

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany (Series A)

“Thy Strong Word” (*Lutheran Service Book*, #578; *Christian Worship*, #280, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, #511)

“A Bold Light”

God’s people have been singing of his Word as a “light” from the beginning. “Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.” (Psalm 119:105) “The unfolding of your words gives light.” (Psalm 119:130) Sometimes our hymns, especially the more meditative songs, keep that light in a soft focus—“a stable light”, “pure light”, “holy light”, “clothed in light”, “morning light.” Martin Franzmann will have none of that here, no gentle or tender glowing. God’s Word is a light which “cleaves the darkness”, “breaks the light of salvation”, “bespeaks righteousness”, “breaks forth from the cross”, and explodes into “alleluias.” It’s the kind of contrast we used to sing in the Moravian hymn, “Your Word, O Lord, Is Gentle Dew” (LBW 232) where Carl Grave moves from “gentle dew” and “heavenly balm” to God’s Word as “a flaming sword, a sharp and mighty arrow, a wedge that cleaves the rock; that Word can pierce through heart and marrow. Oh, send it forth o’er all the earth, to purge unrighteous leaven and cleanse all hearts for heaven.”

It is that understanding of the power of God’s Word that Jesus is using in his exhortation: “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:14-16) Coupled with the tenderness that comes with living in God’s grace is his imperative to shine that light on the darkness in the world and to trust its power.



Barry L. Bobb
Carmel, IN

Thy strong word did cleave the darkness; at thy speaking it was done.
For created light we thank thee, while thine ordered seasons run.
Alleluia, alleluia! Praise to thee who light does send!
Alleluia, alleluia! Alleluias without end!

Lo, on those who dwelt in darkness, dark as night and deep as death,
broke the light of thy salvation, breathed thine own life-breathing breath.
Alleluia, alleluia! Praise to thee who light does send!
Alleluia, alleluia! Alleluias without end!

Thy strong Word bespeaks us righteous; bright with thine own holiness,
glorious now, we press toward glory, and our lives our hopes confess.
Alleluia, alleluia! Praise to thee who light does send!
Alleluia, alleluia! Alleluias without end!

From the cross thy wisdom shining breaketh forth in conquering might;
from the cross forever beameth all thy bright redeeming light.
Alleluia, alleluia! Praise to thee who light does send!
Alleluia, alleluia! Alleluias without end!

Give us lips to sing thy glory, tongues thy mercy to proclaim,
throats that shout the hope that fills us, mouths to speak thy holy name.
Alleluia, alleluia! May the light which thou dost send
fill our songs with alleluias, alleluias without end!

God the Father, light-creator, to thee laud and honor be.
To thee, Light of Light begotten, praise be sung eternally.
Holy Spirit, light-revealer, glory, glory be to thee.
Mortals, angels, now and every praise the holy Trinity!

Text: Martin H. Franzmann, 1907—76. Copyright © 1969 Concordia Publishing House.
Tune: EBENEZER. Thomas J. Williams, 1869-1944. The tune is in the public domain.

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

Other notes—

The composer of this famous tune, Thomas Williams, was an insurance man who also served as organist and choirmaster at a chapel. Most chapels in Wales have some kind of Old Testament name and his was called Ebenezer, “stone of the helper.” (1 Samuel 7:12) Interestingly this tune is not sung by Christians in Wales. It has had so many bawdy tavern lyrics sung to it, that they do not consider it appropriate for worship.

Franzmann was one of the great Lutheran hymn writers of the 20th-century. “Our Paschal Lamb, That Sets Us Free”, “In Adam We Have All Been One”, “Preach You the Word”, “O God, O Lord of Heaven and Earth” are among those still being sung. For more of his engaging use of language, see *Ha! Ha! Among the Trumpets*, a collection of sermons still available from CPH. They also published a fine biography, *Thy Strong Word: The Enduring Legacy of Martin Franzmann* by Richard N. Brinkley. (1993)