

Good Friday

“Sing, My Tongue, the Glorious Battle” (*Lutheran Service Book*, #454)

It’s Good Friday, and we stand—or kneel—at the foot of the cross of our Lord Jesus. It was about three months ago that we stood—or knelt—at the foot of his manger bed. I am reminded of the two-dimensional image of a cradle that is, with a couple of deft moves, transformed into a cross. Two events—Jesus’ birth and his death—are separated in the church’s year by about 100 days that represent about 1000 days that comprise the three years of active ministry in the life of our Lord. At each of those events, the church sings. (Not unusual. We sing a lot. In fact, St. Augustine is purported to have said that if the church does not sing, one might question if it even is the church. But I digress.)

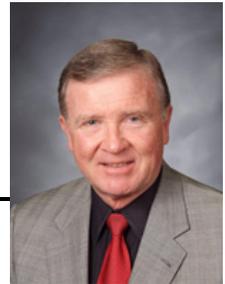
The song of Good Friday harkens back to the song of the angels at Christmas. When I was a youngster, standing in front of my bedroom mirror pretending to conduct some grand musical ensemble, I imagined that “heavenly host” of the King James Version of Scripture to be a finely tuned and newly robed holiday choir, singing the first Christmas carol. When I became a bit more Biblically literate, I discovered that “host” was more aptly translated “army.” And that image is so much more supportive of the Biblical narrative. For on the night that God became a child, at the point in history when God in the person of his one-and-only Son Jesus stepped into our world, in the fullness of time when God would bring to fruition his eternal plan to restore health and wholeness to a broken world—at that moment in cosmic time no devil in hell would have the night off. Satan would have cancelled all leave and positioned his forces around the little town of Bethlehem, ready and waiting to foil this mightiest of God’s acts. And into that kind of menacing situation, that initial struggle for the salvation of mankind, I imagine that (and it pains me a bit to say this) God sent not a *choir* singing a carol, but his finest *army*, arrayed for battle. Like a mighty army, the heavenly host came singing, and they were singing the sign of the cross: “Glory to God in the highest” (the vertical post of the cross), “and peace to his people on earth” (the horizontal post of the cross), announcing to the world how God had and would continue to do his work in the world, under the sign of the instrument of his Son’s looming death. The Church has made that song its weekly battle cry, silencing it only during the Lenten weeks in reverent remembrance of the suffering of our Lord.

Now, this week, 100 days later, we have on our lips and in our hearts the words of the poet Venantius Fortunatus: “Sing, my tongue, the glorious battle; sing the ending of the fray.” It is an old song, though not nearly as old as the original *Gloria in excelsis*, and it paints for us with a broad word-brush the life and death of the Son of God. As we sing, we celebrate what the Christmas angels already knew. Here, on the day we call Good Friday, God laid bare his right hand and his holy arm for all the nations to see his salvation (Psalm 98:1-2). His “right hand

man”—the incarnate Christ— “as a victim won the day.” The song that begins at the place where our Lord was born reaches its fulfillment at the place where he finished the work of salvation.

We are the church; and we are the church precisely because of the journey Jesus took from the cradle to the cross. On that journey with him, year after year, we sing, and perhaps we even dance, with the angels, and archangels, and all the company of heaven—from *Gloria in excelsis Deo; et in terra pax* to *tetelestai*— under the sign of the cross.

David Christian
Carmel IN



Sing, my tongue, the glorious battle; sing the ending of the fray.
Now above the cross, the trophy, sound the loud triumphant lay;
tell how Christ, the world's redeemer, as a victim won the day.

Tell how, when at length the fullness of th' appointed time was come,
He, the Word, was born of woman, left for us his Father's home;
blazed a path of true obedience, shone as light amid the gloom.

Thus, with thirty years accomplished, he went forth from Nazareth,
destined, dedicated, willing, did his work, and met his death;
like a lamb he humbly yielded on the cross his dying breath.

Faithful cross, true sign of triumph, be for all the noblest tree,
none in foliage, none in blossom, none in fruit thine equal be;
symbol of the world's redemption, for the weight that hung on thee!

Unto God be praise and glory; to the Father and the Son,
to the eternal Spirit honor now and evermore be done;
praise and glory in the highest, while the timeless ages run.

Text: Venantius Honorius Fortunatus (c.530-609). English translation prepared by John Mason Neale. (1818-66, alt)

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