

Ash Wednesday

“From Depths of Woe I Cry to Thee” (*Lutheran Service Book*, #607)  
(*A Paraphrase of Psalm 130 by Martin Luther*)

## Indelible Grace

The hymn was written by Martin Luther. Lutheran church musicians revere it as one of the iconic Reformation chorales. And like most icons, it is mostly honored in the breach. Using the hand that is holding my coffee cup, I have enough fingers not in use to count the times I have been able to lead a congregation in a significant singing of this major hymn.

So when I began some brief research for this reflection, I did so expecting a rather dry read about Martin Luther and Psalm 130. Not that I’m not enthusiastic about either one, but that first line, “Out of the depths,” can be so lugubrious. So many people, not as enamored with Lutheran chorales as I tend to be, have said things to me like: “That’s so mournfully Lutheran,” “The first line is such a downer,” and “I don’t know why we have to be so sad during Lent.” (These are the same people who don’t seem to be able to dance with me to “Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted.”)

Then, surfing around the internet, I was stunned to find a group called “Indelible Grace” singing this lyric —more or less unchanged —but to a different tune, performed in a Contemporary Christian Worship setting. It wasn’t the new tune that refocused my attention on the hymn, nor was it the CCW venue. It was the name of the performing group— Indelible Grace. I love the word *indelible* (*dictionary =impossible to remove or forget*). It is such a consonant-rich way to say “forever.” And I love the word *grace* (*dictionary=unmerited love*). It is such a succinct and meaning-laden way to say “Jesus.”

A devotion writer could take a moment to offer his interpretation of each of the five stanzas of this hymn, or he could make yet another attempt at analyzing Psalm 130. But for this day, let me suggest that each of us read, with awe and thanksgiving, those two texts just as they come to us in hymnal and Bible. And perhaps, between each verse of the psalm or stanza of the hymn, take a moment to whisper —to ourselves and for the world —“forever, Jesus; Jesus, forever.” To that I, for one, will add a word of thanks to the Contemporary Christian corner of the world for reminding me that I have been indelibly marked with the grace of God. Beyond that I will let Martin and King David guide my devotion as I set out on this year’s Lenten road.

Prayer: Gracious God, enliven our Lenten journey with the joy of knowing the permanence of Your grace. May we find ourselves able, with Your whole church, to dance at the foot of the cross of Your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

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From depths of woe I cry to Thee,  
In trial and tribulation;  
Bend down Thy gracious ear to me,  
Lord, hear my supplication.  
If Thou rememb'rest ev'ry sin,  
Who then could heaven ever win  
Or stand before Thy presence?

Thy love and grace alone avail  
To blot out my transgression;  
The best and holiest deeds must fail  
To break sin's dread oppression.  
Before Thee none can boasting stand,  
But all must fear Thy strict demand  
And live alone by mercy.

Therefore my hope is in the Lord  
And not in mine own merit;  
It rests upon His faithful Word  
To them of contrite spirit  
That He is merciful and just;  
This is my comfort and my trust.  
His help I wait with patience.

And though it tarry through the night  
And till the morning waken,  
My heart shall never doubt His might  
Nor count itself forsaken.  
O Israel, trust in God your Lord.  
Born of the Spirit and the Word,  
Now wait for His appearing.

Though great our sins, yet greater still  
Is God's abundant favor;  
His hand of mercy never will  
Abandon us, nor waver.  
Our shepherd good and true is He,  
Who will at last His Israel free  
From all their sin and sorrow.

Text: Martin Luther; English translation by Catherine Winkworth  
Tune: Martin Luther

(Both text and tune are in the public domain.)

[This devotion has been prepared for the website of the Center for Church Music. It may be downloaded and duplicated for local use.]