

THE WORD IN
Song



Hymn of the Day Studies for

EPIPHANY

THREE-YEAR LECTIONARY



THE
LUTHERAN CHURCH
MISSOURI SYNOD

Copyright © 2017, 2021
The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod
St. Louis, MO 63122-7295
lcms.org/worship

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Lutheran Service Book © 2006 Concordia Publishing House. Used with permission.

Lutheran Service Book Propers of the Day © 2007 Concordia Publishing House. Used with permission.

Quotations from the Small Catechism are © 1986 Concordia Publishing House.

Quotations from the Lutheran Confessions are from *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, copyright © 2005, 2006 by Concordia Publishing House. Used by permission. All rights reserved. To purchase a copy of *Concordia*, call 800-325-3040.

This work may be reproduced by a congregation for its own use in the study of the Scriptures. Commercial reproduction, or reproduction for sale, of any portion of this work or of the work as a whole, without the written permission of the copyright holder, is prohibited.

Contents

The Epiphany of Our Lord	
395 O Morning Star, How Fair and Bright	1
The Baptism of Our Lord	
406/407 To Jordan Came the Christ, Our Lord	3
Second Sunday after the Epiphany	
402 The Only Son from Heaven	5
Third Sunday after the Epiphany	
839 O Christ, Our True and Only Light	7
Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany	
842 Son of God, Eternal Savior	9
Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany	
578 Thy Strong Word	11
398 Hail to the Lord's Anointed	13
Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany	
394 Songs of Thankfulness and Praise	15
Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany	
820 My Soul, Now Praise Your Maker	17
834 O God, O Lord of Heaven and Earth	19
Eighth Sunday after the Epiphany	
819 Sing Praise to God, the Highest Good.	21
The Transfiguration of Our Lord	
413 O Wondrous Type! O Vision Fair	23

O Morning Star, How Fair and Bright

Lutheran Service Book 395 | study by Todd A. Peperkorn

Introduction

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

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

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

Exploring the Scriptures

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

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

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

Exploring the Hymn

Background

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

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

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

Text

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

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

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

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

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

Making the Connection

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

In Closing

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

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

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

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

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

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

Prayer

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

To Jordan Came the Christ, Our Lord

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

Exploring the Scriptures

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

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

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

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

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

Exploring the Hymn

Background

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

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

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

Text

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Making the Connection

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

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

In Closing

- Sing or read together LSB 406/407.

Prayer

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

The Only Son from Heaven

Lutheran Service Book 402 | study by Todd A. Peperkorn

Introduction

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

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

Exploring the Scriptures

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

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

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

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

Exploring the Hymn

Background

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

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

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

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

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

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

Text

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

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

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

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

- What is the glimpse of heaven to which the author refers?

Making the Connection

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

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

In Closing

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

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

- Why must the Lord awaken our hearts to do these things?

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

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

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

Prayer

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

O Christ, Our True and Only Light

Lutheran Service Book 839 | study by Allen D. Lunneberg

Introduction

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

may enlighten and shine on all who are yet enslaved by the spiritual blindness of the fallen nature.

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

Exploring the Scriptures

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Exploring the Hymn

Background

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

the truth of pure doctrine as contained in the Lutheran Confessions.

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

- Everyone agrees to the necessity of reaching out with the Gospel to the unchurched, to those who have never heard. To what extent do we agree, however, to reach out to those who are being misled by false teachers?

- What are some false religions or teachings today?
- Should these false teachings be addressed by the pastor in his sermons?

Text

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

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

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

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

Making the Connection

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

In Closing

Prayer

Almighty God, in Your kindness You cause the light of the Gospel to shine among us. By the working of Your Holy Spirit, help us to share the good news of Your salvation that all who hear it may rejoice in the gift of Your unending love; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Mission Observance).

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 839.

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

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

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

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

face up to the truth of the spiritual condition of all people according to our common, fallen nature, and then deliver the glorious good news of God’s gift of salvation.

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

Prayer

O God, Your almighty power is made known chiefly in showing mercy. Grant us the fullness of Your grace that we may be called to repentance and made partakers of Your heavenly treasures; through Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Proper 9B).

Son of God, Eternal Savior

Lutheran Service Book 842 | study by Bruce E. Keseman

Introduction

During World War II, Rev. Henry Gerecke, an LCMS clergyman, served as a U.S. Army chaplain in England. At the conclusion of the war, Chaplain Gerecke was asked to provide spiritual care for his enemies, Nazi leaders who were being tried for war crimes at Nuremberg. Chaplain Gerecke knew about and sometimes witnessed the effects of the atrocities inflicted because of those Nazis. He also knew that he could decline the assignment and return to his wife whom he had not seen in two years. Still, he agreed

to minister to his enemies. Some in the United States criticized him for befriending men who were responsible for such horrible torture and death.

- Why might Chaplain Gerecke have provided pastoral care — and friendship — to enemies?
- If you were Chaplain Gerecke, how would you respond to criticism from U.S. citizens?

Exploring the Scriptures

“Son of God, Eternal Savior” was written by Somerset T. C. Lowry (1855–1932). The hymn reflects John 17:1–26, a prayer Jesus prayed for us the night before He died. Read those verses now, especially noticing Christ’s emphasis on unity and love.

- In verse 3, what does Jesus say is eternal life? Why is eternal life impossible apart from Jesus?
- The Father’s words lead us to know and believe that Jesus came from the Father (v. 8). Jesus spoke the Father’s words directly to the first disciples, but how does He get

those words to you (v. 20)? How might that have affected Chaplain Gerecke’s decision?

- What evidence have you seen that verse 14 is true?
- What is Christ’s prayer for us (vv. 15, 17, 20–21, and 26)? What comfort does that give to you in this often difficult world?
- What indications are there that the love of God was in Chaplain Gerecke (v. 26)? In Christians you know?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Read through *LSB* 842. Most hymnals today — *LSB* included — omit two stanzas that Lowry wrote when he penned the hymn in 1893. Read the omitted stanzas below.

2. Bind us all as one together
In your Church’s sacred fold,
Weak and healthy, poor and wealthy,
Sad and joyful, young and old.
Is there want or pain or sorrow?
Make us all the burden share.
Are there spirits crushed and broken?
Teach us, Lord, to soothe their care.
5. Dark the path that lies behind us,
Strewn with wrecks and stained with blood;
But before us gleams the vision
Of the coming brotherhood.
See the Christlike host advancing,
High and lowly, great and small,
Linked in bonds of common service
For the common Lord of all.

- In your opinion, do these stanzas strengthen or weaken the hymn? How do these stanzas alter the focus of the hymn? Explain.
- What good reasons might editors have for omitting these stanzas?
- When it was first published, editors called this a “Christian Brotherhood” hymn. In *LSB*, it is in the category “Society.” In your opinion, how does the inclusion or exclusion of the stanzas above affect the category of the hymn?

Text

Look again at stanza 1 in *LSB*.

- List the titles given to Jesus in this stanza. What unique truth about our Lord does each title provide?
- In what ways does Christ’s birth among us hallow (that is, make holy) the human race?
- Much of the hymn is about showing love, yet only one brief clause of stanza 1 alludes to anything we do for others (“Fill us with Your love and pity”). Why is the

emphasis on Christ's work essential before the hymn speaks about what we Christians do?

Read Heb. 7:23–25.

- What prevented most high priests from remaining in office? How is Jesus, our High Priest, different?
- What does verse 25 say Jesus is doing for us? Why? How is that reflected in the hymn?

Look at stanza 2 of the hymn.

- Notice that the entire hymn is a prayer. For what do we pray in this stanza?
- We often say that Christ *died* for others, but in what ways has Christ "*lived* for others" (including you)?
- What are some ways we might live for others as Christ did for us?
- Lowry writes that our money really belongs to God. We are "stewards" and keepers of a "trust." How does that shape our Christian view of giving?

Read 1 Peter 1:20–23.

- Because of Christ, what have we become (vv. 20–21)?
- Why does Peter suggest (v. 23) that we can "love one another earnestly" (v. 22)?
- What does verse 25 say is the "imperishable seed" by which you have been born again? When did that rebirth happen?

Look at stanza 3 of the hymn.

Making the Connection

As Jesus works among us — speaking His Word, baptizing us into His death and resurrection and serving us His forgiving body and blood — He grants us faith that trusts in Him. The result is both unity (John 17:11) and love (John 17:26).

In Closing

When we pray for unity and love, as we do in this hymn (and Jesus does in John 17), God sometimes responds in surprising ways. When Chaplain Gerecke arrived at Nuremberg, few of the twenty-some Nazi defendants trusted Christ for their salvation. Jesus prayed "for those who will believe in Me through their word" (John 17:20). And God's Word spoken by Chaplain Gerecke changed some of the unbelievers at Nuremberg. When Joachim von Ribbentrop, former Reich Minister of Foreign Affairs, went to the gallows, he was asked for his last words. His response: "I place all my confidence in the Lamb who made atonement for my sins. May God have mercy on my soul." Amazingly, that meant Chaplain Gerecke had Christian

- If we are going to live for others, what does the hymn suggest that Christ must first do for us?
- What strife, passions and discords are evident even among Christians? So why is it appropriate that we call Jesus the "King of *love*" and "Prince of *Peace*"?

The hymn asks our Lord to "quench our fevered thirst of pleasure" (st. 3). Read John 4:1–26, where the Samaritan woman's thirst of pleasure led her to five husbands and her current live-in.

- Why do earthly pleasures fail to quench our desires?
- What does Jesus offer to the woman (and us) that provides what we really need? What hint of that offer is included in stanza 3 of the hymn?

Look at stanza 4, especially thinking about the final request of the hymn: "Here on earth Your will be done."

- How does repeating half of stanza 1 emphasize the true source of Christian sanctification? See also John 17:17–18.
- In what sense is Jesus our "Source of life?" Of truth? Of grace? What alternate sources might we be tempted to rely on?
- What verses from John 17 especially seem to be reflected in the last half of stanza 4?
- What elements of God's will does Jesus mention in John 17?
- How is God's will done? (See the Third Petition in the Small Catechism, *LSB*, 324).

- Why are true unity and true love impossible apart from faith in Christ?
- How might your life look different when Christ's gifts of unity and love show more clearly in you?

unity with his earthly enemy! Christ's love worked through Chaplain Gerecke as he lived for others.

- Sing "Son of God, Eternal Savior" as a prayer.

Prayer

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

Thy Strong Word

Lutheran Service Book 578 | study by Larry A. Peters

Introduction

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

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

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

Exploring the Scriptures

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

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

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

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

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

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

Exploring the Hymn

Background

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

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

Text

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

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

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

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

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

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

Making the Connection

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

In Closing

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Prayer

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

Hail to the Lord's Anointed

Lutheran Service Book 398 | study by David R. Schmitt

Introduction

Judy had problems with a mother at her daughter's school. At social functions, this woman was abrasive and her attitude seemed to carry on to her children. Judy was concerned for her own daughter having to go to school with the child of a woman like that.

One day, in church, Judy was struck by Jesus' words, "pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:44), and she decided to give it a try. She began to pray for this woman by name. As she encountered her at school functions, Judy started seeing her differently. Judy started wondering how God was working in this woman's life, and she started desiring that God would use her, Judy, in His gracious work.

We often talk about the power of prayer. When we say that, we usually mean the power of God to answer prayer.

There is another power, however, and that is the power of prayer to shape the way we live and approach the world around us. To teach someone to pray is to open his or her eyes to see and to wait for God's work in the world. As we pray the prayers God has taught us, we begin to look on the world differently. Our eyes are open as we eagerly await and look for the working of God.

- What is a prayer that you were taught or a prayer that we teach our children?
- Examine the words of these prayers. How do they shape the way we view the world?

Exploring the Scriptures

Psalm 72 is the basis for this hymn. It is also the prayerful response to a promise God made to His people. Consider the promise of God and then the prayerful response.

When King David wanted to build a house for God, God promised to build a house for him. God's promise, however, was to build more than a physical dwelling. Read the glorious promise God gave to the prophet Nathan to share with King David in 2 Sam. 7:12.

- How would this promise shape the way the people of Israel looked at their king?

This promise obviously meant a great deal to God's people. It became part of their life of prayer. Psalm 72 expresses the prayerful response to God's promise. The people may have prayed these words at Solomon's coronation. Read the prayer of Psalm 72.

- What parts of this prayer point beyond the rule of an earthly king?
- The rule of this king touches all nations, all time, and all creation, and yet the psalmist focuses particularly upon the poor, the needy, the weak, and the oppressed. Why? What does that tell us about the nature of this kingdom?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

James Montgomery (1771–1854), the editor of a controversial political journal in Sheffield, England, was a Moravian who helped compose a hymnal for his local parish, St. Paul's Church. In his lifetime, Montgomery published over 11 books of poetry and composed over 400 hymns.

This hymn was originally composed in 1821 as a Christmas ode for a Moravian settlement, where Montgomery had been a member. This Christmas ode would have been sung as part of a larger Christmas festival of songs and anthems.

- When you contemplate the words of this hymn in the context of Christmas, what phrases become deeper or richer in meaning? How?

Montgomery had a great devotion to foreign missions. When he was a child, his parents died in mission work in the West Indies. Montgomery memorialized them as well as other missionaries in collections of his poetry. In 1822, Montgomery sent a copy of this hymn to a missionary in the South Seas and he later recited it at a missionary meeting in Liverpool.

- When you contemplate the words of this hymn in the context of God's mission, what phrases become deeper or richer in meaning? How?

Ultimately, in 1822, Montgomery published this hymn as a translation of Psalm 72 in his collection, *Songs of Zion*.

- When you contemplate this hymn as a translation of Psalm 72, how does that shape your response to the words and to the singing of the hymn?

Text

As we move from the words of Psalm 72 to the opening words of this hymn, Montgomery asks us to shift our thoughts from prayer to praise.

In Psalm 72, we pray to God on the basis of *His promises* to us and, in this hymn, we praise God for His promises *fulfilled for us* in Jesus. In a sense, the prayer of Psalm 72 shapes the way that we see Jesus. He is this prayer being answered. In Him, these promises of God are fulfilled.

The hymn begins with a single claim about Jesus: He is “the Lord’s anointed.” At the beginning of His ministry, Jesus made this claim. In fact, we call Jesus the Messiah or the Christ because these words (in Hebrew and Greek respectively) mean that He is the “Anointed One.”

- Read Luke 4:14–21 and in your own words describe what it means for Jesus to be the Anointed One of God.
- In the first two stanzas of the hymn, how does Montgomery remember and expand this ministry of Jesus?
- How does he turn our attention to the cross?

Making the Connection

Prayer teaches us to see the world differently, and Psalm 72 teaches us to see Jesus as the one God promised Him to be. He is the answer to this Old Testament prayer, the Anointed One of God, who rules over all things for all time in self-sacrificial love.

- What does this hymn teach us to say about Jesus, in terms of His past, His present and His future work?

In Closing

Montgomery originally titled this hymn, “The Reign of Christ on Earth.” While the world may teach us to think about faith as only a matter of the spirit and to think about the afterlife as some bodiless existence where we are souls floating on clouds, this hymn teaches us to speak differently as Christians. We sing of Jesus, the Anointed One of God, who reigns now in a very real way among us and, ultimately, will return and bring about His new creation.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 398, “Hail to the Lord’s Anointed.”

As the hymn continues, the verb tenses shift from the present to the future. In stanzas 1 and 2, we celebrate how Jesus “comes” to work among us; in stanzas 3 through 5, we sing how Jesus “shall come” in the future. Montgomery knows that the reign of Jesus, “begun” at His birth, did not end at His death, but that Jesus was raised, ascended into heaven and now lives and rules eternally. The hymn opens our eyes to this future rule, teaching us to live in hope as it breaks into the world around us.

- In stanza 3, Montgomery uses natural imagery to open our eyes to a different, new creation. What is that new creation and how does God bring it about in your life?
- In stanza 4, Montgomery opens our eyes to the world’s response to Christ’s rule. How does this vision shape our interaction with other people and other faiths?
- In stanza 5, Montgomery opens our eyes to God’s everlasting covenant. Read about that covenant made with Abraham in Gen. 12:1–3 and remembered in Ps. 72:17. How is it remembered in stanza 5?
- How is it remembered in our worship today?

- How does that contrast with what our world teaches people to say about Jesus?
- At the heart of God’s work in Jesus is God’s eternal covenant. What is that eternal covenant of love and how has God the Father made that covenant with you in Jesus, the Anointed One of God?

Prayer

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

Songs of Thankfulness and Praise

Lutheran Service Book 394 | study by J. H. Sorenson

Introduction

If we look in the dictionary for the meaning of “epiphany,” one meaning is “a sudden realization or intuitive leap of understanding,” another is “a manifestation of a god or divine being in human form.” That’s fine if we know what a

“manifestation” is. The word “manifest” is very important in this hymn, used again and again in every stanza.

- What are some meanings for the word “manifest”?
- What do you think “God in man made manifest” means?

Exploring the Scriptures

One of the key emphases of the Epiphany Season, repeated again and again, is that Christ fulfills the prophecies of the Old Testament. Read Is. 61:1–3 for predictions of things that would occur in the days of the Messiah. Compare this to Matt. 11:1–5.

- What evidence does Jesus Himself provide that He is the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecies?
- Did everyone who saw and heard what Jesus was doing believe in Him? (Luke 4:18–30).

This hymn is packed with Bible imagery in every stanza, starting with the visit of Wise Men (sages) to the infant Jesus.

- What do you think “Branch of royal David’s stem” means? (Is. 11:1; Jer. 23:5, 33:15).
- What is important about Bethlehem?

The second stanza continues the biblical themes.

- What does “Manifest at Jordan’s stream” refer to?
- How does this reveal Jesus as “Prophet, Priest, and King”?

Stanza 2 also refers to the wedding at Cana (John 2:1–11), where Jesus and His disciples were guests and He did His first public miracle, changing water into wine, “and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him” (v. 11).

- How does this miracle reveal Jesus?

- What does Jesus’ presence say about marriage?
- How often does this miracle happen?

Stanza 3 begins with Jesus “Manifest in making whole / Palsied limbs and fainting soul.”

- What does “palsied” mean?
- What does Jesus do for people in that condition?
- How did Jesus quell “all the devil’s might”?
- Can you think of a time when Jesus brought “good from ill”?

Stanza 4 looks ahead to Jesus’ “Great Epiphany,” beginning with the cosmic disturbances that will announce His coming again to judge the living and the dead. Among the many passages that foretell these events are Joel 2:10; Is. 34:4; 13:10; Matt. 24:29–31, and Rev. 19:1–16.

- Is the coming of Christ and the “end time” a lively hope for Christians today?

Biblical themes continue to unfold in stanza 5, as the hymn becomes a prayer for grace to see Christ present to us in His Word and grace to “imitate” Him (Eph. 5:1) in “purity,” so that at His coming we may become “like Him” (1 John 3:2).

- How is Christ present in His Word?
- How do we see Him there?
- In what ways do we imitate Christ?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

The author of this hymn was Christopher Wordsworth (1807–1885), an Anglican clergyman and later a bishop in England in the mid-nineteenth century. The hymn was published in 1862 as part of a collection of hymns for the

Sundays and holy days of the Church Year. He wrote the hymn to be a “Recapitulation of the Subjects presented in the Services of former weeks throughout the season of Epiphany; and Anticipation of the future great and glorious Epiphany, at which Christ will appear again, to judge the

World.” In other words, the stanzas call to mind the Gospels for the Sundays of the Epiphany Season in his day. In our time the hymn fits best with the Gospels of Series C.

Text

Over the years, changes are made to many hymns for various reasons. Sometimes new hymnals leave out certain stanzas in order to shorten the hymn. Sometimes doctrinal reasons are involved. Sometimes changes are made as a matter of style or the “inclusiveness” of language.

- How many stanzas are “enough” for most hymns?
- Should a hymn be left out because of false doctrine in one stanza?
- Should a hymn be left out because the author has elsewhere expressed “wrong” ideas?

In the second edition of his hymn collection, Wordsworth himself changed the words in stanza 5 from “mirrored in Thy holy Word” to “present in Thy Holy Word.” Somewhere between then and now “May we imitate Thee now” became “grace to imitate Thee now.”

Making the Connection

The Epiphany Season starts with the leading of the Magi to see in the infant Jesus the revelation of God in human flesh and blood. It goes on to unfold the whole story of God become man in Christ through the actions and events of the life and ministry of our Lord. Each Gospel reading of the Sundays after the Epiphany is a new revelation, a manifestation of God in Christ. Each of them shows Him as the one

In Closing

“Songs of Thankfulness and Praise” is a very good hymn to sing toward the end of the Epiphany Season. It reminds us of many of the ways God is manifest — plain, obvious, evident — in Jesus through the things He did and said in His earthly ministry. It brings the season together and sums it up.

- Sing or read together *LSB* 394.

- What is your opinion of these changes?

In two twentieth-century Lutheran hymnals, stanza 4 has been omitted, and the last line changed to “God in flesh made manifest.” Both of these have been restored in *LSB*.

- Why would some want to omit stanza 4?
- Is “gender neutrality” always a good thing in hymns?

The great number of biblical references and images used in this hymn is one thing that makes it a great and lasting contribution to the Church’s worship.

Wordsworth’s sensitivity to the needs of regular worship in ordinary churches is another thing that makes it a great hymn. It comes from a real pastoral concern that the worshipers in his congregation should hear and learn the lessons from the Word read and taught every Sunday. To this day this hymn is in regular use by English-speaking Christians throughout the world.

and only Son of the living God. Each of the Gospel miracles of the season shows us God-inspired evidence of this truth.

- How do the Epiphany Gospels strengthen our faith?
- What other ways does Christ manifest Himself to us?
- How can we be “imitators of Christ”?

Prayer

Almighty God, whom to know is everlasting life, grant us perfectly to know Your Son, Jesus Christ, to be the way, the truth, and the life, that following His steps we may steadfastly walk in the way that leads to eternal life; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen (For a right knowledge of Christ, *LSB*, 311).

My Soul, Now Praise Your Maker

Lutheran Service Book 820 | study by Paul J. Cain

Introduction

Confess together the First Article of the Apostles' Creed (*LSB*, 322).

"My Soul, Now Praise Your Maker" is a hymn of praise and adoration for what the Lord has done in creation, but not only for what He has done in creation.

- Why is a "First Article only" confession of faith an insufficient confession for Christians from a biblical standpoint? What is missing?

Exploring the Scriptures

There are four main Bible texts for us to consider that are listed at the bottom of the page for *LSB* 820.

Read Is. 40:6–8.

- What is distressing about these verses? Is the prophet only speaking about grass and flowers?
- What is comforting about verse 8?
- Have you ever seen the letters "VDMA"? They are the initial letters of the Latin motto that translates, "The Word of the Lord Endures Forever" (*Verbum Domini Manet in Aeternum*). Why is that an appropriate motto for Lutherans, and especially for Lutheran laypeople?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Intended as a paraphrase of Psalm 103, "My Soul" has a royal history. Martin Chemnitz knew that this hymn was commissioned by Albrecht the Elder, Duke of Prussia, a supporter of the Lutheran Reformation and of Luther himself. Psalm 103 was the Duke's favorite psalm. This hymn was a favorite of Swedish king Gustavus Adolphus. A hymn of consolation, it was sung in thanksgiving for the conclusion of the Thirty Years' War by Christians in Osnabrück, Westphalia. Author Johann Grammann (1487–1541) was known at the time for his preaching and pastoral care, as well as church visitation and the establishment of Lutheran schools. Today his hymn of praise, one of the earliest Lutheran hymns, lives on in *Lutheran Service Book*.

- In what ways does this hymn sound like a sermon?
- What parts of the hymn reflect soul care from a faithful and compassionate pastor?

Pray

O God, the strength of all who put their trust in You, mercifully grant that by Your power we may be defended against all adversity; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Epiphany 7).

Read Is. 57:15–16.

- How is the Law proclaimed here? The Gospel?
- Contrast the dwelling places of the Lord and humanity. Why is the incarnation of Christ so comforting to us?

Read Ps. 119:89–90.

- What do we learn about the reliability of the Lord and His Word in these verses?

This hymn has become a somewhat unlikely favorite hymn at my congregation's school for chapel at the grammar school level, and was even used for Vacation Bible School.

- How and where does the hymn encourage sound catechesis at home, church and school to pass on the faith to the next generation?
- What words and phrases in the hymn encourage evangelism and mission work? Which words and phrases provide good models for use in mission work and evangelism?

Text

Stanza 1 presents Ps. 103:1–6. Read those verses and compare them to the stanza.

- What words in stanza 1 reflect the individual nature of the praises offered in Ps. 103:1–5?

Stanza 2 is based on Ps. 103:7–12. Read those verses and compare them to the stanza.

- In Ps. 103:6–14, the whole community praises the Lord. How is this subtly reflected at the end of stanza 2? Skip ahead for the moment to stanza 3. Note specific language that shows the Lord’s care for the flock of Christians He gathers to Himself.
- Consider the influence of the following on stanza 2: Is. 30:18; Is. 48:9; 2 Peter 3:9; Lam. 3:22; Ps. 34:18; and Ps. 51:17.

Stanza 3 is a metrical paraphrase of Ps. 103:13–16. Read those verses and compare them to the stanza.

- God is eternal. Human life is frail. How are these truths shared poetically in stanza 3? In Is. 40:6–8?

Making the Connection

Most Christians agree that salvation was won by Christ on the cross (that is, if they are still willing to confess the veracity of the Scriptures, the divinity of Christ and the truth of His incarnation and resurrection). Where Christians so often differ is where the benefit of that salvation is delivered to Christians.

- “His grace remains forever” (st. 4). How would you

- How are Mal. 3:17; 1 John 3:1; Rom. 8:15; Gen. 2:7; 3:19; Job 10:9; 14:1–2; 34:14–15; Ps. 90:3–6; 102:11; Eccl. 3:20; and James 1:10 alluded to in stanza 3?

Stanza 4 gives us Ps. 103:17–22. Read those verses and compare them to the stanza.

- All of creation is to honor the Lord, as Ps. 103:20–22 encourages by “Bless the LORD.” Where are these thoughts of praise and adoration expressed in stanza 4?
- Read 1 Peter 1:25 and Is. 59:21. Why are these verses so important to stanza 4?

explain to a non-Christian where and how the grace of God is delivered to you here and now? Would your answer differ if you were giving the same kind of explanation to a Christian who was not a Lutheran? Why or why not?

- “His love beyond all measure” (st. 2). How would you use phrases from the hymn to counter the response, “It sounds too good to be true”?

In Closing

Confess together the Second Article of the Apostles’ Creed (*LSB*, 322–23).

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 820, “My Soul, Now Praise Your Maker.”

Prayer

O God, from whom all good proceeds, grant to us, Your humble servants, Your holy inspiration, that we may set our minds on the things that are right and, by Your merciful guiding, accomplish them; 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 18A).

O God, O Lord of Heaven and Earth

Lutheran Service Book 834 | study by Paul F. Becker

Introduction

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

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

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

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

Exploring the Scriptures

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

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

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

- How was the author of our salvation able to “destroy the one who [had] the power of death” (Heb. 2:14)?
- Describe the bondage from which we have been set free by His death.

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

Read Rom. 15:5–6.

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

Exploring the Hymn

Background

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

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

Text

Even as the first stanza expresses the aimlessness, futility, and brokenness of life, consequences of the fall, it offers a powerful refutation of the false claim that would

lay responsibility for sin and death on God. Call to mind Michelangelo's well-known painting of the creation, in which the "living finger" of God the Father gives life to the yet lifeless figure of Adam.

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

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

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

Making the Connection

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

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

In Closing

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

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

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

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

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

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

Prayer

O God, the strength of all who put their trust in You, mercifully grant that by Your power we may be defended against all adversity; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for the Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany).

Sing Praise to God, the Highest Good

Lutheran Service Book 819 | study by Frank J. Pies

Introduction

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

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

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

Exploring the Scriptures

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

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

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

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

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

Exploring the Hymn

Background

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Text

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

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

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

Making the Connection

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

In Closing

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

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 819.

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

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

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

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

Prayer

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

O Wondrous Type! O Vision Fair

Lutheran Service Book 413 | study by Bernard J. Schey

Introduction

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

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

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

Exploring the Scriptures

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

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

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

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

Exploring the Hymn

Background

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

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

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

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

Text

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

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

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

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

- What are the similarities?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Making the Connection

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

- What are some modern-day myths that need to be discredited?
- How can the truth of the facts of the life of Jesus bring comfort to despairing people?

In Closing

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

- Sing or read together *LSB* 413.

Prayer

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