

Devotions – October 18-24, 2020
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Sunday, October 18, 2020

Text: Revelation 19:6-7a

“Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying out, “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory.”

The great hymnwriter Isaac Watts said, “The singing of God’s praise is the part of worship most closely related to heaven.” Martin Luther said, “They who sing pray twice.” We all have favorite hymns. They may be favorites because of the text, or the tune, or both. In some cases, it is a particular verse, or a phrase within a verse, that has special meaning. This week I will share with you some verses and phrases of hymns that have special meaning for me.

Let’s begin with one of the great triumphant hymns of the faith, “*Crown Him with Many Crowns*” (ELW 855). In these difficult and uncertain times, it is good to focus on “*the Lamb upon the throne*” depicted in verse 1. It assures us that God in Christ will triumph over all difficulties, even as he triumphed over death and defeat on the cross. But it is a portion of verse 5 that I especially love to sing: “*Crown him the Lord of years, the potentate of time, creator of the rolling spheres, ineffably sublime.*” These are not words that are part of our everyday vocabulary, but the poetry of them lifts our thoughts and our voices to greater heights. A potentate is one who rules “potently,” that is, with power. God rules with power over all the forces of evil that adversely affect our lives. God rules with power that is controlled and directed by God’s love, compassion, mercy, and grace. God rules to the benefit and blessing of his people.

Along with this, hymnwriter Matthew Bridges describes God as “sublime,” meaning “supreme,” “majestic,” “of highest spiritual and moral character.” What’s more, Bridges describes God as “ineffably sublime,” meaning “beyond expression,” “indescribable or unspeakable.” In other words, God is sublime beyond our ability to describe. Even the loftiest words are inadequate in describing God.

In short, God rules over all time with an awesomeness that words cannot express. I can think of no words in hymnody that express the inexpressible more beautifully than these: “*Crown him the Lord of years, the potentate of time, creator of the rolling spheres, ineffably sublime.*”

Let us pray: *Most majestic God, all-powerful creator, sovereign of time and space, thank you for words and hymns that lift our voices and our spirits in praise to you. Amen.*



Monday, October 19, 2020

Text: Selections from Exodus 12

“The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt...Tell the whole congregation of Israel that...they are to take a lamb for each...household. They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD. The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt”

I was an impressionable 9-year-old when I went to the theater with my parents to see Cecil B. DeMille’s epic film, “The Ten Commandments.” I remember feeling a twinge of anxiousness watching the scenes of the Israelites hurriedly wiping the blood of sacrificed lambs on the doorposts of their houses before the cloud of death passed over the land of Egypt. I remember a feeling of dread as the green vapor moved through the streets and into the houses of the Egyptians, bypassing the houses of the Israelites, repelled by the lambs’ blood. I was moved by the wailing and outcries of grief from the Egyptian parents and spouses as their firstborn sons fell in death. I was mystified that the blood of sacrificed lambs spared the Israelites from such a terrible fate.

Perhaps this is why I am so moved by the words of Martin Luther in his powerful Easter hymn, “*Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands*” (ELW 370). Luther references the 10th plague in the Exodus Passover story in verse 3 of his hymn:

*Here the true Paschal Lamb we see, whom God so freely gave us,
who died on the accursed tree-- so strong God's love!--to save us.
See, his blood now marks our door; faith points to it; death passes o'er,
and Satan cannot harm us. Hallelujah!*

In Exodus 11-12, we read about the blood of the paschal lambs that saved the ancient Israelites. In the gospels (John 1:29), we read about “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” In the epistles (1 Corinthians 5:7), we read about “the paschal lamb, Christ, [who] has been sacrificed.” In Revelation 5, we read about “the Lamb” upon the throne. What marvelous imagery God has given us that offers us Easter hope in every season of our lives!

Let us pray: *Lord God, we humbly thank you that you were willing to sacrifice your own Son that we may be forgiven and redeemed. Give us faith that will enable us, every day and in every circumstance, to behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Amen.*



Tuesday, October 20, 2020

Text: Revelation 4:9-11

“And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to the one who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall before the one who is seated on the throne and worship the one who lives forever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing, “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created””

My favorite living hymnist is Marty Haugen. His poetic and deeply reflective texts are as inspiring as his singable tunes. We are blessed to have several of his hymns in the ELW. One of my favorites is “*Soli Deo Gloria*” (ELW 878), a beautiful hymn of praise for God’s many gifts.

As for the gift of music, including hymn singing, he writes in verse 3, “All praise for music, deep gift profound, through hands and voices in holy sound; the psalms of David, and Mary’s praise, in wordless splendor and lyric phrase, with all creation and song we raise: Soli Deo gloria!”

But it is Haugen’s praise for the gift of Jesus in verse 4 that especially lifts my spirit. “All praise for Jesus, best gift divine through word and witness, in bread and wine; incarnate love song of boundless grace, priest, teacher, prophet in time and space, **your steadfast kindness with human face:** Soli Deo gloria!” What marvelous imagery in that last phrase! In the man, Jesus, looking upon others with kindness and compassion, reaching out to those in need with acts of empathy, healing and mercy, we see the kind and loving heart of God in action. To God alone be the glory, indeed!

Let us pray: *Creator God, for all your gifts that bless, inspire and uplift us, we give you thanks and praise. Above all, we thank you for your greatest gift, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.*



Wednesday, October 21, 2020

Text: Ephesians 2:8-9

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”

Text: 2 Corinthians 12:9-10

“...but he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’ So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.”

One of the special gifts of the Evangelical Lutheran Worship is the inclusion of the hymn, “*For by Grace You Have Been Saved*” (ELW 598), by Finnish composer Kari Tikka. The hymn tune is ARMOLAULU, translated “Grace Song.” It is his most popular hymn.

As lovely as the melody is, I especially like the way Tikka incorporates the words of scripture in the text. This is evident in verse 1:

*For by grace you have been saved and even faith is not your own,
it’s the gift of God for you and not the works that you have done.
Don’t let anybody boast, for this is God’s great gift. Amen.*

In verses 2 and 3, Tikka references 2 Corinthians 12:9-10.

*“So my grace is all sufficient for each child who is my own,
for my strength is now made perfect for each child who is my own.
When you’re weak, then you are strong, for this is God’s great gift.” Amen.*

*So this weakness with contentment I’ll accept now in myself,
all my hardships, pains, and griefs that still lie deep within myself.
When I’m weak, then I am strong, for this is God’s great gift. Amen.*

In this hymn, Tikka captures the essence of Paul’s proclamation of grace as the basis of our saving relationship with God through faith, as well as the core of Luther’s Reformation teaching, “justification by grace through faith.” This hymn is a wonderful source for personal devotional reading, praying and singing, as well as for congregational use.

Let us pray: *Blessed Father, your grace is sufficient for our every need. Direct our faith daily to your redeeming action in Jesus Christ, your Son, for us and for our salvation. Amen.*



Thursday, October 22, 2020

Text: Acts 8:4-6a, 8

“Now those who were scattered went from place to place, proclaiming the word. Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah to them. The crowds with one accord listened eagerly to what was said by Philip,...So there was great joy in that city.”

“I Love to Tell the Story” (ELW 661) was one of the first hymns I became acquainted with in my childhood. I don’t recall if it was the melody or the simplistic words that resonated with me. In either case, it was a hymn that I remember early on singing with gusto. Yet, I was somewhat mystified by the first half of verse 3: *“I love to tell the story, for those who know it best seem hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest.”* Why, I wondered, would those “who know it best” want to hear it as much, if not more, than those who haven’t heard it before? Isn’t once enough? I compared it to stories one hears over and over again. In time, they grow old. “Not that story again!” As I matured in my faith, and especially when I became a pastor and began “to tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love” Sunday after Sunday from the pulpit and week after week in personal ministry and witness, did I come to understand the meaning of that verse. Indeed, the “story of Jesus and his love” never grows old to those who take it to heart and build their lives on it. In fact, it grows deeper, richer and more fulfilling with every hearing. What’s more, as life moves closer to its fulfillment, the remaining words of verse 3 take on special meaning—*“And when, in scenes of glory, I sing the new, new song, I’ll sing the old, old story that I have loved so long.”*

Let us pray. *Dear heavenly Father, thank you for putting in our hearts a song of your glory, a story of Jesus and his love, that never grows old, but fills us with hope and joy throughout the course of our lives. Amen.*



Friday, October 23, 2020

Text: Matthew 19:13-14

“Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; but Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.’”

Since the opportunity to participate in corporate worship was cut short this year by the coronavirus, I sang my favorite Lenten hymns at home. Singing and reading hymns devotionally can result in a deeper understanding than one gets from singing them as congregational hymns. Such was the case with “*There is A Green Hill Far Away*” (LBW 114). I was taken by how simple, even childlike, the text reads. For example, one verse reads, “*He died that we might be forgiv’n; he died to make us good, that we might go at last to heav’n, saved by his precious*

blood.” It reminds me of the prayer I learned as a child: “Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.”

The original text by the 19th century Irish hymnwriter and pastor’s wife, Cecil Frances Alexander, had a refrain which appeared as a fifth verse in the former Service Book and Hymnal that reads, “*Oh, dearly, dearly, has he loved, And we must love him too, And trust in His redeeming blood, And try his works to do.*” I learned that Alexander dedicated much of her life and her poetic skills to teaching the faith to children. To this purpose she wrote hymns as a vehicle for teaching Christian doctrine. For example, she wrote a series of hymns on the Apostles’ Creed, including “*All Things Bright and Beautiful,*” to teach about God as Creator. “*There is A Green Hill Far Away*” was written to teach about Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross.

The point this drives home for me is that, while the Christian faith is so deep and profound and beyond our ability to fully comprehend, yet its core message for our salvation is so clear and simple that the simplest child can grasp it.

Let us pray: *Heavenly Father, grant us such childlike faith that we will trust unquestioningly in your loving embrace and in our salvation through Christ’s atoning death on the cross. Amen.*



Saturday, October 24, 2020

Text: Isaiah 53:3-4

*“He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;
and as one from whom others hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him of no account.
Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.”*

As I write this last devotion of the week, it is Holy Saturday. Last evening, I experienced an online Tenebrae service that ended with one of my favorite Lenten hymns, “*Ah, Holy Jesus*” (ELW 349). Its author, Johann Heermann, was a Lutheran pastor in Germany in the early 1600’s. During his pastorate, Heermann and his parishioners suffered affliction and death from the religiously based Thirty Years War’ (Catholics and Protestants fighting each other) and its

accompanying plague. The hymn is deeply personal. Heermann undoubtedly heard people asking, “Why is this happening to me?” Heermann, himself, may have struggled with that question. He framed the question in the context of another, even deeper, question: “Why did Jesus, God’s very own Son, suffer and die so horribly?” His resounding answer is, “For me, for me.”

The genius of this hymn is that Heermann ends each of the five verses with a 3-word phrase. Put together, the five phrases form a poem that beautifully sums up the message of Good Friday:

*O most afflicted.
I crucified thee.
God intercedeth.
for my salvation.
not my deserving.*

As you read this, we will be well-past Good Friday. But we will encounter many Good Friday days as we struggle with life’s challenges, disappointments and losses. Let this hymn remind you, in a very personal way, that Jesus Christ died for YOU so that God may grant you days of Easter hope and victory, again and again.

Let us pray: *O Lord, our God, in the Good Friday days of our lives, remind us of your undeserved grace and mercy that led you to offer your own Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. May we discover and rediscover your love for us in Easter moments throughout our days. Amen.*

