

Sunday of the Passion / Palm Sunday (Year B)

Reflection on “A Lamb Goes Uncomplaining Forth” (*Lutheran Service Book*, No. 438)

Paul Gerhardt’s classic hymn for the Passion cracks our post-modern shell to see the Savior, our world, and the promise of heaven in age-old ways. We are drawn into the wider Christian community in the ten original stanzas (see below), and then we know: this text is no sixteenth century period piece but a throat-tightening allegory about the ancient fear of death and the offer of new life by the Lamb of God. It is our story told in timeless voice. Modern realities have led to a drastic shortening of the original text, but we might well keep its masterful drama of salvation in mind as we sing the modern reduction of four selected stanzas (1, 2, 3, and 10) of Gerhardt’s original. No wonder this text has been considered the benchmark for all Passion hymns.

Opening Meditation (Sts. 1-4). References to Isaiah 53:7-8 and John 1:29 occasion intimate language between the Believer, who speaks for all of us, and the Lamb. The believer meditates on the words of the *Agnus Dei* (“O Christ, Thou Lamb of God”), but in the intimate language of a lover. It is a “Little Lamb” (*Lämmlein*, in the German original) that is addressed, a term of endearment missing in the English translation. God the Father’s and God the Son’s dialog carry us through the next stanzas in a contemplation of the horrible price of redemption in the slaying of the Lamb, the culmination of all Old Testament sacrifices. This is no raging fury of insatiable justice but an act of love by the Father (see st. 4), who is named as “Love” as he fulfills what Abraham and Isaac foreshadowed: the sacrifice of the Son for us. The Believer (into whom each of us is embodied) can only reply: “What can I give, whose love to me for me doth make Thee languish?”

Betrothal of the Believer (Sts. 5-6). In the unmistakable language of devotion, the Believer becomes the Beloved. The Beloved declares life-long devotion and praise to the one who is our true lover and redeemer. We are brought safely through “death’s dark night” to a new life where the Son’s love draws forth our never-ending praise.

The Bridal Garment (Sts. 7-10). Now, devoted to the Lamb who gave up life itself, the Betrothed becomes the “priceless treasure.” The blood and manna (the Lord’s Supper) become our ultimate joy; music marks the feast; this satisfies when all else in life loses its flavor. In the arms of the Lamb the thing all fear most, death’s poison, cannot reach us. Finally (st. 10), I (the Beloved, the embodiment of all the redeemed) appear with the Son in the final act of betrothal before the Father’s throne (not “Your throne” as in the hymnal translation, but “the throne of the highest Father”) as “Your own bride.” The life of the Christian has one goal, one promised fulfillment: to stand in joy beside the Lamb. (Note that the “we” in LSB, st. 4 is a translation error.)

We are not used to such blood-filled language, especially if we lose sight of the blood-filled Sacrament shared each Sunday, nor are we comfortable to be told of the incalculable love God showed us in offering the Son. We can make more sense — and find reason to blame God for the whole mess of our existence and fear — if we see the price of redemption as a vicious act of deadly justice. Gerhardt knew better. The redemption was an incalculable act of love by Father

and Son together for us. And we do no favors to heart attack victims, the chronic illness patients, the stroke sufferers, the sinfully dark consciences, the downsized ex-employees, the couples swerving into divorce, those uncertain of faith, the aching children — in short, all of us — by shielding ourselves from all the promises of this ageless hymn, promises that only God the Father and Son could devise.

Paul Westermeyer reported that Wolf Krötke, alone in an East German prison, loved this hymn, especially stanza 8. Those words, Krötke reported, “turned the couple square meters in front of my wooden bench into the wide-open spaces in which God sets our feet . . .” These words reminded him of all other words that recalled the experience of God. We forget these words to our own loss, even if we gain five more minutes by not singing them.

“A Lamb Goes Uncomplaining Forth” joins our voices to those of other centuries and to the Christian experience of every age, though it is unrealistic to believe most congregations will sing all ten stanzas. We might, if possible, alternate the ten stanzas interpretively, employing an appropriate organ setting to give us time to contemplate stanzas 5-6 or 7-9 devotionally. A choral alternation in several stanzas would keep the truth and power of the hymn fresh as we both sing and hear. Another possibility would be the printing of several additional stanzas to make a more complete reflection possible. Try grouping stanzas 1-3, then adding at least 6, 9, 10.

Knowing the devotion of a local congregation may lead to other stanza choices. In any event Paul Gerhardt’s profound hymn will bring each congregation fully into the truth of the redemption through Jesus Christ as Holy Week begins on Passion Sunday.

- 1 A Lamb goes uncomplaining forth,
The guilt of sinners bearing;
And laden with the sins of earth,
None else the burden sharing;
Goes patient on, grows weak and faint,
To slaughter led without complaint,
That spotless life to offer,
He bears the stripes, the wounds, the lies,
The mockery, and yet replies,
“All this I gladly suffer.”

- 2 This Lamb is Christ, the soul’s great friend,
The Lamb of God, our Savior,
Whom God the Father chose to send
To gain for us his favor.
“Go forth, my Son,” the Father said
“And free my children from their dread
Of guilt and condemnation.
The wrath and stripes are hard to bear,
But by Your passion they will share
The fruit of Your salvation.”

- 3 "Yes, Father, yes, most willingly
I'll bear what you command Me.
My will conforms to your decree;
I'll do what you have asked Me."
O wondrous Love, what have you done!
The Father offers up his Son,
Desiring our salvation.
O Love, how strong you are to save!
You lay the One into the grave
Who built the earth's foundation.
- 4 *Thou lay'st Him, Love, upon the cross,
With nails and spear him bruising;
Thou slay'st Him as a lamb, His loss
From soul and body flowing;
From body 'tis the crimson flood
Of precious sacrificial blood,
From soul, the strength of anguish;
My gain it is; sweet Lamb to Thee
What can I give, whose love to me
For me doth make Thee languish?*
- 5 *Lord, all my life I'll cleave to Thee,
Thy Love fore'er beholding,
Thee ever, as Thou ever me,
With loving arms enfolding.
Yea, Thou shalt be my Beacon-light,
To guide me safe through death's dark
night,
And cheer my heart in sorrow;
Henceforth myself and all that's mine
To Thee, my Savior, I consign
From whom all things I borrow.*
- 6 *From morn till eve my theme shall be
Thy mercy's wondrous measure;
To sacrifice myself to Thee,
My foremost aim and pleasure.
My stream of life shall flow for Thee,
Its steadfast current ceaselessly
In praise to Thee outpouring;
And all that Thou has done for me,
I'll treasure in my memory,
Thy gracious love adoring.*
- 7 *Enlarge, my heart's own shrine, and swell,
To Thee shall now be given
A treasure that doth far excel
The worth of earth and heaven.
Away with all earth's brightest gold,*

*With treasure of an earthly mold!
I've found a better jewel.
My priceless treasure, Lord my God,
Is Thy most holy, precious blood,
Which flowed from wounds so cruel.*

8 *This treasure ever I'll employ,
This every aid shall yield me;
In sorrow it shall be my joy,
In conflict it shall shield me;
In joy, the music of my feast,
And when all else has lost its zest,
This manna still shall feed me;
In thirst my drink; in want my food;
My company in solitude,
To comfort and to lead me.*

9 *Death's poison cannot harm me now,
Thy blood new life bestoweth;
My Shadow from the heat art Thou,
When noonday's sunlight gloweth.
When I'm by inward grief opprest,
On Thee my weary soul shall rest,
As sick men on their pillows.
Thou art my Anchor, when by woe
My bark is driven to and fro
On trouble's restless billows.*

10 *Lord, when Your glory I shall see
And taste Your kingdom's pleasure,
Your blood my royal robe shall be,
My joy beyond all measure!
When I appear before Your throne,
Your righteousness shall be my crown;
With these I need not hide me.
And there, in garments richly wrought,
As Your own bride shall [I] be brought
To stand in joy beside You.*

Hymn text: Paul Gerhardt, 1607-76; sts. 1, 2, 3, 10 from *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (2006), alt.;
sts. 4-9 from *Evangelical Lutheran Hymn-Book* (1931), alt.

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