

Sermon

10/30/2022 (05/15/2022)

Get Thee Back to Hymnody!

The Hymnal as Devotional

Each year for Reformation Sunday, I choose a favorite sermon from the previous year and revise it for this day. This sermon was first preached May 15, 2022.

Pastor Dan

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Dear Eberhard,

All I want to do today is to send you a short greeting. I expect you are often with us here in your thoughts and are always glad of any sign of life, even if the theological conversation stops for a moment. These theological thoughts are, in fact, always occupying my mind; but there are times when I am just content to live the life of faith without worrying about its problems. At those times I simply take pleasure in the day's readings [from Scripture] – in particular those of yesterday and today; and I'm always glad to go back to Paul Gerhardt's beautiful hymns.

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These words come to us from a Nazi prison cell in July of 1944. They were written by DB to his closest friend a day after the execution of the Valkyrie Plot.

The Valkyrie Plot was an attempt to assassinate AH.

B was involved in helping to set it up.

When the plot failed, the Nazis quickly discovered Bonhoeffer's role. He was sent to a concentration camp, and in less than a year he was executed just days before American forces would liberate the camp's prisoners.

It's a story of deep tragedy but also a triumph – not a *triumph of the will* (to quote the infamous Nazi slogan) but a *triumph of faith*. According to an eye-witness, Bonhoeffer died after saying these words: "This is the end, [though] for me, the beginning of life."

Bonhoeffer's Life

Most of us at QAL have heard of Bonhoeffer. He is our patron saint of civil disobedience, a German Lutheran pastor and theologian who defied the Nazi regime almost from the beginning.

He wrote several modern Christian classics, including *The Cost of Discipleship*.

He taught at a seminary for the Confessing Church, which also opposed the Nazis, and he participated in Operation 7, a successful attempt to smuggle not seven but ultimately fourteen Jews into Switzerland using false papers in August and September of 1942.

What we may *not* know is the personal dimension of Bonhoeffer's faith, his struggle with doubt, his correspondence with Mahatma Gandhi, and how he agonized as a Christian pacifist over his involvement in the plot to kill Adolf Hitler.

His options were grim: either he take part in the attempt to take the life of another human being, even one as terrible as Hitler, or he become complicit for doing nothing as the Nazis slaughtered his Jewish brethren.

“There is,” he confessed, “no way out without guilt.”

A Sung Source of Inspiration

What we also may *not* know about Bonhoeffer is how much the hymns of our Lutheran heritage comforted him, especially in the last year or so of his life. As you heard or read a moment ago, he especially liked “the beautiful hymns” of Paul Gerhardt.

Gerhardt’s focus was on salvation by grace, an emphasis perfectly in keeping with his identity as a Lutheran pastor and theologian. By the end of his life in 1676, he had written 123 hymns, nine of which appear in the red hymnal we use for worship.

Of course, to Bonhoeffer, Gerhardt’s hymns inspired more than artistic appreciation. They also provided immense reassurance and strength to Bonhoeffer in the midst of circumstances most of us could probably never imagine.

“Every hour or so since yesterday,” Bonhoeffer writes in 1943, “I’ve been repeating to my own comfort Paul Gerhardt’s [Pentecost] hymn with the lovely lines ‘Thou art a Spirit of joy’ and ‘Grant us joyfulness and strength,’ and besides that, the words ‘If you faint in the day of adversity, your strength is small’ (Prov. 24), and ‘God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control (II Tim. 1)” (Bethge, ed., *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 53).

What a an eye-opening (or ear-opening) testimony to the power of our hymns! Not only can passages from Scripture convey the gospel or what Martin Luther calls the “encouraging news” of God’s radical grace, mercy, and strength. The hymns of our tradition do that as well! Yet, how often do we search the height and depth of these hymns for comfort?

How often do we mine them, as Bonhoeffer did, for consolation and reassurance?

How frequently do we *pay attention* to the lyrics when we sing them?

Not often, most of us (myself included) will likely confess. Our minds wander, not only sometimes during the sermon but when we sing.

The question is, why? Is it because the melody moves us to such an extent that we ignore the text?

Or have the hymns become so familiar to us that, like the Lord’s Prayer or the Apostles’ Creed, we no longer ponder their words? Or is it because those of you like me who identify as *musically challenged* spend so much time trying to figure out the melody that the language escapes us entirely?

I don’t know.

But my point here is simple: *words matter*. Think about how affirming it can be to hear “I love you,” or how devastating it can be to hear “You disgust me” or “I hate you.”

Bonhoeffer knew that, especially when it came to hymns. Do we?

Reflecting on our Hymns

Let me pause here to explain what came next when I originally preached this sermon back in May. (On Reformation Sunday, which is the day I preached this sermon, my tradition is to select one I preached during the past year that, to me, best conveys the gospel, hence the explanation of what took place in May.)

It was on the same day as the hymn festival that was held here to honor Virginia Stamey’s late

mother Janice. Janice served for years as the organist at Trinity Lutheran in Lynnwood, and so with her in mind I offered a few examples of how our hymns that day conveyed the gospel.

Today, in honor of Luther’s conviction that music plays an integral role in the proclamation of the gospel, I would like to do the same thing. Let’s begin with the first hymn (at the 10:30 service) by Martin Franzmann.

Like Luther, Franzmann grasps the power of the Living Word, the Word that has existed from the beginning. The Word that spoke creation into being.

The Word, as Franzmann puts it, that broke through the “darkness, dark as night and deep as death” with the light of God’s salvation. (To make the metaphor consistent, incidentally, we could say that the Word shattered the silence that came with the darkness.)

We hear the same message about God’s invincible love in our sending hymn, “A Mighty Fortress is our God.” Luther wrote this hymn, possibly during an outbreak of the plague in 1527, with the exception of the last stanza, which I added. I want you to notice two things about it.

First, like Franzmann, Luther refers to *the power of God’s speech*, and how, according to the third stanza, “one little word [from God] subdues” Satan, who represents and personifies death.

The last stanza I added with Bonhoeffer in mind. I wanted to clarify that it’s suffering love of God that conquers sin and death, not (as some people might assume) sheer force or brute strength. It’s the love of God that makes God invincible and almighty, for not even death can separate us from His love in and through Jesus Christ (see Rom. 8:38-39).

Nobody understood that better than Luther!

Hymn of the Day

Luther refers to the power of God's Word in our Hymn of the Day. Once again, it means something different than God's ability to do whatever God wants. This power *strengthens* us through the Word.

It also *sustains* us, as we see in stanza three:

"O Comforter of priceless worth, send peace and unity on earth; support us in our final strife and lead us out of death to life."

Now sit with that for a moment. What if these words are meant for *you* to hear right now? What if they are God's way of speaking to you in this moment, God's way of throwing you a life-preserver which you can cling to when you in the midst of loss, or when you confront death – as we all must do – yourself?

God has not abandoned you.

God will lead you through the valley of the shadow of death and darkness to new life (see Ps. 23:4).

That is the promise, to harken back to an earlier quotation from Luther, that we "sing and tell with gladness."

The Hymnal as Devotional

Dear friends, some of you read the Bible for devotional purposes, for words of "encouraging news." You are absolutely right to do that. Maybe you keep it on your nightstand, opening it when you cannot sleep. Maybe you find hope, as I have, by turning to Psalm 30:5 which says "weeping may linger through the night, but joy comes in the morning."

But hope these days is in short supply.

Last spring, when I taught at SPU, I asked my students about their hope for the future. As I did, I found myself wondering if they had Bibles on their nightstands. Why? Because the majority of responses I received expressed utter hopelessness with regard to the future. Many of them felt overwhelmed, even scared.

I sometimes feel that way too.

But then I remembered Bonhoeffer, and how he continued in the face of unbelievable adversity. What gave him strength? Sure, he read his Bible frequently, pouring over it for words of consolation and encouragement, promises that God would never leave him no matter how dire the circumstance.

Yet Bonhoeffer had another source of reassurance and strength.

I imagine next to his bed in the cold winter cell of a Nazi prison there stood a wobbly nightstand upon which he had not only a Bible but a small hymnal. In its pages he

found the “beautiful hymns” of Paul Gerhardt, hymns that gave him strength to face the darkness.

Perhaps we should have hymnals on our nightstands too, or at least a copy of a song or even just a stanza we sang in worship that moved us and gave us strength. Think, for example, of the verse from “A Mighty Fortress” I cited: “O Comforter of priceless worth, send peace and unity on earth; support us in our final strife and lead us out of death to life.”

Can you imagine letting the gospel we sing on Sundays in a verse like this give you hope throughout the week?

Can you imagine the assurance of the gospel, spoken in our readings, yes, but sung too?

Can you imagine how our hymns can lead you through the valley of the shadow of death, or accompany you (as they did Bonhoeffer) in an hour of great darkness? This is how I believe God speaks to you, if only you ponder for yourself the words together we sing.

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*– [Your friend,]
Dietrich*