Lenten/Easter Special Events and Services

Tuesday, February 9 - **Shrove Tuesday** Meal, 6:00 PM

Wednesday, February 10 - **Ash Wednesday** services, 12:15 PM and 7:30 PM
(imposition of ashes at both services)

Wednesday, February 17—Bible Study Theme-Intro & 1st petition, 11:00 AM & 6:15 PM

Wednesday, February 24—Bible Study Theme-2nd & 3rd petitions, 11:00 AM & 6:15 PM

Wednesday, March 2—Bible Study Theme-4th petition, 11:00 AM & 6:15 PM

Wednesday, March 9—Bible Study Theme-5th petition, 11:00 AM & 6:15 PM

Wednesday, March 16—Bible Study Theme-6th & 7th petitions, 11:00 AM & 6:15 PM

Sunday, March 20 - **Palm Sunday**, 8:00, 9:00 and 10:30 AM services
6:00 PM Contemporary Worship

Wednesday, March 23 - **Holy Wednesday Program**, *Around the World in Word and Song: Christ Revealed in Music,* 7:00 PM in the Sanctuary

Thursday, March 24, **Maundy Thursday Worship**, 7:30 PM

Friday, March 25, **Good Friday Worship**, 7:30 PM

Sunday, March 27 - **Easter Sunday**

6:30 AM—Sunrise Service

7:30 AM—Easter Breakfast, Harkins Hall

8:00, 9:00 and 10:30 AM—Worship Services

6:00 PM—Contemporary Worship

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12:15 p.m. Wednesday Lunchtime Lenten Worship (until 12:45 p.m.)
with weekly celebration of Holy Communion. This short service should fit into a working lunch hour as well as allow our shut-ins the opportunity to attend weekday worship with out nighttime travel.

7:30 p.m. Lent Mid-Week Wednesday Evening Worship
This mid-week evening service is designed so that all Sunday worshipers will find many similarities, but there will also be some differences as well. Come and make these Wednesday worship opportunities part of your Lenten discipline.

MID-WEEK LENTEN SERIES: Petitions of the Lord's Prayer

February 17—Intro and first petition

February 24—Second and third petitions

March 2—Fourth petition

March 9—Fifth petition

March 16—Sixth and seventh petitions

Grace Lutheran Church's Congregational Care Ministry has assembled this devotional booklet thanks to the kind and faithful work of members and friends of our congregation. This year's theme, Favorite Hymn, has produced moving tributes. Many of the hymns were chosen because of the memories they evoked. There were memories of mothers, fathers or grandparents singing the hymn. Others spoke of hearing the hymn in Sunday School, at a special church service, at a funeral, by a choir, or in a special play. For one person the hymn was tied to old western movies seen as a boy on TV. Some people spoke about how the hymn aided the development of faith. Many people spoke about the outpouring of emotion the specific hymn produced. One person credited the hymn with a release of her shyness because she could sing the hymn "strong and loud" in a group. Hymns were viewed as prayers, sources of unification, little sermons, calls to service, sources of inspiration and ways to praise God.

It is our hope that these devotions will be meaningful to you. May they add to your preparation for Easter as you contemplate the life, death and resurrection of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Because we are including each selected hymn with the devotion, the booklet will be in two volumes. In this way, you can use the actual hymn as a part of your daily meditation. Sing it or say it to yourself. We have also tried to include many of the hymns as part of our Lenten worship services. Watch out for them as you attend on Sundays and Wednesdays.

Anticipating that we will be at worship on the Sundays during Lent, we have not provided devotions for those days, although there are two Easter hymns featured for Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God Colossians 3:16

Wednesday, February 10, 2016

Blest Be the Tie That Binds

Sometimes hearing a song can instantly transport us to another time and place. Such is the case with the old hymn "Blest Be the Tie That Binds." Whenever we sing it, I am immediately taken to Grover Corners, New Hampshire, and the choir rehearsal on a weekday night at the Congregational Church in Thornton Wilder's Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Our Town*. From there, I'm just a step away from the lives of Emily and George and all the townspeople and–in the playwright's genius–just steps away from my own life, too, for the play, like the hymn, is universal.

I cherish this hymn because it reminds us that we all share a common experience. In the play, Wilder captures this through the title of the three acts–Daily Life, Love and Marriage, and Death–and creates ordinary scenes (mothers preparing breakfast, children going off to school, neighbors chatting, fathers mowing the lawn...and then the sweetness of falling in love and a wedding...and finally the deep sadness of loss and a funeral). Our journeys on earth are very similar. The first verse of the hymn states this simply: "Blest be the tie that binds/Our hearts in Christian love;/The fellowship of kindred minds/Is like to that above." From there, another verse emphasizes that "our fears, our hopes, our aims are one." We share a common humanity.

I also embrace this hymn because it reassures us we are part of something greater. In the play, Wilder illustrates this in the address the local minister pens to his young parishioner: Jane Crofut, The Crofut Farm, Grover's Corners, Sutton County, New Hampshire, United States of America, Continent of North America, Western Hemisphere, the Earth, the Solar System, the Universe, the Mind of God." The hymn reminds us that we are joined in heart and that, one day, we'll dwell in "perfect love...through all eternity." As Christians, we believe God sent his Son to die for us that we might have eternal life.

Perhaps this Lenten season is a time to reflect on these blessings. At Grace we have a church family to turn to for comfort, understanding, and fellowship as we make our way in this world. But we also have Jesus to turn to for strength and forgiveness and love, a promise given to us by our heavenly Father. As we sing our Alleluias on Easter Sunday, let us remember "the tie that binds."

Let us pray…

Dear Lord, During this Lenten season–and always–let us rejoice in God's gifts to us: the blessings of this life and the promised blessing of eternal life. For that we are most grateful. Amen

Polly Dee Keiser McWilliams

Thursday, February 11, 2016

Be Thou my Vision

How many times have you listened on the radio and really liked a particular song that is playing? The music is catchy or for whatever reason, it sticks with you. How many times have you listened, but not **really listened** to the words? It's the tune, it's the beat, but **sometimes** the words also speak to you. With hymns, it's usually the words (the text) that make most hymns meaningful. They are sung to reflect the liturgical year and the weekly lesson. They speak from scripture, tell a story, and speak about a Holy occasion such as Lent, Easter, or Christmas. But it was the **tune** of *Be Thou My Vision* that got to me first; from an ancient Irish folk tune called *Slane* as a matter of fact. My research revealed that the text is attributed to an 8th Century Monk, Dallan Forgaill, as a tribute to St. Patrick's wholehearted loyalty to God. I liked the text, but what did these words really mean? With all the "thou" and "thee" in this old text, it can be hard for a 21st century ear to decipher. Just read the first verse:

Be Thou my Vision, O Lord of my heart;
Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art.

Thou my best Thought, both by day or by night,
Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light.

One day I sat down and actually read the words between the "thou's" and "thee's."

Take them away, and it's more clear, but obviously less poetic.

Be my Vision, O Lord of my heart; Nothing more but you Lord (you are all I need)

You are (should be) on my mind day and night, Waking or sleeping, you are my light.

This hymn is truly a prayer that we should seek God always. Replace those words with titles of God; vision, wisdom, soul, treasure, Ruler of all, and you begin to see a beautiful prayer this song is, to seek God each day and to continually refocus the direction of our life.

Let us pray…
I will make my prayer the last verse of this song:

Light of my soul, after victory won,
May I reach Heaven's joys, O heaven's Sun!
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
Still be my Vision, O Ruler of all.

AMEN

Brenda Palmgren

Friday, February 12, 2016

Beautiful Savior

Beautiful Savior was a popular hymn in my home congregation in Kutztown, PA. I have a vivid memory of my mother, next to me, confidently singing the alto line, which highlighted the song's beautiful harmony. My mother's fondness for the hymn was clearly communicated through her ardent singing. In short, she didn't hold back. In addition to the melody which starts hushed and then intensifies, this hymn is poignant to me because it reminds me of my mother. It was her passion for the hymn that fostered my appreciation for the song.

In addition to singing this hymn in church services, I've had the opportunity to sing an arrangement of *Beautiful Savior* in a choral setting, as well as hear the Gettysburg College Choir perform it a cappella, which was a very moving experience. Exploring the piece from a musical standpoint has added to my enjoyment of the anthem.

The anthem's lyrics are particularly meaningful to me. They are a tribute to God and the beauty of His creation. I feel God's presence most intensely in and through nature. The lyrics speak eloquently and tenderly of fair meadows and woodlands, robed in flowers of blooming spring; fair sunshine and moonlight, and bright sparkling stars. These images are identifiable (even to a child) and reference a God who blesses with gifts of the natural world. The hymn acknowledges God's awesome presence in nature, and then hits home with the message that Jesus is yet fairer, Jesus is purer, Jesus shines brighter, than all the angels in the sky. The stanza, *He makes our sorrowing spirits sing,* credits a God who delivers peace, happiness and hope beyond our understanding.

Let us pray…
Dear God, Thank you for the beauty of your creation and for the talents of many who are able to write lyrics that touch our soul and artists who express those words beautifully to each of us.

Barbara Schroeder

Saturday, February 13, 2016

Eternal Father, Strong to Save

William Whiting, 1825-75, survived a furious storm while on a Mediterranean voyage, and felt his life had been spared by God. Later, as Choirmaster at Winchester College in England, and inspired by the dangers described in Psalm 107, he penned the words of *Eternal Father* for an anxious choirboy who was about to embark on a trip to the United States. He addresses in successive verses the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

The music was written by John B. Dykes, an Anglican clergyman, who originally named the tune after a locale associated with a Biblical shipwreck. Melita was the island the Apostle Paul reached after his ship went down (Acts 28:1); today we know it as the isle of Malta.

In 1879 the later Rear Adm. Charles Jackson Train, an 1865 graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy and in charge of the Midshipman Choir, made the song a permanent part of the service. It still is today.

Winston Churchill had it sung on the HMS Prince of Wales when he had his mid-Atlantic meeting with Franklin D. Roosevelt. It was sung at FDR's funeral at Hyde Park, NY in April 1945, played in 1963 when John F. Kennedy's body was carried up the steps of the Capital, and at the funerals of Ronald Reagan, Gerald Ford, Richard Nixon, and Walter Cronkite.

I used to attend with some frequency chapel services at the Naval Academy, where our son went to school. Looking at the huge stained glass window rising in back of the altar which shows Jesus walking on water, and hearing the song, *Eternal Father*, sung as a prayer when the flag was brought down from the altar, has meant so much to me. Looking at those "boys" who were part of the service and those attending who were headed to protect us was awe inspiring.

Let us pray…
Keep us safe, Dear Lord. Not only those "in peril on the sea" but everywhere. Amen

Grace Antes Strong

Monday, February 15, 2016

Abide With Me

"I need your presence every passing hour.
What but your grace can foil the tempter's power?
Who like yourself my guide and strength can be?
Through cloud and sunshine, O abide with me."

Words delight me. I enjoy reading them, speaking them, and hearing them well employed, just the right one to aptly articulate a precise idea or eloquently express an exact emotion. A most marvelous word on which I have meditated, pondered, and mused is *abide*. Abide is a verb, both transitive and intransitive (grammar nerd alert!), and therefore, has multiple definitions; it can mean to remain, to endure, to dwell, to await, to accept, to bear, to stay, to continue, and even to tolerate.

19th century poet Henry Francis Lyle, who penned the lyrics to "Abide with me," implores God to remain with him (and us) in a darkening world when he feels helpless and in need of comfort. He seeks assurance asking the Lord to dwell with him even though change and decay surround him, reminding himself of God's constancy: "O Lord who changes not, abide with me." And he clings to God's promise that God remains ever his strength, guide, and presence through "every passing hour." God abides with us, never leaving, walking side-by-side through whatever life presents.

Knowing God abides with us is great comfort indeed. But are *we* not to abide with God as well? Ought we not daily to seek to stay the course, with our eyes resting on Him? Should we not fix our minds and hearts on Him, remaining in and relying on our Lord's omnipotent wisdom and love? And can we not accept the challenges and bear the struggles that come our way, knowing fully that God who loves us never forsakes us, even when we don't understand? Surely, just as God abides with us, we too can abide in Him by living in His "presence each passing hour."

Let us pray...

Oh Lord, I am so grateful that you abide with me, covering me with a love that never lets go, even when I trip or stumble. Please continue to walk with me each day as I seek to do your will. I praise your holy name. Amen.

-Ellen Campbell

Tuesday, February 16, 2016

Here I Am, Lord

Our Grace Lutheran mission statement reads “we are energized by the Holy Spirit and nurtured through God’s word and sacrament to gather, feed, and send people in the name of Jesus Christ.”

My favorite hymn asks, ”Who will bear my light to them? Whom shall I send?” and the answer is, “Here I am, Lord. I will go, Lord, if You lead me. I will hold Your people in my heart.”

When I was much younger I understood being “sent” to mean that I should be a missionary in a far off and dangerous place, but since there is a good deal of Jonah in me that never occurred.

A few years ago I decided that being “sent” meant going to Nicaragua on the yearly medical mission trip only to be curtailed for two years in a row by my own medical problems.

So- I prayed, “Here I am, Lord. I will go if You lead me.” What I discovered is that we are sent every day if we are open to God’s will. If we but trust God to guide us as we step out of our personal “comfort zones” He does send us to do His will.

For me it is to work with our homeless neighbors through the Out of the Cold ministry. But - there are many ways our church members are “sent” – to take communion or to deliver meals to shut-ins, to travel to other states to help rebuild after disasters, to make warm quilts for those in need, to teach children about Jesus’ love, to visit those in the hospital, to pack and ship gifts for Operation Christmas Child, to be the kind and loving word that brings comfort to the troubled heart; the list is endless.

I think the point is that we are indeed gathered and fed, but if we are truly followers of Jesus, we are also “sent” to spread the message of love and to do His will. “Here I am, Lord. I have heard you calling in the night. I will go, Lord, if You lead me. I will hold Your people in my heart.”

Let us pray…
Lord, I am constantly in need of prayer time to be with You. I want to follow you, Lord. Help me find that quiet time in my busy life to be solely with You, to understand Your infinite love, and to do Your will. Strengthen and guide me, Lord, to take your love to our hurting world. Amen.

Nancy Reinert

Wednesday, February 17, 2016

All Praise to Thee, My God, This Night

One of my favorite hymns is not sung very often at Grace. It is in the "evening" section of the hymnal. I first heard this hymn at Christ Lutheran in DuBois, when Steve and members of the Worship and Music team decided to do an evening service every Wednesday at 9:00 pm. The service was called Compline or Prayer at the Close of the Day. It was a quiet and comforting service. It did not include a sermon, just scripture, liturgy and one hymn – "All Praise to Thee, My God, This Night". I had never heard or sung this hymn before.

The hymn is short with a simple melody that is easy to sing. The words, however, are what speak to me. They serve as a perfect way to end each day. The first verse praises God for all the blessings He provided me on this day. The second verse asks God to forgive me for any "ill that I this day have done" The third verse talks about death, not always an easy subject, but the hymn writer asks that we fear it as little as our beds. The next verse asks for "sweet sleep" – sleep that will make me more able to serve God when I awake. Finally, the last verse is the doxology – familiar words of praise.

Is there any better way for us to end each day – praising and thanking God, asking for forgiveness, asking for peaceful energizing sleep and reminding ourselves to fear death as much as we fear going to bed at night?

I liked this hymn so much that I knew its page number in the green hymnal. I was happy to see it in the new ELW and even happier to see it used occasionally as part of our evening Lenten services at Grace. I copied it from the hymnal and sometimes sing or say it to myself before going to bed. It reminds me of God's constant presence in my life. It also reminds me to be open to new hymns. I was certainly touched by this one.

Let us pray…
Dear Lord, thank you for the work of hymn writers. Thank you for the inspiration and comfort they provide. Thank you also for all the days and nights we are provided. May we go to bed each night knowing that we are your children – forgiven, blessed and encouraged to share your love the next day. Amen

Lois Lynn

Thursday, February 18, 2016

Joy to the World

I ***LOVE*** Christmas music. Not only that, I am a person that listens to Christmas music year-round. Let me emphatically state I believe that in worship, Christmas music should be limited to the Christmas season. I also love the season and hymns of Advent, including *Prepare the Royal Highway* and *Rejoice, Rejoice, Believers*. But outside of worship, Christmas music blares while I am driving to work or listening to my ipod whether it's December, April, or July.

Due to my keen interest, I have read about Christmas carols and learned fascinating stories. *Silent Night* was originally written to be played by guitar because the church organ was out of commission on Christmas Eve. Richard Smith wrote the words for *Winter Wonderland* while recovering from tuberculosis in Scranton. Felix Mendelssohn composed the tune to *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing* as a tribute to Johann Gutenberg and his invention of the printing press.

But probably the most thought-provoking research on Christmas music I have ever read is a favorite hymn of mine: *Joy to the World* (ELW #267). Why do I consider it so thought-provoking? Because *Joy to the World* was not written to be a Christmas carol. There's no mention of shepherds, a manger, angels, the wise men or any other elements with which we associate a Christmas carol.

Isaac Watts wrote *Joy to the World*, based on Psalm 98, about the second coming of Jesus. It is found in the Advent section of the ELW, not Christmas. Advent is a time, not only to prepare for the celebration of the birth of Jesus, but also a time to prepare of the second coming of Christ. When I read the lyrics of *Joy to the World* through this new filter, it brought a whole new meaning to me. It is certainly not wrong to sing at Christmas when we celebrate Christ's appearance as a babe in Bethlehem. But *Joy to the World* is appropriate to sing any time of the year.

As we journey through Lent with our eyes to the cross, may *Joy to the World* remind us that the whole earth will celebrate the glorious time when Jesus returns. Even the rocks will sing!

Let us pray…

Lord Christ, help me to prepare my heart for Your joyful return. In the name of the One who was, who is, and who is to come, Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Deanne Armagost

Friday, February 19, 2016

Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee

The music in this hymn is, obviously, what first stands out. Taken from the well-known fourth movement of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, the hymn is definitely one of praise and joy!

Henry van Dyke's lyrics emphasize that sense of praise and love for God. "Melt the clouds of sin and sadness, drive the gloom of doubt away;" "All thy works with joy surround thee, earth and heav'n reflect thy rays." "Field and forest, vale and mountain, flow'ry meadow, flashing sea, chanting bird, and flowing fountain call us to rejoice in thee."

What a beautiful scene! But it's the words in the third verse that hit me most — "Thou our Father, Christ our *brother* …" When we think of Jesus, we, of course, think Son of God, the Messiah, King of Kings, the risen Lord. But my *brother* — our brother — never really crossed my mind, even though it is in scripture. Mark 3:34-35 reads, "And looking at those who sat around Him, [Jesus] said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.' "

Jesus as a *brother* maybe doesn't sound as grandiose as Messiah and some of the other words we use to describe our Lord. But that's maybe the point. Jesus came down here to this sinful world not only to save us but to *be* us. He became flesh and blood, and He lived life on Earth, suffered, and died as a man. He is our brother in arms when it comes to facing the challenges of this world.

When we're in a foxhole, either literally or figuratively, our brother Jesus is there with us. He always has our backs like no one else, and is ready to lift us out of those foxholes and walk side-by-side with us through life and death.

And through His example, He also looks for us to — as part of the will of God — become loving brothers and sisters to each other. As we sing when we sing "Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee," "Teach us how to love each other, lift us to the joy divine."

Let us pray…
Dear Lord Jesus, our Savior and our Brother, in your death on the cross and resurrection, You performed the ultimate act of brotherly love. Help us to look to You and have the Holy Spirit burn in us so we can become better brothers and sisters to each other — and to You. Amen.

Dave Pencek

Saturday, February 20, 2016

Children of the Heavenly Father

For anyone like me who was raised within the Swedish expression of the Lutheran Church, the hymn "Children of the Heavenly Father" is as familiar as a nursery rhyme, as beloved as a dear friend, and as stirring as a national anthem. The lyrics were written by Lina Sandell-Berg, who was born in Sweden in 1832. Women of Lina's day were deprived of so many fundamental rights, including the ability to become ordained Lutheran pastors. But Lina, daughter of a pastor in the Church of Sweden, preached perhaps the most powerful and memorable of all sermons with this hymn text, which she wrote when she was in her late teens. This gifted and prolific theologian-in-verse would go on to write approximately 2,000 hymn texts in her lifetime, which spanned until 1903.

Why is this hymn so popular among Swedish Lutherans? I think it is because it encapsulates the totality of God's love throughout our life, similar to the way that "Borning Cry" does for a different generation of Lutherans. Lina's gentle hymn text, set to an old Swedish folk song, is commonly played at both baptisms and funerals. It speaks of God's tender love, his merciful provision for us, and his constant care. I'm especially moved by the simple line in the fourth verse that proclaims the comforting promise that "God his children ne'er forsaketh."

Whenever I sing this hymn I'm transported back to Tabor Lutheran Church in Kane, the congregation in which I was raised. The faithful saints of Tabor typically sang the hymn in Swedish. As you can see, our ELW hymnal still preserves the first verse in its original language. From its very first notes, "Children of the Heavenly Father" floods my mind with precious memories, including my first communion, my confirmation, our annual St. Lucia festival with the Lucia Queen's crown of flaming candles, and of course that sturdy old wooden font where water mixed with God's steadfast Word poured over my head at my baptism on March 20, 1966. Just imagine how "at home" I felt at Grace when I discovered that we have a banner that contains the lines of this treasured hymn! This hymn has richly blessed my life. And one day far in the future at my funeral, the words and music of "Children of the Heavenly Father" will sing me home to heaven.

Let us pray…

Gracious Lord, thank you for tenderly caring for me. In your grace you claimed me in baptism and have never stopped loving me even when I felt unlovable. Thank you for your steadfast care. Never forsake me. Draw me close to you and never let me go. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Rev. Scott E. Schul

Monday, February 22, 2016

For the Beauty of the Earth

A few years ago I attended an outdoor worship and we sang, “For the Beauty of the Earth”. The singing of this hymn touched me, as I enjoyed the beauty of the outdoors during the service. At the time, I was looking for new songs to sing for bedtime with my daughter, so I memorized this hymn, and have greatly enjoyed singing it. I relate to the imagery in this hymn of the beauty and wonder of the Earth. Being outside in nature often inspires me, makes me feel closer to God, and gives me peace. Also, I relate to the author’s admiration of how our ears, eyes, heart, and mind work together in “mystic harmony.” The experience of music through the senses can be inspiring and spiritually meaningful to me. Furthermore, I relate to the joyfulness of human love, through our connections to each other and our ability to love. Love of others and kindness (“gentle thoughts”) are also experiences that allow me to feel closer to God. Finally, in the fifth verse, how amazing God’s love of us is, with the gift of Jesus “best gift divine”, is the best connection of all to God! The verse I love the most in this hymn is “for the love which from our birth over and around us lies”. It speaks to God’s love of each and every one of us, just as we are, that has surrounded us from the beginning.

I have always been confused, however, by the wording in the refrain. What does the author mean by, “sacrifice of praise”? How is praise a sacrifice? I discovered that the words, “sacrifice of praise” are mentioned in Hebrews 13:15-16, which also interprets these words as “the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name” and “to do good and to share what you have”. In other words, to Love God and Love Neighbor! We can love God by praising him for these gifts, and we can love neighbor by sharing these gifts!

Let us pray...
Dear Lord, during this time of recognizing Jesus’ sacrifice for us, please help us to make the necessary sacrifices within our own lives in order to praise you and share with our neighbors the gifts you have given us of the earth and skies, the love all around us, our enjoyment of our senses, our human relationships, and most importantly our relationship with you. Amen

Susan Buda

Tuesday, February 23, 2016

Lift High the Cross

One of my favorite hymns is seldom heard, reserved for special days in the church year: *Lift High the Cross*. As soon as the first few sounds burst forth on the pipe organ, shivers travel down my spine as I remember that God is so much more majestic and magnanimous than anything I can possibly imagine. Not only does the hymn have a glorious tune and strong harmonies that evoke a feeling of majesty; it also reminds me to keep my focus on Jesus and what his life, death, and resurrection mean for me so that I can focus my energies on living mindfully and meaningfully.

Typically this hymn is sung on special days, when the cross is carried into the church by a crucifer. As the cross bearer leads the choir down the center aisle, it reminds me that nothing, and no one, should *ever* be ahead of our Lord and Savior in my heart, mind, or life. Of course, my daily actions too often stray from that ideal, but the cross reminds me where my mind *should* be focused. The hymn refrain begins, "Lift high the cross; the love of Christ proclaim till *all* the world adore his sacred name."

All four verses are powerful, but the first and third I find especially meaningful and relevant. The first calls to us all: "Come, Christians, follow where our captain trod, our king victorious, Christ, the Son of God." The words ask for *unquestioning commitment* to follow Christ. The third verse continues, "O Lord, once lifted on the glorious tree, as thou hast promised, draw us all to thee." This reminds me that even though I may stray repeatedly from God's will for my life, He draws me back to him through Jesus' ultimate victory over the grave.

Contemporary Turkish playwright and novelist Mehmet Murat ildan wrote, "I prefer to sail in a bad ship with a good captain rather than sail in a good ship with a bad captain." Sometimes the ships we sail in are rough and we must course through challenging waters. Aren't we lucky to be able to follow where our captain trod—and that he is our king victorious, Christ, the Son of God?

Let us pray…
Dear God, help me to see your cross before my eyes each and every day, from the moment I awake until you take me into your arms at night. ***Amen.***

Laurel Sanders

Wednesday, February 24, 2016

A Mighty Fortress Is Our God

As people volunteered to write devotionals for this booklet, I was stunned to see that no one picked that most Lutheran of all hymns, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” How could we not include that one? I know…there are many folks who have grown weary of singing this venerable old song. I even hear that sentiment at Synod worship planning meetings. And so if overuse of this hymn has caused it to grow stale for you, then I hope these few thoughts help breathe a bit of new life into this most iconic and emblematic expression of our faith and heritage.

Martin Luther wrote this hymn in the late 1520’s. He was a gifted musician and composed the music too. Our ELW hymnal contains two musical versions of “Mighty Fortress”; it is #503, with its slightly syncopated melody, that is the original. The more regular, march-like version (#504) that we more commonly sing is a more recent adaptation that renders the song more accessible (but, in my view, a bit less musically interesting). Luther drew his inspiration for the hymn’s text from the first three verses of Psalm 46, which read: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.” You can well imagine why these verses resonated with Luther. His entire world was being shaken to the core. Politically, socially, and theologically, everything seemed as if it was being torn apart at the seams, and there at the epicenter of it all was Luther himself. In the midst of such chaos and uncertainty, what else could he do but throw his hope, his trust, and his very future on God’s Word, Jesus Christ?

We too face a litany of woes and challenges. Often it seems as if the stability and sanity of our world is crumbling. Likewise, we each have our own personal and family challenges and worries. This hymn speaks a much-needed word of comfort to all of those trying circumstances. And so whatever struggles you are enduring, take heart, for “they cannot win the day” because, by the grace of God, “the kingdom’s ours forever!” Thanks be to God!

Let us pray…
Merciful God, you are our mighty fortress who provides stability, security, and hope in the midst of life’s storms. Keep us safely within your loving and protective embrace. Fill us with the assurance of your presence, for indeed on earth you have no equal! In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

Rev. Scott E. Schul

(Editor’s note- Someone else did pick *A Mighty Fortress*. See devotion for March 21.)

Thursday, February 25, 2016

Morning Has Broken

I love mornings – the quiet, the gentle light, a clean slate, another chance. This hymn celebrates these daily new beginnings. It compares them to that first morning's light when God walked in Eden, and the world was new.

During Lent, we ponder Christ's sacrifice on the cross. It was a time of darkness and horror we can barely comprehend. Yet, when Christ from the cross said, "It is finished", a great light beamed – MORNING HAS BROKEN!

Let us pray…
Dear Heavenly Father, open my heart to the light of your presence. Help me be with the Light of the World, Jesus Christ, your son. Amen.

Barbara Hackenberry

Friday, February 26, 2016

On Eagle's Wings

I love singing this hymn at church because of the beautiful melody as well as the meaningful words. Father Michael Joncas composed the hymn based on Psalm 91 for a friend's father's funeral in the late 1970's. While often sung during regular church services, people often choose this hymn for funerals, associating the "raising up on eagle's wings" with life after death. However, for me, the hymn is more about trusting God during our journey here on earth.

A friend of mine shared a video on Facebook this past week that relates well to this song. The video, titled "Just Jump" contains a speech that Steve Harvey gave his audience after filming a segment of "The Family Feud." Harvey opines that God gives every one of us a special gift or a talent. Sometimes the gifts are obvious, like being a great musician or especially talented in academics. Sometimes the gifts may seem more subtle like being a good listener or a good cook. It's up to us to develop our gifts. Whatever our gift may be, we need to practice it, refine it, and invest in it. We owe it to God. Harvey goes on to say that as we stand on the "cliff of life", we will see others struggling below and some soaring above. At this point, we need to take a chance and "jump" – putting our talents and gifts to the test. God acts as our parachute. The parachute may not open quickly, and you may get hit with a few rocks, but God will then guide you to soar.

God gave us the most precious gift, Jesus Christ. Through his death and resurrection, he forgives us for our sins and promises life eternal. This provides us with a freedom to let go of our past mistakes or our regrets that can hold us down. Whatever our talents or gifts may be, we owe it to God, Jesus, and ourselves to develop those gifts and hold nothing back. The refrain of the song tells us that God will raise us up on eagle's wings and make us shine like the sun. God holds us in the palm of his hand, and we just need to let go, do our best, and trust in God.

Let us pray…
Thank you God for each of our special gifts, most importantly, your son Jesus. Let us honor you by doing our best each day, and continually develop our gifts and talents while putting our trust and faith in you. Amen.

Jane Utzman Heatwole

Saturday, February 27, 2016

Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing

Rarely do lyrics AND tune energize me, but “Come Thou Fount” is such a hymn. Every verse, beat, and note fill my body and soul with inspiration making my soul and voice sing.

But one day the start of the second verse, “Here I raise my Ebenezer, Hither by thy help I’ve come” puzzled me. In one sense the meaning is clear, but I didn’t know if I had an “Ebenezer” and if I have one, where did I leave it? The puzzle sent me off researching the origin.

From a couple Bible dictionaries I learned the word Ebenezer translates to “stone of help.” The word appears only in 1 Samuel 4-7. The story is the Philistines and Isarel went to battle near the town, Ebenezer, and the Philistines won. The Israelites looking for a way to recover and gird their loins for the next battle moved the ark of the covenant (their physical sign of God’s presence) from Shiloh to their battle camp. However, the Philistines prevailed and to add insult to injury stole the sacred ark. After 20 years of oppression under the Philistines, the Israelites finally defeated their enemy. In 1 Samuel 7:12 the writer tells us: *Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Jeshanah, and named it Ebenezer; for he said, “Thus far the Lord has helped us.”*

Now I understood. Ebenezer was a physical reminder of God’s help. I started looking for my Ebenezers and found:

- Parents who read to me, a local public library providing books to read, all God’s instruments leading me to a vocation I love.
- A husband and 4 children God used to grow my capacity to love.
- Family and friends in my life who nurtured and continue to guide my faith.

And then I saw Ebenezers for others in my family, such as the scars on my Mother’s knees, reminder of knee surgeries giving her years of improved quality of life.

What are your Ebenezers? Look for them. You will see them. And may we all remember daily the water in the font reminding us God chose each of us as his own. The cross, the most significant Ebenezer of all, God’s saving act of grace for us.

Let us pray…
Dear Lord, thank you for the many Ebenezers in our lives, reminders of your help in the past and promise of your presence in our lives. Amen.

Dotty Delafield

Monday, February 29, 2016

Rock of Ages

It has been said that **Rock Of Ages** is in more church hymnals than any other English hymn .My regard for the hymn stems from my love of old black and white cowboy movies. On Saturday mornings, before my parents got up, I was seated in front of the TV, bowl of corn flakes in hand, watching whatever cowboy movie was on that morning.

What does **Rock Of Ages** have to do with cowboy films? Growing up in the Catholic Church (pre Vatican 2), I had never heard a hymn as part of a church service. My understanding of a Protestant church and its music came from the services shown in those cowboy movies. In times of turmoil the homesteaders would gather in the town's old church to pray away their current danger (bad guys, Indian attack, drought, etc.) while the minister led them in a hymn. Invariably that hymn was **Rock Of Ages**. Why was this hymn commonly used in these cowboy movies?

If you remember those cowboy movies, you may recall that they did not have unique story lines and did not win a lot of Oscar Awards. The general theme of all cowboy movies was:

1. local ranch experiences trouble because of local bad guys
2. wandering cowboy savior comes to town
3. town gathers in local church to pray for intervention
4. cowboy savior wins the day and makes the local cowboy world safe.

Because the same theme was carried out in most cowboy movies, it stands to reason that not a lot of thought went into the selection of the hymn to be used in the church service. Why not use the most popular hymn of the time, the one used in every other cowboy movie, **Rock Of Ages?**

What lesson can be taken from this young boy's early understanding of church and church music? As we approach the sacred time of the Easter season, let's not do so with the regimentation of the cowboy movie producer. Don't follow the time honored script for celebrating Lent. Look at old hymns like **Rock Of Ages** as new and invigorating. The message of **Rock Of Ages** can be as new today as it was to Lash LaRue in "Dead Man's Gold". Celebrate this Lenten season with renewed vigor!

Let us pray…

"Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee; let the water and the blood, from thy wounded side which flowed, be of sin the double cure; save from wrath and make me pure." Amen.

Bob Griffin

Tuesday, March 1, 2016

Blest Be the Tie That Binds

This hymn is sung by the choir in what I consider the greatest of all American plays, Thornton Wilder's OUR TOWN. At the end of the play, a young mother dies in childbirth. She is taken to the cemetery on the hill and asks the stage manager character if she might go back to life, just briefly. She tries but finds it too difficult. She says, "I can't. I can't go on. It goes too fast. We don't have time to look at one another. I didn't realize. So all that was going on and we never noticed. Take me back—up the hill—to my grave. But first. Wait! One more look. Good bye, goodbye World. Goodbye Grovers Corners. . . Mama and Papa. Goodbye to clocks ticking. . .and mama's sunflowers. And food and coffee. And new ironed dresses and hot bath's. . . and sleeping and waking up. Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you. Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it—every, every minute?" And the stage manager answers her. "No, the Saints and Poets, maybe . . .they do some." So the hymn that threads through the play speaks of binding our hearts in Christian love, about fellowship like that we find at Grace Lutheran, about compassion, about sharing our pain, our burdens, and our cares. The hymn tells us that we can find comfort in prayer.

Let us pray…

Dear Lord,

In this time of Lent, let us bind our hearts in Christian love. Open our eyes to the beauties and wonders of our world and to the sacrifice that was made by your Son in his love for us. Make us aware of the pain and suffering that is in our world and teach us to do what we can to dispel it. Let us try to live our lives with love and the fellowship of kindred souls but also to find compassion for those we do not know or understand.

In Jesus's name,
Amen

Helen Manfull

Wednesday, March 2, 2016

Fairest Lord Jesus

The first hymn I ever loved was “Fairest Lord Jesus,” in our hymnal as “Beautiful Savior”.

Having not been raised in the church, then coming home from summer camp wanting to find out everything I could about God, I listened to the Christian radio station in Houston. Mixed in there with a lot of very bad theology and political discourse was a lot of great 1980s “Contemporary Christian” music—some of it terrific, some truly awful—covering the whole range of 80s sounds from synthesizers, to fake rock and roll, to the truly grandiose. One day, cutting through all that noise like a laser, I heard this simple hymn. It was performed a capella, without instruments, starting with a single voice and then layering on part after part in a way that made my ears tingle. It was like musical glitter, sparkling and lovely.

I knew about Jesus the baby, Jesus the mighty, Jesus the mysterious, Jesus the dead-then-alive. To that point, my attraction to Jesus had been to the *idea* of Jesus. It was about his teachings, his importance, the necessity of Jesus.

But THIS was a different Jesus. Jesus the beautiful. Jesus in the meadows and woodlands; Jesus in a shining sky. Beautiful Jesus. The Fairest. The song, and the Jesus in the song, cut right through my brain, through all that thinking and reasoning I had been doing, and got into my musical heart. Thinking about Jesus was good, but through this song I started to *feel* Jesus.

Let us pray…
Beautiful Savior, delight us with your starlight and moonlight. Shine on the meadows and woodlands, and on us. Drizzle your beauty all over us like musical glitter. Let your love enter our brains, our ears and our hearts. Amen.

Anne Whitney

Thursday, March 3, 2016

For the Beauty of the Earth

I LOVE hymns. They have been an integral part of both the development and the sustenance of my faith. I caught this love from my Dad. I can't begin to count the hours I spent in the back seat of our car while radio or family hymn sings accompanied our travels. Each Sunday when we returned from church, my Dad and I would sit at the piano and sing our way through his/our favorite hymns. Dad sang along, loudly, in his very atonal voice. Even now, when I hear one of those hymns, I can hear him singing along in the echo of my mind. This particular hymn was not on our usual Sunday playlist although I was familiar with it. My childhood congregation sang it yearly at Thanksgiving because of its glorious elements of praise for our creation: *"For the beauty of the earth, for the beauty of the sky."*

In 1976 I was boating on a lake near sunset. The night sky with its pale new stars was ahead of me, the orange glow of sunset behind me, and both the new night and the waning day were reflected below me in the water. I was in the midst of the beauty of both earth and sky and I felt surrounded, but not just by beauty, but by love. Unbidden, the words of this hymn came to my mind: " *for the love which from our birth, over and around us lies".* I felt surrounded by the love of God, Creator of the beauty, but also by the love of my family that, like God's love, had been over and around me from birth:*"for the joy of human love, brother, sister, parent, child".*

In the years since, this hymn has continued to elicit strong feelings in me. I still love its praise for the beauty of God's creation and its thanksgiving for the all encompassing love of God and family. But as time has goes by the line *"friends on earth and friends above"* has added impact to the meaning of this hymn. It reminds me of beloved family and friends who are now a part of the "great cloud of witnesses".

Let us pray...
Thank you, Creator God, for all the love that *"over and around us lies."* Amen

For the beauty of the earth,
For the beauty of the skies,
For the love which from our birth
Over and around us lies,
For the beauty of each hour
Of the day and of the night,
Hill and vale, and tree and flow'r,
Sun and moon, and stars of light
For the joy of human love,
Brother, sister, parent, child,
Friends on earth, and friends above,
For all gentle thoughts and mild,
Lord of all, to thee we raise
This our hymn of grateful praise.

Alice Griffin

Friday, March 4, 2016

Precious Lord, Take My Hand

This hymn was written by Rev. Thomas A. Dorsey in August 1932. It was in response to his inconsolable bereavement on the death of his wife, in childbirth, and his infant son who died two days later.

In researching *Precious Lord*, I found out it was Martin Luther King, Jr.'s favorite hymn. He often invited Mahalia Jackson to sing it at civil rights rallies to inspire crowds, requested she sing it at his funeral, and also requested it to be played at a mass he was due to attend the night he was assassinated in April 1968. It was also a favorite of President Lyndon B. Johnson's, and it was sung by Leontyne Price at his funeral in 1973.

Many artists (including Elvis Presley, Tennessee Ernie Ford, Ike and Tina Turner, and Engelbert Humperdinck) have recorded this hymn, and Jim Reeves' version my be one of the best known of all. It was recorded as the "B" side of his single, "This World is Not My Home" in 1965.

Last year, 2015, saw the passing of many close relatives and friends. For this reason, *Precious Lord* has a special meaning to me because when I sing it, I am reminded of how our Lord guided all of them home. Some had to suffer lengthy illnesses, some suffered for a short time, and for some it was sudden and over quickly.

My Mother, Hazel Shemas, was one of those individuals who went to be with our Precious Lord. So many times she told me she was tired, she was weak, and she was worn. But through it all, she was preparing herself on a daily basis, as well as all of her family, for her end here on earth. She wasn't afraid of dying and would tell us she had lived much longer than she thought she would, and not to cry when she was gone. The *Portals of Prayer* and *The Church in Season* from Grace were read faithfully by her until a week before her death. Two days before my Mother died, Pastor Alison (and Simon) visited her in the hospital and told all the family she looked very peaceful. I knew then our Precious Lord was beginning to lead her home. *Precious Lord* was played during the Prelude at my Mother's funeral service.

Let us pray...
Precious Lord, lead us home with joy and thanksgiving for a life well-lived and knowing that we have done our part to serve you while here on Earth. Amen

Sharon A. Rivell

Saturday, March 5, 2016

On Our Way Rejoicing

While perhaps not my favorite hymn – there are too many to list only one-*On Our Way Rejoicing* has a special meaning for me. Written in the 1800s, it still carries a message to today's worshipers. The text is by John S.B. Monsell who wrote two other hymns in our hymnal and the tune was written by well-known Frances R. Havergal.

In a former church, many years ago, a visiting missionary gave the day's sermon. Our much loved Associate in Ministry at that time had previously been a missionary to Tanzania – where, at that time, missionaries were a new endeavor for our Lutheran Church. Her friend was the one giving the sermon that day. This lady's words conveyed a very bright outlook on her work as a foreign missionary and delivered a very positive message concerning those people of Africa and to those who supported them.

She used this hymn to emphasize how, placing our trust in God, the world would be a much brighter and better place. It was the closing hymn for that day and I sang that in my mind several times thereafter… *on our way rejoicing, gladly let us go….O blest God of love.*

It seems we need this reassurance these days when there are so many troubles in this world. Perhaps it can brighten our attitude, put us in a positive mood and help us to show more thankfulness and help others when and where we can - to love others as God loves us.

Let us pray…
O God, our guide and our redeemer, be with us this day and throughout our lives. Show us how to love each other and help all people to rejoice in your goodness and kindness. Amen

Joan Denny

Monday, March 7, 2016

Amazing Grace

My favorite hymn is *Amazing Grace*. I can sing all the words. I like to sing it in Sunday School with my friends. I like to sing it with my family. I like to sing it because I like to believe in God and I like to believe in Jesus Christ.

My Dad says, “Grace IS amazing!” I think so too.

When I am sad, this song makes me happy.

Let us pray…

Dear God, thank you for Amazing Grace. Thank you for taking care of me. Thank you for loving me. Amen

Matthew Campbell (transcribed by his mother)

Tuesday, March 8, 2016

Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow

I grew up attending a United Methodist Church in Virginia. Each week, our response at the close of offering was to sing “Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow,” also called the Doxology. An online search reveals that the word doxology comes to us from the Greek word δοξολογία, from δόξα, *doxa*, "glory" and -λογία, -*logia*, "saying," and is a short hymn of praise or thanksgiving. The doxology was written by Bishop Thomas Ken (1637-1711) to the tune of “The Hundredth.”

The hymn has stayed with me throughout the years because of its message and upbeat tune. It's difficult to sound sad when you're belting out a sincere thank you that repeatedly starts with “Praise.” And, just as all believers are invited to the Communion Table, all are also invited to join in the praising, both those on and above Earth. Though the second stanza below is not in our Hymnal, it is one that I remember from the complete Doxology. It's a comforting thought to know that life goes on, perpetually, with God's love.

The hymn itself works perfectly as a prayer.

Let us pray…

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;

Praise Him all creatures here below;

Praise Him above, ye heav'nly host;

Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

As it was in the beginning;

Is now, and ever shall be;

World without end;

Amen, Amen.

Amy Evanego

Wednesday, March 9, 2016

Take, Oh, Take Me As I Am

Take, oh, Take me as I am:
Summon out what I shall be;
Set your seal upon my heart and live in me.

Since there are so many different songs in our hymnals that I am fond of and find meaningful, I am not certain that I actually have one favorite hymn. There are so many. This is one of the songs that means a great deal to me. It is simple and beautiful: short, melodic, and meant to be sung over and over, like a repetitive prayer.

Our world and our days are filled with so many demands and deadlines. There are long lists of things to do, people to contact, and things to get done. We are always striving for high standards and lofty dreams of what could be. Sometimes it seems that the goals of achievement and accomplishment drive most of our waking hours, yet we never reach them.It feels as if what we can complete in any particular day, or even what we have to offer, is never enough. It feels as if we are never enough.

This little song reminds us that God welcomes us, and gathers us in with compassion. We are loved, just as we are. God knows all about the circumstances, choices, and realities that have shaped us into who we are today. Without rebuke or judgement, God helps us move into the future, calling out the potential that lies within.

You are enough. God is using you to love, care for, and serve the world.
You are not done growing and becoming. There is so much you are going to be.
You are claimed by God, and God's love and presence are within and around you.

If you look this song up to sing it, sing it gently, prayerfully, and over and over again. Let the tenderness of God ease your load. Let the love of God reassure you that you are enough just as you are. Let God move you into what lies ahead. Rest in God's presence and God's claim on you.

Let us pray...
Gracious God,
Your love and embrace comforts and heals me.
Help me to trust that you do take me just as I am.
Open my mind and my spirit to welcome how you are moving me.
Live in me, and transform me every day.
Amen.

Alicia Anderson, Campus Minister
Lutheran Campus Ministry at Penn State

Thursday, March 10, 2016

The Church's One Foundation

For me, a favorite hymn consists of two features: a tune I like and the lyrics, specifically how the words speak to me. One of my all-time favorite hymns is *The Church's One Foundation*. The tune is Aurelia. It's a simple melody which allows the lyrics to be highlighted. It's conducive to congregational singing that enables congregants to participate. Aurelia is a tune that I can hum hours after worship has ended. I simply love it.

This hymn contains some wonderful scriptural words and phrases: "by water and the word," "with his own blood," "with God, the Three in One," and "Lord, save us by your grace." But what about "heresies?" "schisms? Why would the author, Rev. Samuel J. Stone, include such strong and divisive terms? The origin of the hymn provides an explanation. Around 1862, a controversy was brewing in the Anglican Church in South Africa. John Colenso, a bishop of Natal, had published a book which questioned the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch among other claims. Bishop Robert Grey of Cape Town, claimed jurisdiction and had Colenso deposed for heresy. Colenso appealed to a secular court and was reinstated. This created a schism in the South African church that lasted until Colenso's death. Rev. Stone supported Bishop Grey and was inspired by the turmoil to write a series of hymns based on the Apostles' Creed. *The Church's One Foundation* is based on "the holy catholic church, the communion of saints." The third verse references the controversy with Colenso.

I believe controversy has been and will always be part of the church. Whether it is changing Sunday School curriculum or traditional v. contemporary worship or same-sex marriage, disagreement will exist. But a divide does not have to develop if we keep in mind the first line of this hymn, "The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ, her Lord." ("For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ." *1 Corinthians 3:11*) In my opinion, this line is the heart of the hymn. During this Lenten season, may we increase our prayer time and scripture reading to discern God's will for us, the church, and "peace forevermore."

Let us pray…

Almighty God, please help me to always remember, especially in times of controversy and disagreement, that Jesus is the foundation of the church. Amen.

Deanne Armagost

Friday, March 11, 2016

The First Noel

The word noel means Christmas season and the title and song describes the very first Christmas season. This hymn is so peaceful and serene, but also very descriptive of the night of Jesus' birth.

It reminds me of a storybook tale about the simple beginnings of our Savior. The image of a clear starry night with peaceful shepherds quietly guarding their flocks of sheep is very tranquil. The fact that Jesus is the light of the world is emphasized even before His humble birth. Once His light reached the earth the world has never been the same. The light was so special that it was visible both day and night.

Besides the shepherds, some wise men also saw the light of the heavenly star. They followed it by day and night until it stopped and when they reached his birthplace they fell on their knees to worship the newborn king. Those wise men knew that the baby Jesus was the king of all and gave Him gifts to celebrate His birth.

In the future, this little baby would sacrifice His lifeblood to save all mankind. This hymn, though common and straightforward, states it all.

Let us pray…

Heavenly Father, thank you for the gift of your son Jesus who enables us to have eternal life. Amen.

Don Burris

Saturday, March 12, 2016

Christ the Life of All the Living

Lent is a time of the year when we come more penitential in our thoughts, more reflective in our prayers and more somber in our worship. We contemplate our sins and strive to come closer to God and Christ through more prayer or worship (or, for some, giving up some type of luxury). Lenten music is so beautiful, especially the 17th and 18th century melodies. For me, this Lenten hymn stands above the rest and is one I feel that we should include in worship all through the year. Though it fully references Christ's suffering and death, it is also a hymn of praise and thanksgiving for all that Christ has done for us. For me, this hymn has it all--meaningful words and a beautiful tune, which is actually quite up-beat for a Lenten hymn. So many times when I witness beauty or joy or just feel exultant about life, this phrase in the hymn enters my mind "Thousand thousand thanks are due, Dearest Jesus unto you. " Our spiritual well-being would be nothing without Christ suffering great affliction, and choosing "to be tormented, that my doom should be prevented." Christ has saved me through his suffering, and now "Life eternal I inherit." What a joy! "I will thank You ever more."

Let us pray…
Heavenly Father, Thank you for the gift of music and for those who so eloquently express your Word through lyrics and tunes. Open our hearts and minds so that through the words of the lyrist, we may come to a better understanding of You, and express our praise and thanks to You. "Through your suffering, death, and merit, Life eternal I inherit, Thousand, thousand thanks are due, Dearest Jesus unto you." Amen

Julianne Herman

Monday, March 14, 2016

Take My Life, That I May Be

I inherited most of my favorite hymns, mainly because I grew up in a musical family with a strong Lutheran heritage. The list is long, and probably includes many of your own favorites.

A year or two ago, I acquired a NEW favorite hymn. It was on a Sunday when my mood was gloomy and I was feeling sorry for myself: What is my purpose in this world? Am I always going to feel alone? Is there any place where I might fit in? Who will be with me as my life reaches its end? These are common themes for me, when my life seems to be over-burdened.

I don't remember anything else from that day, except for THE hymn. It wasn't the music that did it; it was how the words fit together as I became totally focused on their meaning: Take my life and let it be consecrated [to the Lord]. Maybe there was a reason why I was in this place, on this day. Each line of the hymn became highlighted poetry for me.

Later that day, I pulled out my home hymnal and copied the words onto a small piece of paper, placing it on the dashboard of my car (to this day). The magical words still jump out at me: ceaseless (praise), impulse (like the beating of one's heart), swift & beautiful (like a ballet dancer). And that's only the first verse… Take a look at the second and third verses to find that God welcomes your entire being, giving you a place in his Kingdom: You'll always have a purpose and you'll never be alone.

Let us pray…
Heavenly Father, Please help us to dedicate ourselves to your service. Help us to remember that our lives are blessed by following the teachings of your Son, Jesus Christ. Thus, it is our joy to walk in the ways of the Lord. Amen

Signed: Aunt B.

Romans 12:1-2
“Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. 2 Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

Barbara Vogler

Tuesday, March 15, 2016

For the Beauty of the Earth

I have been fortunate to travel to the British Isles, Scandinavia, and several other countries in Europe. We took our family on a camping trip through the national parks to California and back. This is a song that comes to mind most often when I am traveling and seeing natural sights that may be new or familiar. There are so many beautiful sights in mountains and beaches and valleys, that it is hard not to thank God for all of this beauty.

This is one of our older hymns, written in response to the beauty that surrounds us. People have responded to this beauty since antiquity with psalms of praise and beautiful cathedrals, to honor God. Do we still stop and notice this beauty? Do we notice the mountains shrouded in fog early in the mornings or the reds and purples of the evening sunsets, or the beauty in the kindnesses of the people we deal with daily? When we pay attention to the news it seems all we see is ugliness. But if we really look around, we can still see the beauty. The hymn ends "Lord of all, to Thee we raise, this our hymn of grateful praise".

Let us pray…

God of Beauty, thank you for the beauty that still surrounds us. Help us to be mindful of what you have given us, and guard it as a precious gem. Amen

Joann McCormick

Wednesday, March 16, 2016

We All Are One in Mission

The idea of selecting just one hymn for this devotion was a daunting task. How could I possibly pick just one meaningful song? My initial thoughts led me to *I Love to Tell the Story*. Singing about our need to share Jesus' story of love with new people, as well as our fellow Christians, speaks to the heart of Christianity. We are called to share Christ's love to the world. Then, during the eccumenical service of prayer and peace hosted at Grace, I knew that I could no longer write about just one hymn. At the end of worship, we sang *We All are One in Mission*; the inspirational lyrics and soaring melody immediately called my name. In these trying and, sometimes, dark times, it is incredibly easy to build walls, isolate ourselves, and accentuate our differences. Throughout this hymn, we are reminded that each of us has unique talents and gifts that must be united in Jesus' great love so that we can share His message with the world. The idea of "us" versus "them" needs to be forgotten. Our similarities are far greater than our differences. As we journey to the cross during this Lenten season, we should remember Jesus' new commandment that we love one another as He has loved us. If we make our love for Christ the center of our lives, all of the other pieces will fall into place. Yes, we have differences; no, we will not always agree, but if we make Jesus our focus, then we can truly come together in our mission to help all people know Christ's love. I know that I love to tell the story, do you?

Let us pray…
Dear Heavenly Father,
Help us to search for Jesus in every person that we meet. Make us bold in our love for Christ. Empower us to share the old, old story of Jesus and his love. Unite us in our mission that all may know Christ's love. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Sarah Rodgers

Thursday, March 17, 2016

Here I Am, Lord

Singing is not one of my talents as my husband, son and those in neighboring pews at Grace can attest to. So why did I volunteer to write about my favorite hymn? I love to sing. Singing hymns is a meaningful part of worship. Some of the familiar hymns stir fond memories. I can hear my father next to me in church singing "Just As I Am" and see my grandmother playing "In The Garden" on her piano in the room she called a parlor.

While there are many wonderful old favorites, a contemporary hymn stays in my heart long after the music ends. "Here I Am, Lord", also known as "I, the Lord of Sea and Sky" written in 1981 by Fr. Daniel Schuttehas reached popularity close to "Amazing Grace".

"Here I am, Lord" recalls Isaiah's response in Chapter 6:8: "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!'" During some of the most difficult times when the future looked bleak for the Kingdom of Judah, Isaiah had a vision in the temple in Jerusalem which called him to serve the Lord.

God, "the Lord of sea and sky" sees our broken world today of "people's pain" and "hearts of stone ". We face many of the same inequities and difficulties that Isaiah faced. Through this hymn's words, we are being called to be God's disciples in State College as Isaiah was called in Jerusalem.

God asks through this hymn …"Who will bear my light to them? Whom Shall I Send?"

How will you respond?

Here I am, Lord. Is it I Lord?
I have heard you calling in the night.
I will go, Lord, if you lead me.
*I will hold your people in my heart.**

God works in us and through us when we listen and answer His call. May your Lenten devotions lead you to spiritual ways to, not only sing "Here, I am Lord", but to respond with giving your time, talent and treasures to love and serve our Lord.

Let us pray…
Dear Lord, You are the light of the world. Open my heart to answer your call. Amen.

Anne Rohrbach

Friday, March 18, 2016

O Sacred Head Now Wounded

It seems like my favorite hymn changes many times during the year. Sometimes the melody is pleasing, sometimes the lyrics and the melody just seem to work together and sometimes my favorite hymn simply reflects my mood. However, a hymn which never fails to speak to me and render me humble and grateful is "O Sacred Head…." I tried to memorize this hymn several years ago during Lent. I was overcome with emotion as I worked through it. For me, the words created a scene in which I was talking with Jesus one-on-one. Through the hymn I could tell Jesus how I could see in his presence, his face, his wounds, what he had gone through for me. I could tell him in the words of the second verse that I could see how deeply my sin paled his face, caused his pain, affected his being. ("…mine was the transgression, But thine the deadly pain.") The opening lines of the 3rd verse – "What language shall I borrow to thank thee, dearest friend…." Does it seem to you like Jesus is standing before you and you are talking with your dearest friend as you think through these words? And the plea at the end of that verse, "Lord, let me never, never Outlive my love to thee." I think all of us strive for this. And the final stanza, which helps us prepare for our own death – "Lord, be my consolation; Shield me when I must die." It assures me that death here on earth brings us into the arms of Jesus. If possible, take time to read the words of this hymn before Holy Week. Perhaps it will speak to you in a special way and prepare you for this sacred time.

Let us pray…
Dear Jesus, My heart swells with immeasurable gratitude and awe, yet sorrow, at the cost of my redemption. Please help me to strive daily to bring honor and glory before you, and let me never outlive my love for you. Amen.

Carolyn Fishburn

Saturday, March 19, 2016

I Was There To Hear Your Borning Cry

"When the evening gently closes in, and you shut your weary eyes, I'll be there as I have always been with just one more surprise."

I first heard this hymn sitting in an elementary school cafeteria with huge posters of smiling fruits and vegetables on the walls. Fifteen or twenty of us were sitting on folding chairs in front of a make-shift altar – adventurous souls hoping to start a satellite campus for our church in a "bedroom" community in Maryland. As we sung the hymn, to my great embarrassment, by the last verse I was fighting back tears. So what was it about this simple song?

The Lutheran tradition has hundreds and hundreds of beautiful hymns, to say nothing of the beauty of our liturgy and the words of our sacraments. This song had a simple, lively tune; the words aren't complicated and there are no beautiful metaphors, no poetic symbolism, Yet every time I hear it, I am incredibly moved.

At first, I thought maybe it was because my mother had just passed, knowing that she was getting that "just one more" surprise. But as the years passed, I read some thoughts that others have about this hymn and I think it's much more.

It's written from God's point of view. God is speaking to us as a friend, a family member – someone who has loved us every moment of our lives and beyond. As we sing it, we can't help but figure out what "verse" of life we're in. It reminds me of how I felt watching my daughter throughout her life or my parents as they neared the end of theirs.

We, as Christians, are struggling with so many weighty and complex things – immigration, world hunger, sharing of our sacraments, on and on. And it's right that we tackle these things with prayers for discernment. But what a comfort it is, at the end of the day, when we are tired and frustrated and confused, to have God's "love song." The simple, but incredibly precious knowledge that He is with us every moment from birth to the "just one more surprise." So if we are in church together when we sing this hymn again, I will still reach for the tissue…

Let us pray…
Thank you, God! Thank you for the incredible gift of your love – individually to each and every one of us, through every second of our lives and beyond. Thank you!

Lynn Rogers

Monday, March 21, 2016

A Mighty Fortress Is Our God

How many songs do you know? From hymns to pop songs to lullabies, how many tunes can you hum or sing? I wondered this about our red Lutheran hymnal. So, I sat down at my piano and paged through the hymnal in my attempt to try to pick my favorite hymn. In the main part of the hymnal, there are about 650 hymns. I could easily sing over 200 of them! I had a REALLY hard time picking just one. The one I have chosen is A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.

This hymn was written by Martin Luther and is one of his most well-known. It is based on Psalm 46 whose opening line is: "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble." Verse 7 notes "The Lord Almighty is with us: the God of Jacob is our Fortress."

There have been many times in my life where I have been in trouble. This hymn reminds me that my Savior is fighting for and with me, always. There are many things in my life that are against me or trying to steer me in the wrong direction. "Hordes of devils fill the land, all threatening to devour us." The hymn also reminds me that I cannot do it alone. "No strength of ours can match his might." I am lost without Him. But, he is always at my side, and I never have far to look. He will always prevail! No one can win over Him. If He is with me, no matter what happens, I will be His and His kingdom will be mine—forever.

I am a somewhat shy person and not always adept at talking about our Lord with other people. However, give me a song, and you'll have no doubt how passionate I can feel about singing and praising the Lord. (I'm sure the folks who sit in front of me in church can attest to this fact!) This is a bold and confident song celebrating the Lord. Never be afraid to sing this one strong and loud!

Let us pray…
Thank you, God, for being my sword and shield. Help me to always remember that no matter what may happen to me in my life, only you will win the day. Thank you for being my champion. Amen.

Angie Hardyk

Tuesday, March 22, 2016

The Lord's My Shepherd

The Lord's My Shepherd is one of my favorite hymns. When I was going to school, Bible reading was a part of our opening exercises. The most often used book was Psalms. As a result, I learned many by memory, which serves me today. In my third grade Sunday School in the Congregational Church in West Boylston, Massachusetts, we had to memorize the twenty-third psalm to receive our Bibles. The church had a big stained glass window of the Good Shepherd. I find this psalm very comforting and use it often.

When I have trouble getting to sleep I often use the hymn *The Lord's My Shepherd*. When I was in the choir in seventh grade, in the same church, many years ago we sang it as a duet. I learned both parts, so in my head I sing one part, then the other, then I put them together. The words of the twenty-third Psalm calm my spirit and put me into God's safe-keeping for the night.

Let us pray...
Dear God, please help us to remember that you are always there when we need you, to care for us and guide us through the difficult times in our lives, to calm our souls, quiet the waters, and lead us through green pastures. You are our Shepherd.

Joann McCormick

Wednesday, March 23, 2016

Come Now, O Prince of Peace

As a musician who enjoys different hymns for varied reasons, I chose to write about my favorite "NEW" hymn: *Come Now, O Prince of Peace*. Authored in 1947 by Korean composer Geonyong Lee, I appreciate its clear, straightforward message and equally simple melodic line (five notes and only four phrases; three are nearly identical). Beautiful harmonies portray strong contrasts; *dissonant* sounds of yearning are followed by *consonant* sounds of desired outcomes: unity and reconciliation.

The text reads:
Come now, O Prince of peace, make us one body. Come, O Lord Jesus, reconcile your people.
Come now, O God of love, make us one body. Come, O Lord Jesus, reconcile your people.
Come now and set us free, O God, our Savior. Come, O Lord Jesus, reconcile all nations.
Come, Hope of unity, make us one body. Come, O Lord, Jesus, reconcile all nations.

Unity and peace are simple concepts, but they are elusive and fragile. Whether we are looking at political and cultural differences on the world stage or opinions that divide our households, living together as one body doesn't mean we must sacrifice our values or beliefs. Perhaps we fail to achieve unity because we misunderstand what it means to be one.

God did not make us the same; where we live, the institutions and media around us, and the people and situations we encounter shape our beliefs. Pope John Paul II once wrote about his boyhood in Poland, saying he cherished regular outings with friends who had diverse opinions. They would argue their positions vigorously; afterward, they would slap each other's shoulders, a sign of respect for each others' carefully constructed and passionately delivered arguments. Outings ended peacefully because they loved, valued, and respected each other.

Peace between faiths and nations is elusive; political and social issues in our own country also make it challenging at home. Maybe we should *pray* for those whose opinions differ from our own: *not* that they should "convert" to our own "wiser" opinions, but that they—and we—can learn to see, respect, value, and love each other despite our differences. The *consonant* sounds of unity and peace can only be achieved if we can see God despite the *dissonance* around us.

Let us pray…
Dear God, help us to see the beauty of creation in each person we meet. Help us to follow your lead, respecting and loving all of your creation. Amen.

Laurel Sanders

Maundy Thursday, March 24, 2016

Ah, Holy Jesus

There are several reasons why I am drawn to a hymn. It could be the tune, how the hymn affects me, what it reminds me of or what it helps me to picture. These are all reasons that attract me to a hymn; but the most important reason, for me, is the words of the hymn and the theology they reflect.

I'm one of those people who actually like Lenten hymns. The words of Lenten hymns, more than many others, reflect the suffering and death of Jesus. Lenten hymns emphasize the cross and my sin, my unworthiness and my only hope which is the cross of Jesus Christ. That's the real meat and potatoes of our faith. The hymn *Ah, Holy Jesus* does this as well as any hymn I know.

The first stanza reflects on our (my) rejection of Jesus. The second is my all time favorite stanza of any hymn. It emphasizes my guilt and my involvement in His crucifixion because of my sin. "I it was denied thee; I crucified thee!" That is powerful stuff that gives me chills when I sing it.

The third and fourth stanzas continue the story. Jesus, my good shepherd sacrificed himself for me – one of his sheep. All his suffering was for my (our) salvation. The last stanza is my response to it all. I will adore and praise Jesus in worship now and forever. The last line of stanza five is my second favorite part. In true Lutheran fashion, we are asked to think on Jesus' love "unswerving", not "my deserving".

Hymns, to be great hymns for me, need to be little sermons. This hymn tells the story of Jesus' passion, our guilt, our sin, our forgiveness and then our response. It makes the grade!

We will sing this hymn on one of the Sundays in Lent and then, most importantly, on Good Friday during our Tenebrae worship. Watch for it, sing it, listen to it – and allow it to do for you what it does for me – helps me to love and appreciate Jesus for all he has done.

Let us pray…
Ah Holy Jesus, I have offended you. I have caused your suffering and death. Thank you. Thank you for forgiving me. I do not deserve it but I humbly accept it. Help me respond in worship to You and acts of love to my neighbor. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Pastor Lynn

Good Friday, March 25, 2016

Were You There

We will always remember the momentous events that have changed our lives – purchasing our first home, the birth of our first child, the death of a loved one. The impact of those events remains with us for the rest of our lives. During the quiet times in our lives we can even experience the emotion of those long-ago events again and again and again.

Our anonymous hymn writer similarly draws us to be engulfed by the suffering and death of Jesus a long time ago on the cross.

"Were you there when they crucified my Lord?"
"Were you there when they nailed Him to the tree?"
"Were you there when they laid Him in the tomb?"

These haunting words challenge us during this Lenten season to experience the events on the cross that unfold before us with all of our being and all of our emotions. We are drawn to the cross because it is our sin that crucified Him and nailed Him to the tree. Jesus's frail body that hung on the cross was weighed down by the heavy burden of sin – our sin.

"….Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble…."

We tremble because that is the only way that we can respond when we feel the brokenness of the world around us and feel our own brokenness.

But it is at the foot of the cross that we also hear the powerful words of our suffering Jesus as He reached out to Mary, as He reached out to the thief on the cross, and yes even as He reaches out to us in our brokenness – "Today you will be with Me in paradise." Jesus' powerful words of love from the foot of the cross break through our trembling. Jesus' powerful words of grace replace our broken trembling with thankful trembling for His life-giving forgiveness from the cross. The foot of the cross is where we need to be, not only during this Lenten season but throughout our lives. Are you there?

Let us pray…
As we humbly stand at the foot of the cross, open our hearts and minds to your great love for us and open our hands in service to those all around us. Amen.

Bob Voigt

Saturday, March 26, 2016

Alleluia! Jesus is Risen!

As holidays go, I like Easter better than Christmas. It has less of the secular trappings of Christmas and it reminds me of the essence of Christianity – Christ's death and resurrection. I can rejoice in what that means for me – the miracle of my own resurrection after I die. Nothing says that more to me than this hymn.

The hymn is set to the same tune as "Earth and All Stars", a lively melody that is fun to sing. That melody and the bright images the hymn provides make it a meaningful and joyful song, even though it talks about death.

Its verses and refrain are full of good news. The first verse speaks of "trumpets resounding" because of the miracle that "God has in sight." The second verse talks of Jesus being our blessing as he walks with us, tells his story, opens our eyes and constantly surprises us. I especially like the fourth verse where the author joyfully describes death with phrases such as: "weeping be gone", "sorrow be silent", "death put asunder" and "O grave be open". The exultant refrain after each verse consistently drives this home when it says, "Jesus is risen and we shall arise. Give God the glory! Alleluia!" How can I picture death as something to dread or to fear after reading these words?

For me, however, the key phrase of this hymn is in the last verse where the hymn writer says, "Easter forever". We think of celebrating Easter on a specific day. At the most, in church we celebrate the Easter season for a few weeks in the spring. This hymn reminds me to celebrate Christ's victory over death not just on Easter Sunday, but every Sunday and every day.

Remember that Jesus conquered death and that he will conquer death for your loved ones and for you. We can celebrate that every day, not just at Easter. "Give God the glory! Alleluia!"

Let us pray…
Dear Lord, We praise you for all you do for us, but we are especially grateful for the death and resurrection of your Son ensuring us a place in your kingdom now and forever. Amen.

Lois Lynn

Easter Sunday, March 27, 2016

Jesus Christ Is Risen Today

I love a holiday—any holiday. I enjoy decorating and making my home festive from everything from St. Patrick's Day to Halloween. During the Christmas season, I'm sure it looks like Santa Claus has thrown up all over my house! Some of my favorite hymns are related to church holidays or seasons. One might think, given how much I enjoy celebrating Christmas, that my favorite hymn would come from that church holiday. However, it's Eastertime that you can find my favorite hymn—Jesus Christ Is Risen Today.

I love celebrating the resurrection of our Lord! In this hymn one can find all the reasons we rejoice in our Savior's triumph. "The pain that our Lord endured for us on the cross has procured our salvation" (verse 3). He "endured the cross and the grave for us sinners, to redeem and save" (verse 2). And now we "sing to our God above with praise and eternal love" (verse4). The best part of this hymn, for me though, is that we get to sing Alleluia at the end of each line—that's 16 times! The definition of Alleluia: exclamation, God be praised!

I believe this hymn embodies the true spirit of Easter. We are saved, not by our works and good deeds, but by the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He came to this earth, sent by God, to live among us and have the human experience. Then, to save me from my sins, he died a horrible death on the cross. And he did it all because he loves ME personally. He made the ultimate sacrifice so that I may know what it is to be truly loved. There is no greater love than this. We should rejoice in this with glad abandon. This hymn allows us to do just that—a true hymn of praise.

Let us pray…
Dear Lord, thank you for the ultimate sacrifice you made for us. May we always remember why you did it and rejoice in the knowledge of how much you love us. Amen.

Angie Hardyk