

Proper 14 (Series B)

“Lord, Enthroned in Heavenly Splendor” (*Lutheran Service Book*, #534)

Worthy is the Lamb that was slain,
And hath redeemed us to God by his blood,
To receive power, and riches, and wisdom,
And strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing.

* * * *

Blessing, and honor, glory, and power, be unto him
That sitteth upon the throne and unto the Lamb.

- Revelation 5:12-13 (KJV)

Charles Jennens (1700-1773), the librettist of G. F. Handel’s magnificent *Messiah*, selected texts from the Holy Scriptures as the basis for one of the most beloved oratorios ever written. Jennens selected the foregoing words from “The Revelation of St. John the Divine” in his King James Bible as the basis of the concluding Chorus in Handel’s magnum opus, paving the way for one of the most extended musical expressions on the single word, “Amen.”

As I listen once again to this last full chorus in *Messiah*, I am swept up in the same affective adrenaline rush that accompanies our singing of the famous hymn, **Lord, Enthroned in Heavenly Splendor**, set to the stirring hymn tune of BRYN CALFARIA. The trifold alleluias within each of the four stanzas included in *The Lutheran Service Book* (LSB #534) are framed by texts of powerful imagery supplied by the English lyricist, George H. Bourne (1840-1925) in his collection of *Seven Post-Communion Hymns* in 1874. Yes, I daresay that the audience exhilaration caused by the premiere of Handel’s extended fugue on the single word, “Amen,” in the April 1742 premier of *Messiah* in Dublin, must have been very similar to the “goosebumps” we all experience when hearing or singing the Bourne hymn set to the powerful hymn tune penned by William Owen (1813-1893).

The words from the book of Revelation at the top of this reflection are central to the final chorus, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain,” in *Messiah*, and are from the same Biblical passages that inspired **Lord, Enthroned**: Revelation chapter one and especially chapter five. In the four stanzas of #534 (there originally were as many as ten stanzas), we find the proclamation of Christ’s story, both on earth in human form, as well as with “Our Father, who art in heaven.” The third stanza in our LSB setting focuses on the symbolism and centrality of the Paschal Lamb:

Paschal Lamb, Your off’ring, finished
once for all when You were slain,
in its fullness undiminished
shall forevermore remain.

This parallels with the words Charles Jennens selected for the closing *Messiah* Chorus, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain," including the librettist's direct reference to the powerful nouns found in Revelation chapter five.

William Owens' hymn tune name, BRYN CALFARIA, literally means, "Mount Calvary." The output of the Bourne and Owen collaboration of both tune and text first appeared in *The English Hymnal* (1906). The hymn tune is featured in a number of current mainstream denominational hymnals. In the *Lutheran Worship Hymnal Companion* (1992), Fred L. Precht contends that "once learned, the tune is recognized as one of solemn grandeur, possessing a strong individuality all its own. Its trochaic metrical scheme [87 444 77] gives it a determined, somewhat vehement character." (p.300)

BRYN CALFARIA was a favorite of Richard Purvis, church musician, organist, and composer, between 1947 and 1971 at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. The esteemed English church music authority, Erik Routley, called it "a piece of real Celtic rock." For me, it is a hymn that gets our attention, our participation through congregational singing, and of course ... our goosebumps.

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Lord, enthroned in heav'nly splendor, first-begotten from the dead,
you alone, our strong defender, lifting up your people's head.

Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!

Jesus, true and living bread!

Jesus, true and living bread!

Though the lowliest form now veil you as of old in Bethlehem,
here as there your angels hail you, branch and flow'r of Jesse's stem.

Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!

We in worship join with them;

we in worship join with them.

Paschal Lamb, your off'ring, finished once for all when you were slain,
in its fullness undiminished shall forevermore remain,

Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!

Cleansing souls from ev'ry stain;

cleansing souls from ev'ry stain.

Life-imparting heav'nly manna, stricken rock with streaming side,
heav'n and earth with loud hosanna worship you, the Lamb who died.

Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!

Ris'n, ascended, glorified!

Ris'n, ascended, glorified!

Text: George H. Bourne

Tune: BRYN CALFARIA William Owen

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.]