

Proper 14/Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost (Series C)

“O Little Flock, Fear Not the Foe” (*Lutheran Service Book*, #666)

The word “flock” creates images in our minds: shepherds in the fields keeping watch, a good shepherd who lovingly cares for his sheep. We might think of Paul’s words to the elders in Ephesus: “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). We probably won’t recall what Jesus told his disciples on the Mount of Olives: “You will all fall away because of me this night. For it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd and the sheep of the flock will be scattered’” (Zechariah 13:7, quoted in Matthew 26: 31). In this hymn Jacob Fabricius (1593—1654), court preacher to Gustavus Adolphus, would have us remember Jesus’ words: “Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32).

The origins of this hymn are a bit cloudy. After the death of the Swedish King Gustavus Adolphus in the battle of Luetzen (16 November 1632) a pamphlet included three stanzas of this hymn and stated that he sang this song before he led his army into combat. We know that on that day Gustavus Adolphus commanded his trumpeters and drummers to play “A Mighty Fortress” and “May God Bestow on Us His Grace” before he sent his troops forward. (During the Thirty Years’ War it was typical for Protestant soldiers to sing hymns before engaging in warfare.) Another source, a 1638 hymnal, attributes the poetry to Pastor Johann Altenburg and says that it was sung on 7 September 1631 before the battle of Leipzig. Recent hymnologists, however, favor this story of its origin: Gustavus Adolphus asked his Chaplain, Jacob Fabricius, to put the king’s own prayer into a poem that could be sung.

We don’t need to be military personnel to sing this hymn. In every age, disciples of Jesus are surrounded by evil forces that would disrupt and destroy his flock, the church. When the enemies of God seem everywhere, seem too powerful, or seem to be winning, we should have no fear. When we feel helpless, a “little flock” or all alone, do not be afraid.

Be cheerful, not fearful! Look at the enemies who rage and threaten us with “eyes of faith.” Then we are able to “see” God at work and trust his ability to rescue—a sight hidden from those who do not believe in Jesus. We know what God’s Word can do—create and give

life. We trust his promises—of salvation and life eternal. We can smile at our enemies' threats; they are a joke. Against the Almighty One their efforts may be strong but they are doomed to fail. They cannot have victory. What can the devil, the world, or our own sinful flesh really do against God's flock? We remember what has already been done. The great battle against the enemies of God was won when Jesus gave his life on the cross and delivered us from slavery to sin. By his resurrection he showed his power over death. Now he rules all things. Soon he will return and bring his flock into the heavenly mansions he has prepared for them. Through Christ God has dealt with and will deal with his foes.

As we sing this hymn we pray that Jesus show his mighty arm now, when we feel threatened. We trust he will fight for us and help us remember his triumphant victory. We want to add our voices to the thankful praise for our Redeemer. Indeed, God does give his flock the kingdom! To this we say, "Amen."



James L. Brauer, S.T.M., S.M.M., PhD
Professor Emeritus, Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis, Missouri

O little flock, fear not the foe
who madly seeks your overthrow;
dread not his rage and pow'r.
And though your courage sometimes faints,
his seeming triumph o'er God's saints
lasts but a little hour.

Be of good cheer; your cause belongs
to him who can avenge your wrongs;

leave it to him, our Lord.
Though hidden yet from mortal eyes,
his Gideon shall for you arise,
uphold you and his Word.

As true as God's own Word is true,
not earth nor hell's satanic crew
against us shall prevail.
Their might? A joke, a mere façade!
God is with us and we with God—
our vict'ry cannot fail.

Amen, Lord Jesus, grant our prayer;
great Captain, now thine arm make bare,
fight for us once again!
So shall thy saints and martyrs raise
a mighty chorus to thy praise
forevermore. Amen.

Text: Jacob Fabricus, 1593—1654; English translation by Catherine Winkworth, 1827—78.

Tune: German, Nurnberg, 1534.

Both text and tune are 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.]