled with bitter medicine that is for your spiritual health and well-being. It is a matter of trust. Is God good or not?

In Closing

None of us is going to have everything go the way we want it to 365 days a year. And no one, not even Christians, will escape death and decay in this sin-wracked life. We must rely on God’s goodness toward us while receiving His gifts through His Word and Sacraments, and finally trust in His promise that nothing can separate us from His love for us in Christ. It’s a truth that remains unshaken: though sorrow, need or death be yours, you shall not be forsaken. And in the end, we look forward to the time when He will wipe away every tear, when we will be with Him in heaven.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 760.

He suffered in agony on the cross on Good Friday. It may seem to you at times that you are drinking from a bitter cup. But though it tastes nasty now, God promises relief and comfort in the future. Christians especially look to their future home in heaven as an end to all earthly suffering (see Rev. 21:4).

- In light of this, why is Good Friday called “Good”?

We must be prepared in this life to commend ourselves, our bodies and souls and all things, into the Lord’s hands.

Martin Luther’s most famous hymn says it this way:

And take they our life,
Goods, fame, child, and wife,
Though these all be gone,
Our vict’ry has been won;
The Kingdom ours remaineth. (*LSB* 656:4)

Prayer

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

Sing, My Tongue, the Glorious Battle

Lutheran Service Book 454 | study by Paul Gregory Alms

Introduction

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

Exploring the Scriptures

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

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

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

Exploring the Hymn

Background

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

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

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

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

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

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

Read Gal. 6:14.

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

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

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

Text

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

- What is the reason in this psalm for praising God?
- How is this similar or related to our hymn?

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

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

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

- According to stanza 2, what else did Christ do to redeem us?

Making the Connection

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

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

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

In Closing

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

- Read Gal. 4:4–5. How does this passage help us understand Christ’s life of obedience?
- For whose sake was He being obedient?

Stanza 4 draws a comparison between the tree of life in the Garden of Eden and the cross.

- Read Rev. 22:2. How is this tree of life similar to the cross? See Is. 53:5.
- Read Gen. 3:22. There God mentions that eating of the tree of life brings eternal life. How do we “eat” the cross, our tree of life, for eternal life?

- For whose sake did Christ obey the Law?
- Who gets the “credit” for His obedience?

Stanza 3 emphasizes the willingness of Christ to die on the cross for our sakes and for our forgiveness.

- What does such willingness indicate about Christ’s attitude toward us?

Such an attitude calls forth from us just the type of praise and singing this hymn invites us to offer to God.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 454.

Prayer

Almighty God, graciously behold this Your family for whom our Lord Jesus Christ was willing to be betrayed and delivered into the hands of sinful men to suffer death upon the cross; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Good Friday).

The Royal Banners Forward Go

Lutheran Service Book 455 | study by Paul Gregory Alms

Introduction

Every king or president or ruler has symbols of power that surround him. A king has a scepter and a crown. A president has the presidential seal and Air Force One. Ancient generals often had banners that were lifted up before their armies to march before them. Such things are used to proclaim that the ruler or king is powerful and important.

Jesus Christ's "banner" is His cross. It is the sign and the place of His great victory. Churches have for many, many centuries lifted up crucifixes and crosses in worship as reminders of Christ's power and might. But this banner of

Christ is a strange one. For on that wood He suffered and bled and died. His grisly death does not seem like a victory but an awful tragedy. But in such things as suffering and blood and death is the triumph of our Savior. With such things He wins the battle for us.

- How is the cross a sign of victory?
- Where and how does your church use crosses or crucifixes or banners with the cross? What messages do they (and how your church uses them) convey?

Exploring the Scriptures

The Readings for Holy Cross Day form an excellent scriptural basis for this hymn. Numbers 21:4–9 tells the story of Moses lifting up the bronze serpent in the wilderness to save the people of Israel from God's wrath.

- What do the people say to Moses in verse 7, and how is this similar to the way we approach God in the Divine Service?
- What does God tell Moses to "lift up" for the people? What does God "lift up" for us today? Where do we see and receive this?

In the Epistle for today, 1 Cor. 1:18–25, Paul says many regard the cross as folly and weakness.

- Do people today still have this attitude? What about Jesus on the cross appears foolish?
- Paul writes that in truth the word of the cross is the power and wisdom of God. How is the proclamation of Christ's death powerful?

In the Gospel Reading, John 12:20–33, Jesus says, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (v. 32).

- How does the crucifixion and death of Jesus draw us to Him?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Venantius Honorius Fortunatus (c. 530–609) is the author of this hymn. He wrote many hymns, most of which were written for use in the church year. One volume of verse was entitled *Hymns for All the Festivals of the Church Year*, but it, like almost all of his work, has been lost. This hymn is among the few that have survived.

This hymn was written as a procession hymn for a specific occasion. A supposed relic of the cross of Jesus was being brought into the monastery where Fortunatus lived. This piece of wood was highly regarded and greeted with pomp and ceremony at the church where it would be displayed. Fortunatus wrote this hymn to be sung as the relic was first brought into the sanctuary. Of course we reject the value of relics, or the idea that they are genuine. The hymn itself does not mention relics but rather praises the atoning work Christ did on the cross for us.

- What is the difference between worshiping relics and using crosses and crucifixes and banners and art in our churches?
- If we are looking for tangible signs of Christ's love for us, where should we look? Has God given such signs?

Text

The first stanza of this hymn includes a challenging theological statement. Fortunatus points to the mystery that the one who made our flesh (the Son of God) now pays the ransom of sin in that very flesh He has made. God has taken on the flesh He made in order to free that flesh (us!) from our own sin.

- Consider how this stanza emphasizes God's working all things in our salvation: creation, incarnation and atonement.

Read John 19:34.

- What does this Scripture tell us flowed from Jesus' side?
- The hymn calls the "torrent rushing from His side" (st. 2) a "precious flood" that washes us. How are we washed in the cross of Jesus?
- How do Baptism and the Lord's Supper connect to this image of blood and water flowing from the crucifixion of Christ?

Stanza 3 says that Jesus reigns "in triumph from the tree."

Making the Connection

This hymn text pushes us boldly to meditate on the cross of Christ, on His suffering and death. But it does that with us in the picture. Read the hymn text slowly and consider how each part of the picture of Christ's redemptive suffering includes us and our sin and the salvation Christ brings.

- How can you find yourself and Christ's work for you in these individual words:

ransom (st. 1)

flood (st. 2)

price (st. 4)

shame (st. 5)

restore (st. 6)

In Closing

Christ is our King and Lord. But unlike other earthly rulers, the banners and symbols of His power are upside down. His banner is His holy cross, where He conquered in the fight against our sin not with worldly displays of power but by suffering and dying. The true cross is shown forth in our midst by preaching and Baptism and the Lord's Supper. There Christ has promised to give the victory over sin that His cross has won.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 455.

- Why is Christ's place of death considered the place where He rules and triumphs?
- How does Gal. 3:13 fit in here?

The hymn speaks of the cross as a "tree of beauty" (st. 5) that bore "holy limbs." Further in that same stanza, the hymn proclaims that the shame once associated with the tree is now gone.

- What shame might be attached to a tree in the biblical narrative? See Gen. 3:1-7.

We often encounter difficulties, burdens and afflictions. How can this hymn's proclamation that Christ reigns and triumphs especially on the cross in His agony be a comfort to us?

- Are there words or images in this hymn that especially speak the comfort of the crucified Christ to you?

Prayer

Merciful God, Your Son, Jesus Christ, was lifted high upon the cross that He might bear the sins of the world and draw all people to Himself. Grant that we who glory in His death for our redemption may faithfully heed His call to bear the cross and follow Him, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Holy Cross Day).

The Will of God Is Always Best

Lutheran Service Book 758 | study by Larry A. Peters

Introduction

Every day some people must face the death of a spouse or the loss of a child. How do you recover from such traumatic events? Such events in life are hard to get over and are spiritual challenges as well as matters of the heart. They test us in ways we wish we could avoid.

Pastors often stand with people in the worst moments of their lives, trying to help them make sense of it all, to find comfort and peace and to put the pieces back together again. Pastors and our church families are helpers in our time of need, but faith is our primary resource to find God's grace when life is touched by sorrow or suffering.

The most credible author of this hymn is Albrecht von Preussen, whom we believe wrote this text after the death

of his wife Dorothea in 1547. His grief and faith was met with hope, trust and the comfort of God's gracious will. If we learn anything from him and this hymn, we learn to trust in God when all we have is sorrow, hurt and struggle. Christ is still there with us and for us.

- When the wounds of life cause us the greatest pain and suffering, where do we go for comfort?
- Lamentations 3:33 reminds us that God does not willingly grieve us. He does willingly support us in our grief, console us with His grace and supply His mercy to answer our pain. How do His Word and Sacraments deliver this comfort and consolation to us?

Exploring the Scriptures

All the Readings for today speak comfort. The Introit begins with our prayer for God's grace in our cries "all the day" long (Ps. 86:3). In the worst moments of life, faith insists that the Lord is good, "abounding in steadfast love to all who call upon [Him]" (v. 5).

- "In the day of my trouble I call upon [God]," says the psalmist (v. 7). Is the Lord our last resort or our first stop for this comfort and deliverance?

In the Lessons we are confronted with the nature of suffering. It is brief: it lasts only for the night (Ps. 30:5). "Joy comes with the morning."

- Why does suffering feel like it lasts so long?
- How many days and nights are stolen by anxiety, fear and sorrow?
- To whom do we turn? Who is our helper in the distresses of this mortal life?

In 1 Kings 17:17-24 we read how the death of a child became an occasion for God to display His mercy. In the end, it was not merely the return of her son that the Lord gave to this woman, but faith in His will.

- Verse 19: "Give me your son." Is this the call to give over to the Lord all our sorrows, griefs, pain and so on?
- Can we depend on the Lord to comfort and heal us?

St. Paul acknowledges the worry and sympathetic concern of the Ephesians (3:13) but insists that his suffering points to "the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge" (3:19). In other words, God's love transcends all we see and even what we feel.

- Does the love of God in Christ transcend our struggles?
- God "is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think" (v. 20). Faith alone moves us to wait upon the Lord, to trust in His promise and to be content. How do we endure when the answers do not come as we pray? Is His grace still sufficient when it seems our prayers are unanswered?

Luke 7:11-17 finds another mother, another dead son, another broken heart and another grief. Even though this son was restored to life, the people were still seized by fear (v. 16).

- Why are we surprised that God's will is good and gracious? Have we learned too well the skepticism of the world and faith not well enough?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

As was mentioned, the author of this hymn was most likely Albrecht von Preussen (1490–1568), not Albrecht von Brandenburg. The first Albrecht wrote sacred verse and was known to be pious. J. S. Bach employed this text (sts. 1 and 4) in his cantatas. Stanza 3 may not have been original, and some add a doxological stanza when omitting this stanza. The text is an eloquent statement of God's grace and a call to trust in the Lord in the darkest of circumstances.

Text

The first stanza masterfully weaves together so many Scripture passages of hope and comfort. As we learn to pray, so we learn to sing, "Your will be done" (st. 4). This is not a hopeless surrender to what we cannot control, but the positive affirmation that those who trust in the Lord are already blest. God cannot forsake His children, marked for Him in Baptism, who live by faith. His discipline is a mark of love lest we be lost to unbelief or impenitence.

- Read Prov. 3:12 and Heb. 12:6–11. What does it mean that God "chastens with forbearing" (st. 1)?
- How has God proven His friendship (John 15:13)?
- How do hymns of faith help us to engage hope in the face of adversity and internalize the Gospel promise?

Making the Connection

Who has not stood at the cemetery at the death of those we love? The words of Scripture often seem to cut like a knife: "The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away" (Job 1:21). But under the prompting of the Holy Spirit faith continues: "blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job 1:21). In the midst of pain and loss, we have hope.

- What moments have most tested your faith?

In Closing

In John 6:68 Peter confesses, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." Where else can we go? Hearts grieving death, sins pressing guilt, bodies facing weakness, the uncertainty of the world — our only real answer lies in the good and gracious will of God we have seen in Christ our Savior. We are not resigned to this, but convinced that our trust thus placed will not be disappointed.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 758.

In the second stanza, the faithful are described as yielding to God's "counsel, wise and just."

- Is this blind trust or has the Lord done something to engender this trust in us? What has He done?
- "The hairs of your head are all numbered" (Matt. 10:30). How intimate is God's knowledge of us and what happens in our lives?
- "He ... will neither slumber nor sleep" (Ps. 121:4). How does this enable us to slumber and sleep?

Stanza 3 prays that the Lord would give us strength in the face of temptation.

- How did the Lord respond to His temptation (Matt. 4:1–11)?

Note how the certainty of death is admitted in stanza 4, but just as certainly is confessed the final victory and eternal life we have in Christ.

- "Grant me to say, 'Your will be done.'" Is this the work and fruit of the Spirit teaching us the obedience of faith?
- We do not surrender to death but to the Lord's keeping. How is this different from surrendering to death? Think of Stephen and his martyrdom (Acts 7). Can we be so confident in our own grief and in the hour of our death?

- What circumstances led you to question God's will and His mercy?
- How does this hymn draw us back to our confidence in Christ when we least understand God's ways, when we do not see His hand at work and when we least sense His purpose, plan and presence?

Prayer

Heavenly Father, into whose keeping we entrust our loved ones, help us to look to You in our time of sorrow, remembering the cloud of faithful witnesses with which we are surrounded. Grant that we may one day share in the joys of those who now rest in Your presence; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen (Time of bereavement, *LSB*, p. 316).

Seek Where You May to Find a Way

Lutheran Service Book 557 | study by Christopher I. Thoma

Introduction

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

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

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

Exploring the Scriptures

Read John 6:68–69.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Exploring the Hymn

Background

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

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

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

ordained pastor? “My heart is stilled, / On Christ I build, / He is the one foundation... / Through Him I more than conquer” (st. 1).

Read Joshua 24:15.

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

Text

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

- What is the problem?
- What is the only viable solution?

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

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

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

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

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

Making the Connection

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

- Where does Weissel call for the reader to locate Jesus with certainty?

In Closing

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

- What does this mean for your life and death in this world?

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

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

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

- Read John 1:14. Who is the “Word”?

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

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

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB 557*.

Prayer

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

Lord God, to Thee We Give All Praise

Lutheran Service Book 522 | study by Thomas E. Lock

Introduction

For this feast of the church year Martin Luther preached:

Now, you have often heard that the devil is around people everywhere, in palaces, in houses, in the field, on the streets, in the water, in the forest, in fire; devils are everywhere. All they ever do is seek man's destruction... . Against such a malicious, spiteful, cunning enemy, who is continually hounding us, God has appointed the beloved angels, to keep watch so that where the devil suddenly comes and strikes with pestilence, with fire, with hail, and the like, an angel is there to counter it. (Eugene F.

A. Klug, ed., *Sermons of Martin Luther* [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000], 7:375–76)

- The devil and his demons are angels who sinned against God (2 Peter 2:4). With what power or might can people defend themselves against the evil spirits? What hope is there for Christians?
- Are there events that have happened which reveal the destructive power of the devil and his crew? How have angels guarded people from such evil?

Exploring the Scriptures

Who, or what, are angels? It is a common fallacy that angels are Christians who have died and been taken to heaven. As we will see, they are spirit beings who are in heaven alongside God and His saints.

- Read Matt. 18:10, a portion of the Holy Gospel for this day. Who protects Christians? Where are they? Whose face do they see?
- Read the Epistle for this day, Rev. 12:7–12. What took place? Who was the leader of the angels? In Job 1:6–12 we see that Satan had access to heaven even after his fall

into sin. But at Christ's death and resurrection, what took place according to Rev. 12:9? Where do Satan and his demons now reside? Why should heaven rejoice and earth fear at his descent?

- Read Rev. 7:9–14. Besides the angels, who are present around the heavenly throne?
- Who will judge the angels? The answer is given in 1 Cor. 6:2–3. How then is it possible for saints to become angels? Doesn't the fallacy of saints becoming angels actually diminish the standing of saints?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Philipp Melanchthon (1497–1560) was Luther's right-hand man during the Reformation. Born as Philipp Schwartzerd in 1497, he was given the name Melanchthon (which is Greek for "black earth," the meaning of *Schwartzerd* in German) by one of his teachers, Johann Reuchlin.

Melanchthon was highly intellectual, even in his youth, having earned his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1511 and his Master of Arts degree in 1514, when he was sixteen years old. In 1518 he accepted a call to teach Greek and literature at Wittenberg University. At Wittenberg he trained generations of men how to be theologians through his compilation of texts under subject headings known as *Loci communes theologici*. Melanchthon also gave the Church three of the Lutheran Confessions, later contained in the Book of Concord, namely, the Augsburg Confession (1530), the Apology of the Augsburg Confession (1531) and the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope (1537).

Melanchthon published this hymn in Latin in 1543. Since it was in Latin, the hymn was to be used at the university

and by the educated. In 1554 Melanchthon's friend and colleague, Paul Eber, made a German translation from this Latin text so that it could be sung by the uneducated as well. Finally, this hymn came to us in an English translation by Lutheran pastor Emanuel Cronenwett, published in 1880.

- Why was it important for the Latin version to be translated into German and, eventually, into English?

Text

Stanza 1 of our hymn for today is a general thanksgiving to God for the angels, based on Ps. 103:20–22 and Matt. 18:10. The remainder of the hymn explores why Christians thank God for these angels.

Stanzas 2 and 3 speak of the nature of these angels of God.

- When Jesus spoke of the angels in Matthew 18, He was speaking from His own knowledge as God, and as He revealed in Ps. 34:7. Read Ps. 34:7. How is that verse like

the lines in stanza 3, “Their whole delight is but to be / With Thee, Lord Jesus, and to keep / Thy little flock, Thy lambs and sheep”?

Stanzas 4–6 sing of the one against whom the angels need to defend the saints.

- Read Eph. 6:10–12. How are the evil angels portrayed in verse 12?
- Read 1 Peter 5:8–9. How is the devil described? What does he seek?

Making the Connection

Luther included Morning and Evening Prayers in his Small Catechism. Both of these prayers include the sentence, “Let Your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me” (*LSB*, p. 327).

- Whom does God appoint to guard you from dangers of body and soul? Have you ever had a time when you might have been injured or even died, but you escaped all harm? Explain what happened.

Luther preached:

[God] does at times permit us to experience such [evil and harmful attacks], that we might learn, if God were

In Closing

Why do Christians celebrate the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels? Luther summed it up nicely in one of his sermons on this day:

This feast commemorating the angels has been placed in the church’s calendar for the sake of our young people, or more correctly, for the sake of all Christians, so that they might train themselves to think about the beloved angels and thank God for appointing these mighty lords to be his servants for us. (*Sermons of Martin Luther*, 7:374–75)

Thanks be to God for appointing these ministering spirits (Ps. 104:4 and Heb. 1:7).

- Read stanza 5 of our hymn. Against whom is the deceiver of old fighting?
- Read Rev. 20:1–2. Who is the dragon being bound? Who does the binding?

Stanzas 7 and 8 conclude Melancthon’s hymn.

- Read the final two stanzas of the hymn. Who defeats our foe? What are Christians to do in return for this blessing?

not there [with his angels] all the time preventing their occurrence, they would happen continuously; and for this reason we ought to pray all the more diligently and thank God for such protection. (*Sermons of Martin Luther*, 7:376)

- Have there been occurrences in your life in which one can see God’s withholding of the protection by the angels? Why would such a loving God allow terrorist attacks to occur in the United States and other countries?

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 522.

Prayer

Everlasting God, You have ordained and constituted the service of angels and men in a wonderful order. Mercifully grant that, as Your holy angels always serve and worship You in heaven, so by Your appointment they may also help and defend us here on earth; through Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect St. Michael and All Angels).

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?

This hymn serves as the Hymn of the Day for two different Sundays. First read Mark 10:17–22, the Gospel for Proper 23B.

- How do the words of this hymn contrast somewhat with the reading from Mark 10?
- How does Jesus show Himself to be the rich young ruler's "best and truest friend" (stanza 2)?
- How does stanza 4 capture our weakness and confess that Christ alone can help us to love?

Read the second Gospel Reading that is paired with this hymn, 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 Wroclaw, 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

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.

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* [CPH, 1986, 1991], 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?

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, whose grace always precedes and follows us, help us to forsake all trust in earthly gain and to find in You our heavenly treasure; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. (Collect for Proper 23B).

Lord, Thee I Love with All My Heart

Lutheran Service Book 708 | study by Randy P. Wurschmidt

Introduction

As the young woman lies dying in her hospital bed, the pastor is urgently summoned. He brings with him his well-used *Pastoral Care Companion*; anticipating that death is imminent, he opens to the “Commendation of the Dying.” Prayers are prayed, psalms are chanted, Scriptures are read; after the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer, he sings the *Nunc Dimittis*, “Lord, now You let Your servant go in peace.” (*LSB Pastoral Care Companion* [CPH, 2007], p. 93). Then he sings stanza 3 of this hymn: “Lord, let at last Thine angels come.” (*LSB Pastoral Care Companion*, p. 93). It is a beautiful and confident way for the Christian to face

death, trusting in God’s promise of the resurrection, in the hope of eternal life in heaven. This stanza is famously used as the final chorale in J. S. Bach’s *St. John Passion*, giving the Good Friday narrative an appropriate ending: not with our Lord dead on the cross, but with the open tomb, and death defeated.

- Is a Christian’s death different from the death of an unbeliever? Why or why not?
- What is the benefit of the pastor being at the bedside of one who is dying?

Exploring the Scriptures

Anyone who is paying attention knows that this life is far from perfect. There are disappointments and heartache, illness and pain. “Change and decay in all around I see,” we sing in another favorite hymn of trust and hope (*LSB* 878:4). And of course, there is death. Most people think of death as an unfortunate but normal part of life. There may be some vague thought of heaven (never hell!) for the nice people; for some, death means simply disintegration back into the earth, and no more. But there is more; there is much more, for Jesus has promised to return on the Last Day and raise the dead.

It won’t be just the righteous that He raises, but all people, as we confess in the Nicene Creed, “I look for the

resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come” (*LSB*, p. 191). The Athanasian Creed goes even further, stating, “And those who have done good will enter into eternal life, and those who have done evil into eternal fire” (*LSB*, p. 320), meaning that those who have rejected Jesus will experience weeping and gnashing of teeth in eternal damnation.

- Read 1 Cor. 15:12–28. When (or who) is the beginning of death and the end of death, according to verse 21? Why should this give us hope?
- Read Psalm 90. How should we consider this life, in light of this psalm? Should we put our hope and trust in the things of our life now?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

The text was written by Martin Schalling (1532–1608), a Lutheran pastor and theologian who was a disciple of the reformer Philipp Melancthon, author of the Augsburg Confession. Martin Schalling lived during a time of intense religious strife, which reached even outside Germany and throughout Europe. As the Reformation moved forward, the Roman Catholics often fought back, countering with their own documents and creeds. At that time, Germany was composed of many small principalities and kingdoms. It was up to each individual ruler to decide on the religious confession of his territory, leading to many changes as rulers came and went. Unfortunately, these battles of words often spilled out into battles of swords, and many were killed in wars and power struggles during this time.

Even if we were without religious strife, death is still a universal problem in this life, and all Christians should be

able to confess the truths sung in this hymn, finding comfort in these words.

- What would be some of the challenges for a pastor in a time of ever-changing allegiances? Could you continue to confess the truth even if your job or your life depended on it?

Text

In the first stanza, we are reminded that earth’s pleasures are no match for eternal life in heaven, and that the most important thing for us is to be in the presence of God.

- Where does Jesus promise to be when we gather for the Divine Service each Sunday?

In the second stanza, we are reminded of the Creed, as you may have learned it from the Small Catechism. So in

the meaning of the First Article, Luther writes, “I believe 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). We pray that the devil, the world and our own flesh would not betray us, or lead us into temptation or doubt.

- According to this stanza, how do we glorify God’s “lavish grace”? To whom is our own love directed?

Sing the third stanza now, if you have not already. Here we have the heart and soul of this hymn. Jesus said, “For what

will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?” (Matt. 16:26). All roads point to the end. The whole life of a Christian is one preparing for death. And in these words, we confess to what end we have held steadfast: “That these mine eyes with joy may see, / O Son of God, Thy glorious face, / My Savior and my fount of grace.”

- Each stanza closes with the refrain, “Lord Jesus Christ.” Compare each of these, and describe how, just from the last phrase, each stanza summarizes our life of faith.

Making the Connection

When the Pharisees tested Jesus, asking, “Which is the great commandment in the Law?” Jesus answered by saying, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” (Matt. 22:36–40). This hymn sums up these commandments very well: we love God because He loved us first, and gave His only begotten Son for the forgiveness of our sins; we love our neighbor because God has given us everything we need for this life and the next.

In Closing

“We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things,” we confess in the meaning of the First Commandment (*LSB*, p. 321). As you know, this is easier said than done, because by nature we look to other gods. This is why we need to regularly hear the Word of God, why we need to regularly hear the words of absolution from our pastors, why we need to regularly receive Jesus’ body and blood: to ease our burdened consciences, and to strengthen our faith in God and our fervent love for our neighbor. For God has promised salvation to you, and baptized you into His life and death. He has assured you that as His sons and daughters, you will inherit eternal life with Him on account of Christ, who covers all your sins in His own righteousness. Therefore, sing

This we do when we share Jesus’ body and blood at the rail with fellow saints. We do this when we receive the forgiveness of sins promised from the cross, and forgive those who trespass against us. We love our neighbors when we help them in time of need, pray for and with them and comfort them with the beautiful hymns of our faith.

- In times of distress, have you ever just sat down with your hymnal open and sung? Why or why not?
- How does our own selfishness and sin keep us from facing death without fear?

this hymn with all boldness and confidence. Sing it now if you haven’t already. And sing it as you journey from this life into death and into life everlasting.

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).

We Are Called to Stand Together

Lutheran Service Book 828 | study by Paul F. Becker

Introduction

One of the chief doctrines of Western civilization is the sufficiency of the isolated individual, epitomized in Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self-Reliance": "though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till." How far this spirit has infiltrated the Church can be seen in the popular question asked by well-meaning Church Growth-minded mission leaders, "How many people have you led to Christ?" This novel question would have been incomprehensible to previous generations of disciples, and to most of the non-Western world today. For them, the Holy Spirit calls unbelievers to faith through the community gathered around Word and Sacrament.

Exploring the Scriptures

The triune God didn't think it was good for the first man to be alone. To this day, God places lonely, solitary people in families. He leads prisoners out of prison into productive lives (Ps. 68:6). Read Ps. 78:4-7.

- How does your family respond to Deut. 4:9 and 6:6-7?
- When God leads people out of prison as ex-offenders or as former addicts, why is the Body of Christ indispensable to their recovery?

Each individual family in Christ becomes part of a local body of believers, nourished and equipped by the ministry of apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor/teachers. Together, they attain maturity, recognize and reject deception, speak the truth in love and experience the growth of the body in numbers and in love. Read Eph. 4:11-16.

- Paul says that growth results when we are joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to

Those who belonged to the Early Church "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). In this way, the ancient world was turned upside down, and the good news of Jesus reached the nations. "And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47). When God calls His people to respond to His love for the world, He calls them to that mission as members of His Body, the Church.

- Discuss the pitfalls and weaknesses of isolated individualism in living the Christian faith.
- In what ways does being part of a living community of faith teach us how to follow Christ, and draw others to follow Him?

the effective working by which each part does its share. Discuss how even what the world would consider small, weak and unimportant is vital to Christ's mission.

- What are some key aspects of Christian mission that cannot be done by isolated individuals?

We have been drawn to faith in Christ, and the message of salvation continues to spread because of those who came before us, especially the prophets and apostles who spoke by the Holy Spirit. From them we learn the method of mission. Read 1 Peter 1:10-12.

- The prophets saw God's grace coming to us in the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. What happens when the Church sees other things as the driving force of mission?
- How can we rely on and acknowledge the Holy Spirit in the preaching of the Gospel?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

"Martin Leckebusch was born in Leicester in 1962; he studied Mathematics at Oxford University and Numerical Analysis at Brunel University. He and his wife, Jane, have four daughters; their second child, a son, died in 1995. The family live in Gloucester and belong to a Baptist church. Martin's work in hymnody over the past twenty-five years has resulted in almost 400 hymn texts... Martin is keen to

see the church equipped for Christian living, and believes that well-crafted and wisely-used contemporary hymns and songs have a vital role to play in that process" (kevinmayhew.com/info/contributors/martin-leckebusch.html).

Text

New parents quickly learn that children not only learn by repetition, but also that consistency matters a great deal.

They will become justifiably upset if even a small detail of a favorite story is altered or omitted. In much the same way, the Early Church was told to earnestly “contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). Patriarchs and prophets treasured and held fast these hopes and promises now fulfilled in Christ Jesus. The faithful apostles who were eyewitnesses of all Jesus said and did became bold missionaries of the resurrection.

- Even though we worship in different languages and with songs that earlier believers never heard, we have more in common than what divides. Discuss how the Catechism helps keep that connection alive and strong.
- See the lists of “Feasts and Festivals” and “Commemorations” in the front of *LSB* (pp. xi–xiii). How does remembering the saints assist us in our struggle to be faithful?

What does the average Christian know about the “intervening ages” (*LSB* 828:3)? We’ve heard about bad things such as the Inquisition and the Crusades. We’ve been told about all the sinful abuses and wickedness. But we’ve

Making the Connection

Even the lost recognize a universal human need for belonging to a group and the sense of security, protection and identity that comes with such associations. Only Christ and the members of His Body have the power to offer lasting change, healing and hope.

In Closing

We believe that the Holy Spirit “calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith” (*LSB*, p. 323). This is God’s plan for reaching the world with the good news of His love in Jesus!

- Read or sing aloud together *LSB* 828.

heard precious little about what the Holy Spirit was up to, with the possible exception of the Reformation of Martin Luther! A closer, more careful examination of Church history will reveal that the Gospel spread around the world by means of faithful preachers, guided by the Spirit. As a result the Church grew in stature, at its best serving the Lord who promised that the gates of hell would not prevail against His chosen ones.

- Certain faithful witnesses are familiar to us, for example, St. Patrick, because the culture has adopted them. Consider how your congregation could draw attention to various faithful witnesses of the Gospel several times a year with a mission festival.

Our final stanza calls us to carry on the task of truth-telling to “each coming generation.” It will take persistence, persuasion and explanation to convince them that this Jesus truly is the same yesterday, today and forever. He will come again, we will be united with all those who came before us and His reign will never end. There is no greater blessing, no more powerful motivation, no sweeter reward.

- Ask your pastor, if he hasn’t already done so, to develop a plan for memorizing and singing hymns.

Prayer

Almighty God, You have called Your Church to witness that in Christ You have reconciled us to Yourself. Grant that by Your Holy Spirit we may proclaim the good news of Your salvation so that all who hear it may receive the gift of salvation; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen (For the mission of the Church, *LSB*, p. 305).

O God of God, O Light of Light

Lutheran Service Book 810 | study by David R. Schmitt

Introduction

An artist once made a pair of banners that hung from the ceiling to the floor, framing a stone altar in the front of a church.

If you look at the banners from the back of the church, they look like two plain panels of red. As you move into the church, however, the vision changes. When you are about halfway down the aisle, you notice that the banners aren't plain at all but have words on them. Because the letters are the same color as the panels, at first you did not see them. About halfway down the aisle, however, you read the word "Alleluia." An altar framed with alleluias.

When you reach the front of the church, you see that the banners are not plain panels of cloth at all; they are a weaving together of various fabrics all the same color. Bits of felt are woven with burlap, satin with velvet, to make two large panels bearing the word "Alleluia." Finally, when you kneel at the Communion rail, you see a ribbon running through the banner, beginning at the top, moving to the bottom and returning to the top once again $\frac{3}{4}$ a ribbon of praise.

Exploring the Scriptures

In Revelation, the apostle John records a vision of heaven, where angels join their voices in song before the throne of God. Read Rev. 5:11–12.

- Why do the angels call Jesus the Lamb? Compare John 1:29 and Exodus 12.
- Why is this Lamb's death of such great value to the angels? See Luke 15:1–7.

Moving outward from this angelic song, we notice that it is part of a much larger event of singing, as one song leads into another and that song leads into yet another song. Read Rev. 5:6–10 and 13–14.

- Before the angels sing, the elders greet the presence of the risen Christ by remembering what He has done. What has Jesus done that the elders celebrate in song?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

John Julian (1839–1913), an Anglican priest, is best known not for his hymn writing but for his writing on hymns. During his lifetime, he published an extensive *Dictionary of Hymnology* that is still in use today. How

With these banners, an artist created a vision of the Church. From the world, the Church can often look like an ordinary gathering of people, a plain piece of fabric. But when you enter into the congregation and participate in worship, you begin to see what God has done. God has gathered people from all parts of the world and woven them together in His Son, Jesus Christ. These people hear a song of praise that begins in heaven, comes to earth, where they join their voices, and then returns to heaven once again.

What this artist did with fabric, this hymn does with words and music. It brings to our lips a song of heaven and teaches us to join the angels in praise.

- When artists paint visions of heaven, they usually picture angels singing. Why?
- When you think about the content of our singing in worship, could the angels join us in song? Why or why not?

- After the angels sing, all of creation joins the song of praise. Who does John tell us is singing, and how does that help us understand the extent of Jesus' rule?
- How does this give deeper meaning to those times in worship when we sing "This Is the Feast"?

In John's vision, all creation joins in one eternal song, praising God for His saving work in Jesus, the one whose death and resurrection save us from our sin. Until the return of Christ, however, this contagious song is not being fully sung on earth. Read Rom. 8:18–25 to see how the apostle Paul describes creation's current song.

- What is the sound one hears from creation?
- Why is creation groaning rather than singing?

fitting then that the one hymn by Julian in *LSB* is a hymn about singing.

Julian wrote this hymn for the Sheffield Church Choirs Union Festival on April 16, 1883.

- What are some reasons churches have choir festivals?

- What are some reasons people go to these festivals?
- What reasons does Julian's hymn offer for holding and participating in a choir festival?

The choir festival for which Julian wrote this hymn was held on the Monday following the Fourth Sunday of Easter.

- How does Julian's hymn relate to the Church's celebration of Easter?
- How does Julian's hymn look forward to the Church's upcoming celebration of the Ascension?

Text

Like the artist's banner, Julian's hymn begins with a song of praise sung eternally ("forever rings") in heaven (st. 1). As you read the first stanza, notice how the words shift from describing something that happens in heaven ("The song of praise forever rings") to inviting something to happen on earth ("To Him ... Be all the glory ... All thanks and praise!").

- What is the primary reason the angels give such praise to Jesus (see line 6)?
- How do we join them in giving glory, thanks and praise to Jesus Christ in worship? In the world?

In the second stanza, this angelic song enters into the fallen world. The hymn contrasts the long period of prophetic

waiting with the sudden appearance of the angels teaching the shepherds to sing at the birth of Christ.

- How did Gen. 3:15 begin a long period of waiting for our "coming Lord"?
- The angels are messengers of God, bringing the good news of salvation to the shepherds. How did hearing that message make the shepherds messengers as well (see Luke 2:8-20)?

In the third stanza, the hymn teaches us to be messengers of the Good News as we sing of salvation in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ.

- Compare the first four lines of this stanza with the earliest Christian preaching of the Good News in Acts 2:22-24 and 32-33. How is preaching part of the Church's song of praise?
- The stanza closes with a moment of anxious anticipation ("Lift up your heads") sung by angels and humans. What do we await (see Rev. 21:1-8)?

In the fourth stanza, this heavenly song now rises from earth and returns to heaven, so that human voices join angelic choirs in a song of praise that never ends.

- How have you participated in that song this past week? Today?

Making the Connection

This hymn is appointed for the Church's celebration of St. Luke, the Evangelist. Luke records many of the songs of praise that people sang when God worked salvation in Jesus Christ in their midst. Those songs of praise are now included in our services of worship (the Magnificat, the Gloria in Excelsis, the Benedictus and the Nunc Dimittis)

and become our song as we praise God for what He is doing in Christ among us today.

- Read the Nunc Dimittis (Luke 2:29-32) and share with one another a phrase from Simeon's song that expresses your praise to God for what He has done for you and for others in the Lord's Supper.

In Closing

While your congregation may not have the banner described in the opening of this study, you do have the work of faithful artists who have listened to the songs of angels and put the story of our world's salvation in Jesus Christ into words for you to sing on earth. As the angels taught the shepherds to join in heaven's praise (Luke 2:13-14, 20), so too our hymns now teach us to join the angels as we raise our voices and sing back to heaven what has first been given to us.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 810.

Prayer

God of majesty, whom saints and angels delight to worship in heaven, be with Your servants who make art and music for Your people that with joy we on earth may glimpse Your beauty. Bring us to the fulfillment of that hope of perfection that will be ours as we stand before Your unveiled glory; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen (For church musicians and artists, *LSB*, p. 307).

From Depths of Woe I Cry to Thee

Lutheran Service Book 607 | study by Randall P. Wurschmidt

Introduction

Here's what Lutherans teach about Confession in the Small Catechism: "Confession has two parts. First, that we confess our sins, and second, that we receive absolution, that is, forgiveness, from the pastor as from God Himself, not doubting, but firmly believing that by it our sins are forgiven before God in heaven" (*LSB*, p. 326). In a nutshell, this is exactly what we sing in Martin Luther's hymn "From Depths of Woe." Whether you say it together as a

congregation at the beginning of the Divine Service, or individually with your pastor, Confession and Absolution has been an integral part of Lutheran piety since the earliest days of the Reformation.

- Why is it important that we confess our sins first, before hearing the words of absolution?
- What would be the advantage of private Confession and Absolution?

Exploring the Scriptures

This hymn is based on Psalm 130, one of the seven penitential psalms (see also Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102 and 143). Read Psalm 130. The image is one of drowning in sin, being totally overwhelmed by the "depths."

- What is the confession in verse 3?
- What is the promise in verse 4?

Along with the cry for mercy, the psalmist also requests that the Lord hear his prayer. See Ps. 143:1–2 for a similar pattern. God promises to hear the prayers of the faithful (1 John 5:14). And He promises to hear our confession and forgive our sin (1 John 1:9). Read 1 John 1:5–10.

- Is anyone without sin? According to verse 7, what cleanses us from all sin?

Scripture makes it clear that our own efforts do not save us. Only the blood of Jesus Christ atones for our sins and

redeems us. St. Paul reminds us of this in passages such as Eph. 2:8–9. We do not deserve the mercy that God shows us in the forgiveness of sins; but He graciously provides it out of love.

- Can God's grace be understood apart from forgiveness? Why or why not?
- Do we have any part in meriting that grace?

God wants us to recognize our sin and our total dependence on Him for salvation. He wants us to turn away from those things that bring only death and return to Him who is life. It is His nature to forgive. Divine Services One and Two include an optional Lenten verse to be sung before the Gospel: "Return to the Lord, your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love" (*LSB*, pp. 157, 173). Read Joel 2:12–14.

- What does it mean to "rend your hearts"?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

This was one of the first hymns of Martin Luther (1483–1546), written in 1523 as an example, which he hoped other poets, theologians and musicians would follow. He wanted to provide congregations with something they could sing in their own language during the service, something that would help people to learn the main articles of faith and that would be memorable. Luther felt that it was essential that hymns teach the faith, and this hymn is one of several that are associated with the six chief parts of the Small Catechism. *Lutheran Service Book* preserves this identification by including it in the section marked "Confession and Absolution." The hymn became one of Luther's own favorites and was even sung at his funeral in 1546.

- Can you think of examples of other hymns that have helped you to learn the teachings of the Christian faith?
- Thumb through the hymnal and see if you can identify all the chief parts by the headings.

Interestingly, Luther — who was a very good musician — also composed the tune for this hymn; it features a bit of text painting in the opening line. When we sing the words "From depths of woe," the word "depths" falls in pitch, musically depicting the singer's plight as he recognizes the depths of his own sinfulness.

- A text and its tune should fit well together, as this one does. What might be the consequences if a tune and text

were out of character with each other? (If you wish to try a famous example, sing the words of “Amazing Grace” to the tune of “Gilligan’s Island.”)

Text

The first stanza follows the first three verses of the psalm rather closely. The singer pleads for mercy from the depths of despair caused by the knowledge of sin. If God remembered every sin, we would be lost for sure. Who could stand in His presence?

- According to stanza 2, what instead do we rely on?

“Therefore my hope is in the Lord,” we sing in stanza 3, resting in the faithful Word and not in our own merit.

- To whom is the promise of mercy explicitly made?

Making the Connection

The Divine Service begins with a confession of sins. The Confession and Absolution in Divine Service, Setting Four (p. 203), even includes words from Psalm 130. Whenever Lutherans gather together in worship, the forgiveness of sins is central to that gathering. Whether at Baptism or in the remembrance of Baptism, we recall the life-giving water, which is “a lavish washing away of sin” (*LSB*, p. 269). And in the Lord’s Supper, the body and blood are given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. Luther writes in the Small Catechism, “For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation” (*LSB*, p. 327).

In Closing

Without forgiveness, there is no life and there is no salvation. What a wretched existence that would be! But we do not live in fear of eternal damnation when we believe that Christ overcame sin and death for us. Therefore, although we are still by nature sinful and will continue to sin throughout this life, we rejoice in the forgiveness won for us on the cross. It is not necessary to sing this hymn with gloomy and disfigured faces. Rather, we can sing it with sincere confidence that God’s abundant favor is still greater than our greatest sins.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 607.

The hymn progresses the same way that the psalm progresses: first, a confession of sin and an appeal to the Lord for mercy (sts. 1 and 2); then forgiveness and trust in God’s Word (sts. 3 and 4); finally an appeal for patience on the part of Israel.

- In the fourth and fifth stanzas, we sing about “Israel.” Who is meant here?

Although Jesus’ name is never explicitly used in this hymn, we are never in doubt as to the identity of the Savior. He is “Our shepherd good and true” (st. 5). He is the one who sets His people free “From all their sin and sorrow” (st. 5).

- Could this hymn be sung to anyone but the Triune God of Christianity?

Even repentance is God’s work. The Holy Spirit works in us when we hear the Word of God, and through the means of grace. By faith we are brought to repentance and confess our sins; by grace we are saved through the blood of Christ.

- Name some other places in the liturgy of the Divine Service (or in any service) where the forgiveness of sins is explicit.
- How does making the sign of the cross also remind us of forgiveness in Christ?

Prayer

Almighty and everlasting God, You despise nothing You have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent. Create in us new and contrite hearts that lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness we may receive from You full pardon and forgiveness; 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 Ash Wednesday).

Praise the Almighty

Lutheran Service Book 797 | study by Bernard J. Schey

Introduction

In recent years, many churches have popularized anthems for worship known as “praise songs.” Actually, one would be hard pressed to find a hymn worth the name that *isn't* a “praise song.” A good hymn to Christ is not only filled with happy thoughts; the reality of sin and death are featured in them as well, along with the grand victory of the cross of Jesus.

- Do our souls always praise the Lord God? Do we praise Him for *all* things? How do we know that our praises are acceptable to Him? See Rom. 8:26–30; Heb. 10:19–25.
- What is the relationship of text/words to melody in a hymn? Could some hymns be better matched when their words and tune are compared?

Exploring the Scriptures

The last five psalms in the Book of Psalms each begin with the Hebrew word “Hallelujah!” (meaning “Praise the Lord!”). Hence, they are called the “Final Hallel” psalms. This hymn, “Praise the Almighty,” is a loose paraphrase of Psalm 146, the first of that group of five psalms.

If we take political campaigns too seriously, we might begin to believe that electing just the right candidates

will bring about a golden age of purity, wealth, peace and well-being. However, verses 3 and 4 of Psalm 146 put that idea out of reach. But grand assurances are given to those who cannot well defend or even speak for themselves. See verses 7–9.

- Which sorts of people are included in that group in our own day and time?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Johann Daniel Herrnschmidt (1675–1723) came from a small town in southwestern Germany and spent time there as a parish pastor. He concluded his career as a professor at the University of Halle, the center of the Pietist Movement among German Lutherans. This school of thought began over concern that people weren't being taught or encouraged to lead a devout, Christlike life. While this inconsistency is a concern of every child of God in any age (Romans 7), the Pietists sought to address it wrongly when they tried to motivate by means of the Law rather than the Gospel. Yet the Pietists had their strengths, and this hymn is an example of a zealous song of praise from the sincere heart of a teacher and pastor.

- When any one of us is prompted to write down a prayer or song of praise, even a few words long, is that a valid confession of faith? Why must the Scriptures be our guide in such confessions or prayers?

Text

Our prayer as Christians for steadfastness in faith to the point of death is expressed clearly in the first stanza of this hymn. See Ps. 104:33–34.

- Will the song of faith always sound beautiful to the ear, that is to say, hit the right notes and always be on key?

In stanza 2, we are reminded again of the limited nature of earthly help. Certainly God has established governments and other authorities for our benefit and protection (Romans 13), but they all must yield to Christ when it comes time to answer concerns over eternal life.

- How does Jesus teach that the powers of this world have clear limits? See John 18:35–38; 19:10–11.

Stanza 3 encourages us to trust above all things in God, who alone can keep us in faith in Him until our lives end, and who will let none of His children slip away. See John 10:27–30.

- Jesus fulfilled Psalm 1 perfectly, and how do we now follow in His steps in the words of this, the first of the 150 psalms?

The poor in spirit (Matt. 5:3) are those who know their sin all too well, and cry for mercy from God Himself. They cry for mercy, and God Himself answers them with the assurance of the cross and resurrection of Jesus (Gal. 6:14). Stanza 4 addresses this desperate need.

- How is it that widows and the fatherless need this assurance in a way unknown to those who have not been widowed or orphaned?

Herrnschmidt concludes the hymn with a fifth stanza done in a doxological (“glory words”) mode. The final address of praise is to the three persons of the blessed Trinity. Just as the psalmist ends Psalm 146 with a final “Hallelujah!” so does the hymn writer exhort the singers to join “with angels

and archangels and with all the company of heaven” (*TLH*, p. 25) in praising and glorifying the one true God.

- In Rev. 5:11–14, the final word is “Amen!” How can we express our agreement and unity with this word that means “Let it be so!”?

Making the Connection

This grand hymn of praise calls us to laud and magnify the Lord’s name not just when we are in a happy and jubilant mood, but also when we are indifferent to thoughts of praise, or even when we are crushed by the effects of sin in this world.

- “Yes, I will laud Him until death” (st. 1) truly seems to include every chapter of life! Can you think of times

when, though shattered with grief, you’ve been called to sing to Christ — even through tears?

- “Penitent sinners, for mercy crying, / Pardon and peace from Him obtain” (st. 4). How does this hymn teach us that our greatest need is for reconciliation and forgiveness in Christ Jesus, our Lord?

In Closing

Never forget that every hymn worth the name is a hymn of praise. Whether or not the tune is “happy” or “sad,” if the tempo is “upbeat” or not, the name of God is to be praised for the fact that He has rescued us from our sins. The God of Jacob (Ps. 146:5) has promised to hear us and to rescue us.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 797.

Prayer

O Lord, let Your merciful ears be open to the prayers of Your humble servants and grant that what they ask may be in accord with Your gracious will; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Proper 18B).

O Christ, Who Called the Twelve

Lutheran Service Book 856 | study by Paul F. Becker

Introduction

Cyril of Alexandria (c. 375–444) said this about the twelve apostles: “These holy men became the pillar and mainstay of the truth, and Jesus said that he was sending them just as the Father had sent him... . [I]n affirming that they are sent by him just as he was sent by the Father, Christ sums up in a few words the approach they themselves should take to their ministry. From what he said they would gather that it was their vocation to call sinners to repentance, to heal those who were sick whether in body or spirit, to seek in all their dealings never to do their own will but the will of him who sent them, and as far as possible to save the world by their teaching. Surely it is in all these respects that we find his holy disciples striving to excel. To ascertain this is no

great labor, a single reading of the Acts of the Apostles or of St. Paul’s writings is enough” (*Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, crossroadsinitiative.com/media/articles/mission-of-the-12-apostles-st-cyril-of-alexandria/).

Our hymn rehearses for us why Christ selected these twelve men to be His apostles, while challenging us to realize that a similar call has come to every believer.

- Discuss the various vocations of the Twelve before their call. Was there anything in their life before Christ that prepared or qualified them for their new work?
- If we also are being sent into the world as the Father sent Jesus, what sort of activities would characterize the life of the Church?

Exploring the Scriptures

At different times, the Lord Jesus sent His disciples out two by two: the twelve apostles (Matt. 10:1–15; Mark 6:7–13; Luke 9:1–6) and the seventy-two (Luke 10:1–12). His instructions fall into three broad categories: proclamation and signs of the kingdom, being prepared for persecutions and the exclusivity of answering Christ’s call.

Read Matt. 10:5–15.

- How did the apostles mirror Jesus’ compassion for the multitudes who “were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matt. 9:36)?
- How were the apostles’ needs provided for, and what were they to expect in return for their ministry?
- What indicates the necessity for a radical dependence on the person and power of Jesus?

Read Matt. 10:16–31.

- Why does persecution come to Jesus’ disciples, and what promises does He give to those who suffer for His name?
- What opportunities for the Gospel arise from times of persecution?

Read Matt. 10:32–42.

- What must Christians be willing to lose? What will they gain in return?
- Discuss how believers might either confess or deny their relationship with Christ in their daily vocation.

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Herman G. Stuempfle (1923–2007) grew up in a Lutheran parsonage and served both as a parish pastor, author, seminary president and teacher of preaching. But his lifelong love of hymns blossomed creatively only in his later years. He thought of writing hymn texts as another way to proclaim the Good News, and said that his texts were “triggered by such-and-such a passage of Scripture.”

- After a lifetime of parish ministry, teaching and administration, becoming one of the great hymn writers of his time must have come as a bit of a surprise. How has God filled the later years of someone you know with unexpected blessings?

Stuempfle is among the most honored and respected hymn writers of the twentieth century. His collections are entitled *The Word Goes Forth: Hymns, Songs, and Carols* (1993),

Redeeming the Time: A Cycle of Song for the Christian Year (1997), *Awake Our Hearts to Praise: Hymns, Songs, and Carols* (2000), and *Wondrous Love Has Called Us* (2006). He has written an estimated 550 texts, more than half of them already published, including 15 in *LSB*.

- As you ponder the titles of his hymn collections, what theological themes can you deduce were of significance to Stuempfle?

Text

Stanzas 1–4 divide equally into a reminder of how Christ worked with His Twelve, and a request that He would work in much the same way with us:

1. Christ, who *called* — Grant us to *hear*
2. Christ, who *taught* — *Instruct* us now
3. Christ, who *led* — *Lead* us along the ways
4. Christ, who *sent* — *Send* us

For the Twelve, following Christ brings “ventures bold and new” (st. 1) in which they see “The ways of God revealed” (st. 2); ways that include miraculous feeding of multitudes but also proclaim God’s reign as they serve, suffer and teach “On roads they’d never trod” (st. 4).

Read Acts 5:17–20; 12:1–11.

Making the Connection

The hymn makes a strong connection in the final stanza between the Twelve and the saints and martyrs of every generation who share “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:5–6).

In Closing

“How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news, who publish peace and bring good news of salvation” (Gradual for St. Simon and St. Jude, Apostles). By God’s grace, we also confess the faith of the Twelve: “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen” (*LSB*, p. 323).

- Read aloud or sing together *LSB* 856.

- Imprisoned by both religious and secular rulers, the apostles experienced supernatural protection. How did this strategy of the evil one “backfire”?

Modern-day believers soon discover they are not exempt from the call “To risk security” (st. 1). The tragic wounds of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries “Lead us along the ways / Where hope has nearly died” (st. 3). These wounds can only be healed by going to the cross on that lonely hill “Where love is crucified” (st. 3). And yet, as another apostle wrote, “now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13:13). These three have power to transcend timidity and sustain “Both life and ministry” (st. 4).

Read Rev. 7:13–17.

- The apostles speak of times of trials, testing by fire and great tribulation as something all believers share. Describe the promise that sustains us through these difficulties.

Read Eph. 2:19–22; Rev. 21:14.

- How does the apostolic foundation help explain the mystery not only of the Church’s survival despite persecution, but her spread to all tribes and nations, peoples and tongues?

- Name two or three things you share in common with saints of every generation that remind you that you belong to the crucified and risen King.

- Even though it is traditionally held that only one of the Twelve, St. John, died of natural causes in old age, what unique difference in their lives and their deaths continues to inspire us today?

Prayer

Almighty God, You chose Your servants Simon and Jude to be numbered among the glorious company of the apostles. As they were faithful and zealous in their mission, so may we with ardent devotion make known the love and mercy of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for St. Simon and St. Jude, Apostles).

Salvation unto Us Has Come

Lutheran Service Book 555 | study by Christopher I. Thoma

Introduction

If you take a test and fail it because you didn't study, do you deserve an A? If you studied all week and memorized all of the necessary information and answered all of the questions correctly on the test, do you deserve an A? These are not difficult questions to answer because it is natural for man to play by the rule that says quite simply, "You get what you deserve."

Today's hymn, like the Gospel theme it supports, gets this rule a little mixed up. In fact, it turns it around completely.

- What do you believe to be the focus of the hymn?

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?

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?

- In your opinion, what is a "good work"? Read Article IV of the Augsburg Confession: Our churches teach that people cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works. People are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake. By His death, Christ made satisfaction for our sins. God counts this faith for righteousness in His sight (Romans 3 and 4 [3:21–26; 4:5]). (AC IV)
- What light does this quotation shed on your understanding of good works in the Christian life?

- 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?

Text

The language and tune of this hymn are borne along with what is seemingly a sigh of blissful relief. There is so much joy, it appears that Speratus cannot stop writing stanzas, and so we are given a hymn with ten stanzas of great substance. Let's consider a few of these stanzas.

Stanza 1 does a wonderful job of telling the reader the purpose of the joyful hymn to follow. Stanzas 2–4 drop us into the dirty reality of the Law's requirement, our sinful condition and our helpless standing against it.

- According to stanza 1, for whom did Christ die?
- Who else might have been considered as an advocate and/or redeemer (which is contrary to the Christian faith) by the people and Church of Speratus' time? Which statements in stanza 1 make Christ's role in the Church abundantly clear?
- What is the stance of stanza 2 toward those who would seek to purify themselves by monastic living? Describe

in your own words the burden of the Law to sinners (particularly those who believe they must do good works to get to heaven). Is there certainty of salvation in this?

- Read Rom. 3:10–20. How does this text shed light on stanzas 2–4?

Stanza 5 is a significant turning point in the text of the hymn, setting the stage for the Christian to sing the remaining stanzas with confidence and certainty.

- Who is the focus of stanzas 2–4? Who is absent in stanzas 2–4 and introduced as the focal point in stanza 5?
- With this introduction, how is the direction of the hymn changed? The spirit of its tune? Christian certainty?

The remaining stanzas (6–10) reintroduce the Church to familiar terms.

Making the Connection

Reflect on the parable in Matt. 20:1–16. Perhaps we often grumble to the Lord as the workers grumbled to the landowner.

In Closing

“Salvation unto Us Has Come” seeks to reveal a right understanding of God’s Law, and it refreshes and strengthens the sin- and guilt-wearied heart with the Gospel. Ultimately, it reveals that this Gospel message truly is “foolishness” and a “stumbling block” as it flies in the face of the human understanding that “you get what you deserve.”

By Christ’s life, death and resurrection we are spared from what we deserve. In fact, the Innocent pays for the guilty, and the guilty are declared free. By the power of the Holy Spirit through the Gospel, faith and the merits of Christ’s innocence are given to us. What a joyful declaration of justification for the believing heart, a heart now strengthened to cling to the Lord and not to self.

- Read again the text of Eph. 2:8–10. What ancient and yet radically new theology is presented here?
- Consider the following terms in the remaining stanzas: atonement, baptized, ransom, the cross, trust, peace, justify. How does “saved by grace through faith in Christ” theology change their substance? (For example, Baptism as taught in the Roman Catholic Church removes only original sin. Actual sin remains.)
- Look for and discuss other words.

The hymn ends with a trinitarian conclusion.

- Consider the First through Third Articles of the Apostles’ Creed and their meanings in the Small Catechism (*LSB*, pp. 322–23). In his explanations, how does Luther make clear God’s redemptive plan in Christ?
- Read John 14:8–11, 23–28, and 15:26. How do these texts reflect upon not only stanza 10 but the entire hymn?

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

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 555.

Prayer

Lord God, heavenly Father, since we cannot stand before You relying on anything we have done, help us trust in Your abiding grace and live according to Your Word; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Proper 20A).

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.”

Exploring the Scriptures

Luther’s famous hymn is inspired by the words of Psalm 46 and the comfort Luther himself found in this psalm. Read Ps. 46:1–3.

- In the opening verse, the writer states his confidence. What do you think is the basis for his confidence? If your answer is “experience,” what sorts of experiences might they have been? If your answer is “faith,” what is the source of such faith?
- Verses 2–3 use parallel thoughts to emphasize a major point. If the writer has events in Israel’s history in mind, what might some of them be? Although written long before the New Testament era, what are some events in the Gospels or in Acts in which these words of Psalm 46 could come to mind?

Read Ps. 46:4–7.

- Jerusalem, Israel’s capitol and the site of the temple, had springs of water supplying the city but no river flowing through it. What could the writer have in mind with verse 4? The prophets wrote of such a stream in

Exploring the Hymn

Background

While Luther’s hymn has been employed in triumphal ways — the Swedish Lutheran king Gustavus Adolphus made his army sing this hymn before the Battle of Leipzig in 1631; the nineteenth-century German literary figure Heinrich Heine (1797–1856) called it the Marseillaise of the Reformation — Luther himself called it a hymn of comfort. In the period 1527–31, when the hymn began to appear in a number of hymnals, Luther was surrounded by troubles. In 1527, ten years had passed since Luther posted his “Ninety-Five Theses” in Wittenberg. During this time and after he

Luther’s own hymn, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” has captured these very sentiments over the five centuries since he wrote the text and composed the tune.

- What are some of the feelings you have known when you sing this hymn? How do the text and music together contribute to these feelings?
- Describe the image that comes to mind when you think of the word “fortress” in this hymn.

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?

was buffeted by theological and political storms. His own life was in danger from the empire, from Rome and from outbreaks of the plague. The darkness of depression often closed in on him.

- What are some major cataclysms of the present day that could send a person to seek the comfort expressed in Luther’s hymn?
- What sort of personal troubles — physical, emotional, spiritual — could also find comfort in this hymn?

Whenever Luther's world would "roar and foam" like the waters in Ps. 46:3, he would invite his friends to join him in singing this hymn. In 1530 at Coburg, awaiting the outcome of the Diet of Augsburg, Luther sang his hymn often, perhaps daily.

- What is the comfort in the phrase, "He's by our side" (*LSB* 656:4)?
- Luther mentions "weapons of the Spirit" (*LSB* 657:4). What might these be?
- What phrases in the hymn are helpful when a person's troubles are of long duration, or an end to them is not in sight?
- What difference does it make, do you think, singing the hymn rather than simply reading the text?

Text

While Luther found inspiration for his hymn in the words of Psalm 46, he did not confine himself to that text alone. Read Rev. 19:11–16, where St. John sees a vision of a conquering rider on a white horse, who "in righteousness ... judges and makes war" (v. 11).

- According to stanza 2 of the hymn, who is this rider?
- What other clues to the rider's identity do you find in Rev. 19:11–16?
- Although the imagery of warfare is violent in this text, how does the rider's identity interpret that violence?
Hint: think about the crucifixion of Jesus.

Making the Connection

In the preface to the Wittenberg edition of his writings, Luther wrote, "I want to point out to you a correct way of studying theology, for I have had practice in that... This is the way taught by holy King David ... in the one hundred nineteenth Psalm. There you will find three rules, amply presented throughout the whole Psalm. They are *Oratio* [prayer], *Meditatio* [meditation], *Tentatio* [affliction, trial]" (AE 34:285).

- In what ways is Luther's hymn a prayer? What is it asking? What hope does it express?

In Closing

As Luther said in his hymnal preface for Klug's *Geistliche Lieder*, where people of faith sing hymns there is joy, "All evil passions vanish soon" and hearts are stilled and open to God's Word.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 656 or 657.

Read Eph. 6:10–17. In this epistle, St. Paul uses the imagery of a Roman soldier.

- How is such imagery helpful and comforting?
- How can military imagery be misused within the Church?

For Martin Luther, the devil was no fictitious figure, but very real and troublesome. Read stanza 3 of the hymn.

- How is the devil portrayed?
- Luther writes in *LSB* 656:3, "This world's prince may still / Scowl fierce as he will." What do you think Luther means by "still"? Jesus' crucifixion is judgment upon Satan. What does this mean for us who live in the world?

Read Rom. 8:31–39. St. Paul's answer to his list of questions is verse 37: "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."

- As the Small Catechism asks, what does this mean?
- Is this an answer based upon experience or on faith?
- Must a Christian have experiences similar to those listed by the apostle in this passage to express the same confidence? Why? Why not?
- If "the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (v. 39) does not eliminate all of our troubles, what does it do? What sort of fortress does this make of God?

- Luther sang this hymn often. What is gained by the repetition? Does singing the text make a difference for meditation?
- Do you think Martin Luther would have expressed the confidence of the Gospel as boldly and forcefully as he did if he had not endured the troubles he faced? How have your own troubles thrown you back onto the promises of God in Christ?

Prayer

Almighty and gracious Lord, pour out Your Holy Spirit on Your faithful people. Keep us steadfast in Your grace and truth, protect and deliver us in times of temptation, defend us against all enemies, and grant to Your Church Your saving peace; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Reformation Day).

Chief of Sinners Though I Be

Lutheran Service Book 611 | study by Aaron A. Koch

Introduction

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

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

faith. For only those who know themselves to be wretched sinners will trust completely and wholeheartedly in Christ as their Savior. He even rescues the worst of sinners from the judgment that we deserve by His all-atoning death on the cross.

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

Exploring the Scriptures

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

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

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

Exploring the Hymn

Background

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

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

Text

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

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

Stanza 2 sings in praise of Jesus' love and how that love is everything for the Christian. “Oh, the height of Jesus'

love ... ! / Love that found me — wondrous thought!” Read Ps. 103:11, 17 and 1 John 4:10.

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

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

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

Making the Connection

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

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

In Closing

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

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 611.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Prayer

Almighty God, You turned the heart of him who persecuted the Church and by his preaching caused the light of the Gospel to shine throughout the world. Grant us ever to rejoice in the saving light of Your Gospel and, following the example of the apostle Paul, to spread it to the ends of the earth; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for the Conversion of St. Paul).

Who Trusts in God a Strong Abode

Lutheran Service Book 714 | study by Larry A. Peters

Introduction

This hymn's author, Joachim Magdeburg, was born in 1525, during the turmoil of the Reformation. "Who Trusts in God a Strong Abode" exemplifies the joyful faith in Christ that sees beyond what earthly eyes, so easily blinded by disappointment, persecution and trouble, see. The hymn may not be widely sung today but it ought to be. Its text is a profound call to the wounded, distressed and weary to trust in

God for hope in the face of disappointment, comfort amid trial, a shield against foes, a balm for woes and certainty in uncertain times.

- Why do you suppose troubled lives produce such eloquent hymns of hope and comfort?
- Where in Scripture can you find the voice of lament coupled with confidence in God's presence and power?

Exploring the Scriptures

The Lessons appointed for Trinity 23 all deal with aspects of certainty and assurance in the face of challenge, trial and struggle. Read Prov. 8:11–22 (especially vv. 17 and 21).

- The Lord promises to us Himself and the inheritance He has prepared for us. How do we know this when our lives show little evidence of His blessing (using an earthly definition of blessing)?

To the Philippians, St. Paul writes, "our citizenship is in heaven" (3:20). He challenges those whose god is their belly and whose minds are set upon and satisfied only with earthly things (3:18–19). Christians desire and require the same needs of body and life as everyone else.

- How do we live in confidence of God's provision when our lives are constantly tested by want, need, and struggle?
- How do we live — acknowledging the needs of this mortal life — without letting these define who God is and whether or not God's favor rests upon us?

- How do we live so that we do not depend upon outward physical blessings as confirmation of our salvation?

In Matt. 22:15–22, we hear the familiar story of Jesus being tested by the Pharisees. His punch line for the day was "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." How easy it is for us to immediately jump this focus to what we owe the government and leaders. Today we try to consider instead the second part of that statement — rendering to God what belongs to God.

- What belongs to God? We are told we are not our own but were bought with a price (1 Cor. 6:19–20). We were bought with a price, we belong to Him. Could Jesus be calling us to offer ourselves fully and completely to Him who died that we might live?
- What does God expect from us? That we believe in Jesus Christ and trust Him with all our heart, mind, body and strength?
- We are reminded in Ps. 115:9 to trust the Lord, our help and shield. How difficult is this to do?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Joachim Magdeburg (c. 1525–c. 1587) came through the University of Wittenberg near the end of Luther's life. After Luther died the fragile unity of the reformers was wracked with division. The author experienced this personally. This is his sole surviving hymn. Originally it was only one stanza. Its text has much in common with Luther's "A Mighty Fortress." It is a battle song with words that sing comfort to those who face persecution and strife in their daily lives.

The text of the hymn draws upon many Scriptures but especially the Psalms. There we find struggles against doubt, fear, evil, wickedness and the devil vividly described, along

with a vibrant expression of hope and steadfast confidence in God's presence, protection and providence to sustain and vindicate those who put their trust in Him.

Read Psalms 73, 46, 9, 25, 27, 18.

- What are the recurring themes you find therein?
- How are they addressed in the text of this hymn?
- Do you experience tests, trials and dead ends in life?
- How does the Christian cope with and where does the Christian find comfort and strength for such times?
- Who is our comfort?

Notice how the author presumes spiritual enemies, the presence of the devil and spiritual struggles.

- As you look at the “modern” world, do you see spiritual as well as mortal enemies?
- Do you see evidence of Satan and his evil works and ways around you?
- List some of the enemies identified in this hymn; then list the comforts, promises and assurances God has given us against such enemies (also from the hymn).

Text

This hymn shares the vivid language of Luther’s Battle Hymn of the Reformation, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.”

- Compare 714:1 with the text of “A Mighty Fortress.” What do they have in common? How are they different?
- Read 714:2 and note how it reminds you of one of the greatest passages of comfort (Psalm 23).
- What words of this stanza remind you of Rom. 8:38–39?
- Can God keep us safe? Will He keep us safe? What can separate us from the Lord and the power of His love?

Some have suggested that the greatest quest of this mortal life is the pursuit of certainty or assurance. This is true when nothing changes (and things don’t get better) and when everything changes (and things get worse).

Making the Connection

This hymn is filled with encouragement. It vividly addresses our hope and consolation. It challenges us to look past what our eyes see to behold by faith God’s presence and promise — even amid afflictions, persecution, disappointment and fear.

- Do we access hope and consolation where the Word of God speaks and the Sacraments administer these gifts?

In Closing

Luther tells us with confidence, “God tempts no one” (*LSB*, p. 324), but that does not mean the devil, the world and our flesh do not tempt us. They do. Every day brings its challenges to our faith. With the disciples of old we pray, “I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24). Bitterness and skepticism are common responses to the struggles of Christian life. Christ is with us. All our enemies have been put under His feet. Though our mortal eyes do not see it, His victory is already won.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 714.

- Is certainty still an issue? Where do we get it?
- Will we endure the assaults of the enemy, the weakness of this mortal flesh and the allure of the world?
- Will we merely endure or will God refresh us for the battles we face and give us victory?

One of the often-cited differences between our lives today and the lives of the saints of old is that we tend to expect better health, more happiness, more earthly pleasures and less trouble from life.

- Is this a fair comparison between then and now?
- Should we expect more from this life and depend less upon eternal life for comfort? Or is it the other way around?

Many have noted that the greatest longings for hope and eternal life tend to come from those who face the greatest struggles, sacrifices and sorrows today. Think of how the circumstances of slavery in America produced the spirituals and songs of eternal hope.

- Read the hymn again. Is the hope of standing in God’s presence through Jesus’ saving merits the center of our hope or merely one aspect of that hope?
- Does the promise of heaven and eternal life mean as much to us today as it did to the hymn’s author?

- Often we are tempted to think of God as angry. “Though Satan’s wrath / Beset our path” (st. 2). Is Satan angry? Why? Has Christ’s victory made him angry?
- “O God, renew / With heav’nly dew” (st. 3). What is this heavenly dew and where do we find it?

Prayer

O Lord, absolve Your people from their offenses that from the bonds of our sins, which by reason of our frailty we have brought upon ourselves, we may be delivered by Your bountiful goodness; 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-Third Sunday after Trinity).

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 William How became known as the “children’s bishop.” This title of endearment reflected his great love and attention shown to an often overlooked group of God’s kingdom. His published works include sermons, poetic verse and a still-used volume on Holy Communion. How’s most well-known work, though, is the hymn “For All the Saints.”

- If you were to write a hymn about saints, what important points would you need to include? Which particular Bible passage would you want to use as the hymn’s foundation?

Originally this hymn was eleven stanzas long, but the three stanzas that reflected the ancient *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

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?

Church Triumphant, which is comprised of the saints now gathered into heaven, and the Church Militant, the saints still fighting here on earth.

Text

Though at first glance this hymn seems to begin with the saints of God, careful observation shows the hymn writer rightly begins by addressing the first two stanzas to the Lord Jesus.

- What comfort do you look forward to in enjoying rest from your labors? See Rev. 21:1–4 for a fuller description of rest.
- In stanza 2 Jesus is called “captain.” Read 1 Tim. 6:12. What is the battle about? See Eph. 2:1–3 for a description of the enemy. Why is it necessary to have Jesus as your captain?

Stanzas 3 and 4 turn our focus from the saints who have gone before us to the saints here on earth, and it is among the earthly saints that we are included.

- What caution do we need to keep when considering “the victor’s crown of gold”? Consider what Paul writes in 2 Tim. 2:1–5.
- Why do we “feebly struggle”? In what ways do you need help? Turn to Is. 35:3–4 and rejoice in God’s promises to you.

Stanza 5 speaks of the earthly fight of faith as “fierce” and “the warfare” as “long.”

- What makes you weary as you follow your captain, Jesus?

- What are the things of God that embolden and strengthen the saints here on earth? On what basis can St. Paul say what he does in 2 Tim. 4:7?

Stanzas 6–8 draw our eyes to the same rest that began the hymn. The setting of the sun on the lives of those who have died in Jesus is contrasted with the rising of the dead, the resurrection to come, all following the “King of Glory.” Finally, in stanza 8, the “countless host” of heaven are seen gathered around the Triune God.

- What is it about “the calm of paradise” (st. 6) that appeals to you most?

Making the Connection

Read the appointed Gospel for this day, Matt. 5:1–12. Here Jesus describes your baptismal life centered in His suffering, His death, His resurrection and His ascension.

- At which points does this hymn connect with the Beatitudes? In what ways do these both sing and speak of the same realities?

- The important distinction is made that we do not pray *to* the saints nor do we pray *for* the saints, but we do *sing* with the saints, and our prayers are joined with theirs. Especially on All Saints’ Day do we also *give thanks for* the saints. For examples see *LSB*, pages 250–51.

In Closing

“Our churches teach that the history of saints may be set before us so that we may follow the example of their faith and good works, according to our calling... [T]he Scriptures do not teach that we are to call on the saints or to ask the saints for help. Scripture sets before us the one Christ as the Mediator, Atoning Sacrifice, High Priest, and Intercessor [1 Timothy 2:5–6]” (AC XXI 1–2).

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 677.

Prayer

Almighty and everlasting God, You knit together Your faithful people of all times and places into one holy communion, the mystical body of Your Son, Jesus Christ. Grant us so to follow Your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living that, together with them, we may come to the unspeakable joys You have prepared for those who love You; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for All Saints’ Day).

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 Ninety-five 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.

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.

- Briefly review Jesus' passion. How did Jesus Himself experience utter woe and devastation? For what reason did Jesus experience it?

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).

Preserve Your Word, O Savior

Lutheran Service Book 658 | study by Richard J. Serina, Jr.

Introduction

Unlike many other cultures throughout the world, the United States has not experienced widespread persecution of Christians during its relatively brief existence. Political positions and widely held beliefs may oppose certain features of Christian doctrine, but there is little prohibition of our faith or negative consequences for gathering to worship on a Sunday.

Yet Scripture reminds us that we should expect persecution and suffering. How we endure such suffering is the

theme of this particular hymn, “Preserve Your Word, O Savior.” In it, we cling to what God does promise us: That He will preserve us in His Word no matter the trial or obstacle. We cling to His Word, for it will not fail us.

- Have you ever been threatened with death or imprisonment for your faith?
- How would you respond to religious persecution? What doctrines would you be willing to die for rather than recant?

Exploring the Scriptures

The Gospel Lesson for the Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Trinity is Matt. 24:15–28. This particular lesson gives us a clear depiction of what the Church will face in the latter days. Our Lord prepares the disciples for what lies ahead. Read verses 15–22.

- What are some of the rather terrifying images Jesus uses in this lesson?
- Why does the Lord need to prepare His disciples? What kind of things will they face after His ascension? What will happen to many of the Twelve?

There is a particular threat that should concern the disciples more than any other. Jesus tells them that many

will come in His place claiming to be the Christ. These antichrists will lead many astray, even those who are Christians. Our Lord warns His followers not to fall for their tricks or trust what they say. Read verses 23–28.

- What does Jesus mean by the phrase, “Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather”? Who is the corpse? Who are the vultures? What is Jesus trying to prevent here?
- Jesus here warns us of apostasy, which means falling away from the faith. Why is that a threat to us all? How must we protect ourselves from it?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Between 1618 and 1648, Christian Europe endured one of its bloodiest periods and most intense religious battles, known as the Thirty Years’ War. This war was waged over differing confessions of faith, as Protestant and Roman Catholic lands fought to retain significant economic and military strongholds, while also expecting their inhabitants to affirm their doctrinal positions. Both sides carried their share of blame, and the loss of life, home and wealth was widespread.

But this led to many Christians questioning whether doctrine was important at all. Some grew to believe that if affirming Scripture or church authority led to bloodshed, then neither were worth retaining. They instead suggested we should abandon all beliefs that might cause friction between us and seek the common good.

- How would you respond to someone who says the Christian faith cannot be true because wars have been fought over it?
- What actually causes religious wars — doctrine or sin?

The problem with religious wars is not doctrine, but sin. Rather than trusting the Word of God and prayer to convert people to the truth, our sinful desires lead us to force others into agreement. But the result is never salutary. It is not we who preserve the Word; it is God who preserves His Word. We merely proclaim that Word and trust God to do His work through it.

- Have you ever become angry with someone who disagreed with you in a conversation about religion? Why? What did it accomplish? Were you concerned with the other’s faith in the Word or with being right?

- How does God convict sinners and persuade them of His truth? What is our role in such a work of God? How does He use us?

Text

There are two themes interwoven throughout this hymn, both related to God's divine act of preservation: God's preservation of His Word and God's preservation of His Church. These two are not dissimilar from one another.

Stanzas 1–3 all deal directly with God preserving His Word and the doctrine based upon that Word. In stanza 1, the hymn claims that we are in the “latter day,” when the devil is at war to stop the growth of God's kingdom through the enlarging of the Church. In these latter days, according to stanza 2, the honor of our Lord and His Word are under attack, and He must defend His honor not by might, but by changing hearts and minds: “Convince, convert, enlighten / The souls in error's night.” Stanza 4 resumes this theme, calling God's Word and the preaching of that Word a saving power, a “living water” that rains upon us God's grace and sustains us until our Lord's return in glory.

- According to the hymn, how does God defend His Word? Does that defense depend upon us and our wits? How does God convince, convert and enlighten sinners?
- How does stanza 4 remind us of the Small Catechism's commentary on the Third Commandment (*LSB*, p. 321)?

Making the Connection

Jesus warned us in the Gospel Lesson that the devil would raise up enemies against His Word and His Church in the last days. That happens to us constantly. Yet our Lord has not left us alone. He has provided the means to sustain and even strengthen our faith against the devil and his attacks, and He has done so through Word and Sacrament. In the boat that is Christ's Church, we will find His Word and Spirit, where faith is created and fortified against the errors of the enemy. Likewise, at His table, the risen and ascended

In Closing

The Lord is with you as He promised to be and He sustains you, not by your great might or wits or resources, but by His Word alone and in His Church alone. Here, through Word and Sacrament, God does His work of conviction, conversion and enlightenment, changing wicked hearts and sustaining souls as we eagerly anticipate His return.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 658.

In what way does the Lord's Word preserve us when we “hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it”?

Stanzas 3 and 5 explain how God preserves His Church in the midst of this awful strife in the latter days. God's “Zion” is His Church, those who have been convinced, converted and enlightened by the Holy Spirit through Word and Sacrament and who now believe, teach and confess the Word of the Lord, no matter the consequences. It is our prayer, then, that God would protect His flock, the sheep of His fold, from the attacks of these latter days. Though the enemy will attack and the wind and the waves of false doctrine will rock the boat that is the Church, Jesus is the “pilot” who steadies and steers this boat until she arrives safely in the “eternal light” that is the promised eternal rest prepared for her before the foundations of the world and kept in heaven, never to perish, spoil or fade.

- What sort of opposition to its faith and doctrine does the Church face in these latter days? How did our Lord prepare us for this? What do we cling to in the midst of such opposition?
- This hymn pictures the Church as a boat. Where do we find such imagery in the Scriptures (e.g., 1 Peter 3:18–22, Eph. 4:11–16)? What are the “wind and the waves” that confront us according to the Scriptures? How does God sustain us and protect us against that wind and those waves?

Lord comes to us in His own flesh and blood, ensuring that we are not alone, and fulfilling His baptismal promise to be with us until the end of the age.

- What challenges to your faith or to the faith of your church have arisen? How has God resolved them? What was your strength in the midst of that mighty opposition?
- If religious persecution were to break out in your corner of this world, how does God promise to protect you? Where will you turn for help and aid?

Prayer

Almighty God, we implore You, show Your mercy to Your humble servants that we, who put no trust in our own merits, may not be dealt with after the severity of Your judgment but according to Your mercy; 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-Fifth Sunday after Trinity).

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. "[A]ll 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 ever to be there in the first place; a detail, by the way, 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). "Therefore 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 already 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* (*LBW* 321, 1978) and in *Lutheran Worship* (*LW* 462, 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; Rev. 22:12.

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, 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.

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

We Praise You, O God

Lutheran Service Book 785 | study by Carl C. Fickenscher II

Introduction

In our modern mental calendars (the printed ones, too), Thanksgiving always comes before Christmas. Two days off from school as a teaser for the two weeks coming next month. Weather starting to hint of winter with the prospect of real snow coming soon. The Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade always ending with the appearance of Santa Claus, officially kicking off the Christmas shopping rush.

In the bigger picture, though, Christmas must always precede Thanksgiving. The fact is, without the first Christmas, we'd have nothing for which to give thanks. Appropriately enough, therefore, on the church calendar,

Christmas comes near the beginning, while Thanksgiving in both Canada and the United States, though the dates are set by our secular governments, happens to fall near the end. In the United States in particular, Thanksgiving Day is always the Thursday immediately before or after the Last Sunday of the Church Year.

- Why does that — the end-of-the-church-year location of Thanksgiving — make sense? How does Thanksgiving give a sense of closure — especially with its long-standing agricultural significance?
- Why must all real thanksgiving follow Christmas?

Exploring the Scriptures

Thanksgiving is, of course, always a matter of looking back. Something thankworthy must have been done for us or given to us in the past before we can say thanks. The life of Old Testament Israel was always shaped by its history. God's people were constantly reminded that they had a unique story, that Yahweh had done great things to set them apart to be His and to receive His blessings.

Many biblical scholars point to Deut. 26:1–10 as a focal passage for Israel's liturgy of giving thanks. Read it, and consider how things done in the past give rise to thanksgiving.

- Moses writes Deuteronomy as the Israelites are very soon to enter a new chapter in their history. Where have they been? See Ex. 1:8–11; Deut. 26:5–6.

- Where are they now, and how did they get there? See Deut. 8:2–4; 26:7–9.
- Where are they about to go? See Deut. 26:1–3.
- What is to be Israel's response to this history of theirs? (Read again Deut. 26:1–4.)
- Offering a portion of their blessings, though, is only part of the thanksgiving. What else were God's people to do (Deut. 26:5–10)?
- How is the speaking also an important giving of thanks? (Read Ps. 107:31–32; Phil. 4:4–6; Luke 17:11–19.)
- What does one talk about when speaking thanks (see Ps. 44:1)?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Our great hymn of thanksgiving, too, arises from past events. From 1568 to 1648, the Protestant Dutch waged a long and bitter war for independence from Roman Catholic Spain. In 1597 Adrianus Valerius published the hymn "We Gather Together to Ask the Lord's Blessing" to pray God's help in the war against "the wicked oppressing" (st. 1). While it has held immense popularity as a Thanksgiving hymn, its words are quite specific to a military situation, and less celebrate what God has done than ask for future deliverance.

Thus in 1902, the organist at Brick Presbyterian Church in New York approached a 20-year-old member, Julia B. Cory (née Cady) (1882–1963), about writing new words that would make the beloved tune more generally useful for a

congregation's Thanksgiving service. From the original lyrics, the broad theme of praise carries over. In a lesser way, Cory continues the battle motif of the Dutch hymn (though her "battles we win" has been replaced with "struggles we win" in *LSB* 785:2). She also picks up the reference to God's guidance. Beyond these, the present hymn is clearly Cory's.

- At different times in our country's history — including very recent history — God's help in war has been reason for thanksgiving. Share any such experiences your family may be comfortable telling.
- With what broader struggles has God helped you?

Even in Cory's day, it seems, Thanksgiving preceded Christmas. Her hymn was first sung on that Thanksgiving

of 1902, and a few weeks later her father asked her to pen also a stanza for their Christmas service:

Your love you did show us, your only Son sending,
Who came as a babe and whose bed was a stall,
His blest life he gave us and then died to save us;
We praise you, O Lord, for your gift to us all.

(*Christian Worship: Handbook* [Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997], 613)

Text

Read again Deut. 26:1–10 and visualize the scene: a worshiper coming with a basket of goods, presenting it to the priest, reciting the story of his fathers and what God has done for them, setting the firstfruits down before the Lord and worshipping. Now read all three stanzas of “We Praise You, O God,” *LSB* 785.

- Which phrases of the hymn picture a scene much like Deuteronomy 26? Which elements of our liturgy recreate this? What is the significance of *firstfruits*?
- Think of your family’s Thanksgiving Day traditions. Which customs carry on the Israelites’ example? How might your family better make Thanksgiving a Deuteronomy 26 tribute?

Thanksgiving is so often a family and extended family day. Stanza 2 observes, “We worship You, God of our fathers.”

Making the Connection

Look back on our, your, personal histories. Where have we been? Where are we now and where are we now headed? How have we gotten here?

- Consider this: Our sin separated us from God. Apart from God, what thankworthy things would we get? Jesus’ coming to earth, His birth, living, dying and rising, has

In Closing

Every good gift — physical and spiritual, temporal and eternal, earthly and heavenly — is a result of Jesus’ cross. And because of Jesus’ cross, we have every truly good gift. This means Christmas, which set Jesus on the way to the cross, is indeed before thanksgiving!

- Sing *LSB* 785 — and add the Christmas stanza (first!).

- Why does that matter? “God of our fathers” is a statement about history. Is it about God’s history or our fathers’ (and mothers’) or both? (See Ps. 44:1–3; 2 Tim. 1:3–5; 3:13–15.)
- What might the elders around your Thanksgiving table like to say about this?

Thanksgiving, too, we think of as a day of plenty — and ease, like kicking back to watch football. But each year also has “trial,” “tempest” and “perils” (st. 2).

- God’s deliverance from what such misfortunes can you include in your thanksgiving?
- How does deliverance *from* something increase our sense of thanks *for* other things?

The hymn addresses praise to God as “Creator” (st. 1). How many of the blessings for which we’ve been giving thanks — including in our hearts during this study — have been “First Article gifts”? (The First Article of the Apostles’ Creed, you recall, is our confession of God the Father, “maker of heaven and earth” [*LSB*, p. 322].) But our hymn begins and ends with recognition of God also as “Redeemer” (sts. 1 and 3).

- How has God redeemed us?
- Redemption must come before any earthly or eternal gifts. How is that true? Read again Julia Cory’s Christmas stanza. Would we get even any First Article gifts without redemption first?

taken away our sins. With those separating sins removed, we’re back together with God. What do we receive when we’re with God? Think bigger!

- So then, as we give thanks for turkey and family and a safe and blessed year — as well as for eternal life — what events in history do we have to thank God for?

Prayer

Almighty God, Your mercies are new every morning and You graciously provide for all our needs of body and soul. Grant us Your Holy Spirit that we may acknowledge Your goodness, give thanks for Your benefits, and serve You in willing obedience all our days; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Day of Thanksgiving).

Wake, Awake, for Night Is Flying

Lutheran Service Book 516 | study by Randy P. Wurschmidt

Introduction

We all tend to be fascinated with the end times, what will happen on the Last Day. Every pastor knows that he will be asked to teach a class on Revelation at some point. Piles of books and movies fantasize about mayhem and destruction: obliteration by asteroid or earthquake, or maybe being left behind in a doomed airliner. The apostles were fascinated by this, too, so they asked Jesus, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (Matt. 24:3).

Our Lord is clear on this, and so at Augsburg in 1530, the reformers were able to state from Scripture, “Our churches teach that at the end of the world Christ will appear for judgment and will raise all the dead. [1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:2]. He will give the godly and elect eternal life and

everlasting joys, but He will condemn ungodly people and the devils to be tormented without end [Matthew 25:31–46]” (AC XVII 1–3).

Death and judgment weigh on the minds of almost all people; the hymn we will study focuses primarily on the joy and comfort that Christians look forward to, even in the face of catastrophe. For we hope in things to come, rather than in things present.

- From your experience in talking to others, what are some different beliefs that people have about death and judgment on the Last Day?
- Have you ever known anyone whose faith and calm in the face of death was an inspiration to you?

Exploring the Scriptures

The Gospel for the Last Sunday of the Church Year is a familiar parable, one taught in the context of what is sometimes called the Little Apocalypse. For two whole chapters, Jesus answers the question the apostles asked above. Read Matt. 25:1–13.

- Who are the two groups of virgins, and what makes some of them foolish?
- Verses 11 and 12 might sound harsh to our modern ears. But many times throughout the Bible, God’s judgment

is shown as being final and complete. What are some examples you can think of?

The parable is told in the context of a wedding: the ten virgins are waiting for the bridegroom to lead them to the banquet. Read Rev. 19:6–9.

- What does it mean that the Bride “has made herself ready” (v. 7)? See verse 8.
- How should you respond to the invitation to the marriage supper of the Lamb?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Philipp Nicolai (1556–1608) was a pastor in the town of Unna, Westphalia, in the western part of Germany. From July 1597 until January 1598, plague raged through the town, taking 1300 of his parishioners. During this terrible time, Pastor Nicolai presided over as many as thirty burials a day; in one particularly awful week, 170 perished. From the window of his parsonage, overlooking the church cemetery, Nicolai wrote a series of meditations for the comfort of the congregation. He called the collection *Freudenspiegel des Ewigen Lebens* (*Mirror of Joy of Eternal Life*), saying, “There seemed to me to be nothing more sweet, delightful, and agreeable than the contemplation of the noble, sublime doctrine of Eternal Life obtained through the Blood of Christ. This I allowed to dwell in my heart day and night, and searched the Scriptures as to what they revealed on

this matter” (hymnary.org/person/Nicolai_P). He took this tragedy, and rather than preaching the Law to them, he gave them the Gospel. Surely they were scared — so was he — and he preached the comfort of Christ crucified for their sins, and the promise of eternal life in heaven.

Along with the meditations, Nicolai wrote the two hymns for which he is most remembered, this one, and “O Morning Star, How Fair and Bright” (*LSB* 395). He appended them to the end of the collection, and they have remained in not only the Lutheran Church since then, but also in the hymnals of many other denominations.

- Consider how such a disaster would affect this congregation. What resources would you turn to in such a time?

Text

Prepare. Watch. Expect. The full title of the hymn reads: “Wake, Awake: Of the voice at Midnight and the Wise Virgins who meet their Heavenly Bridegroom.” Nicolai’s hymn is only about the wise virgins, the ones prepared with flasks of oil, the ones who, despite the delay of the Bridegroom, remained steadfast at their post and waited diligently for His arrival. At midnight came the voice at last, “The Bridegroom comes, awake!” (st. 1). Nicolai keeps his focus on this hope rather than on the fate of the foolish virgins who wandered off for more oil at precisely the wrong time. Read or sing the first two stanzas and consider the following:

- To whom are the watchmen calling?
- Who is meant by “Jerusalem”? Who is meant by “Zion”?

In *Lutheran Worship* 177, the last lines of the second stanza are translated as

“We answer all In joy your call,
We follow to the wedding hall.”

Making the Connection

As we end one church year and prepare to begin another, our hymns reflect on both the second coming of our Lord and the first. The hymns for the end of the church year and for Advent are often interchangeable. As we prepare for Jesus to return in judgment, we also prepare to remember Emmanuel, God born in the flesh to dwell among us. We have come full circle. God has come and He will come again.

In Closing

In the Nicene Creed we confess, “He will come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead” (*LSB*, p. 158). We confess this not out of fear, but out of hope, in order to remember that our Lord has promised to return, to raise our bodies into heaven, to bring us around the throne and be with Him in eternity.

Without the forgiveness of sins, this would not be possible. Without Christ’s death on the cross, this would not be possible. For without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins (Heb. 9:22). And without the forgiveness of sins, there is no life. Thanks be to God that He has given us new life in Holy Baptism, in the Holy Supper and in the forgiveness of sins.

- How does the current translation (which reflects the German much better) change our understanding of this stanza?
- What is the “Supper” we are singing about?

Now sing or read the third stanza. The heavenly imagery in this stanza is especially rich. Read Rev. 7:9–17.

- What is the joy that awaits us in heaven?
- In which part of the Divine Service do we say that heaven and earth meet? How does this relate to the hymn?

Go to Nicolai’s other hymn, *LSB* 395, and scan through the second and third stanzas. Both hymns emphasize the coming of the Lord in glory as the Bridegroom. The two hymns together are often referred to as the King and Queen of the Lutheran chorales. Both in the majesty of their tunes (which were also composed by Pastor Nicolai) and in the comfort of their words, they outline for us the joy that awaits us in eternal life.

- What does this mean for the Christian, then? Should we fear death? Why or why not?

- As we wait for Jesus to return, in what ways do we prepare, watch and wait? What is the danger of being unready?
- Even as Jesus is at the right hand of the Father, He is also present among us now. Name some ways in which that is true.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 516.

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, so govern our hearts and minds by Your Holy Spirit that, ever mindful of Your glorious return, we may persevere in both faith and holiness of living; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Proper 29B).