

Proper 8 (Series B)

“In the Very Midst of Life” (*Lutheran Worship*, #265)

As we edge toward the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation (2017), many aspects of that milestone in Christian history will be highlighted and examined. Very likely the focus will often be on the leaders of that time, including Martin Luther himself. One of the striking aspects of Luther the man was his pastoral heart. Although he was certainly a deep thinker about theology and the Church, first and foremost he was a parish pastor. We see that in his many personal letters to congregants, friends, and civic leaders offering spiritual guidance and comfort. Europe in the 1500s was a desolate landscape. There was much poverty, economic distress, disease, the threat of the spread of radical Islam, dysfunction in government, and corruption in the Church. Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

As Luther sought to counter the emotional and spiritual effects of all these pressures, he turned to a popular German song of the time which was itself based on an earlier medieval Latin hymn—“*Media vitae*” (“in the middle of life”). But he expanded it and added the comfort of the cross of Jesus, a confidence in faith and the grace of God, all the while acknowledging our sin and our deserving judgment from God.

At first glance the hymn looks like three long, rambling stanzas. But with closer inspection we see the same simple structure used in each stanza (illustrated in the layout of the hymn text below)—

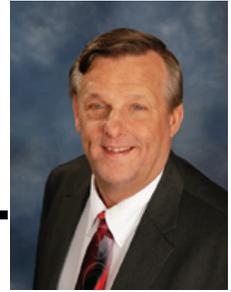
1. A question is posed (2 lines)
2. An answer is given (3 lines)
3. Then comes each time the *Trisagion*, (4 lines) the “thrice holy” song from the 5th century (and antecedent of the *Sanctus*) This adds a certain emphatic punch to the answer in much the same way that “Ask ye, ‘who is this?’ Jesus Christ it is!” does in the second stanza of “A Mighty Fortress.”
4. A prayer is offered (2 lines) always ending with the cry of blind Bartimaeus “Lord, have mercy!”/*Kyrie eleison*

Even as Luther's song of pastoral care reaches across the generations (linking a 1st century blind beggar, a 5th century Greek hymn/a 11th century Latin hymn/a 15th century German song), so it transcends time to our own common human experiences. Whatever stresses crowd our daily life, threatening to push away all joy, there in the middle stands the cross of Jesus offering

his strength, the power of his Holy Spirit and its gift of faith, pointing us to the overwhelming grace of our Heavenly Father.

Barry L. Bobb

Carmel IN



In the very midst of life death has us surrounded.
When shall we a Helper find, hear His coming sounded?

For you, our Lord, we're waiting.

We sorrow that we left your path,

Doing what deserves your wrath.

Holy, most righteous God!

Holy, most mighty God!

Holy and most merciful Savior!

Forever our Lord!

Keep us from despairing in the bitter pain of death.

Have mercy, O Lord!

In the midst of bitter death, sharp the hell-drawn harrow*. (*See note below*)

Who will break its teeth and save faith's most inner marrow?

Lord, you alone, our Savior.

Though you were grieved by our misdeed,

Pity drew you to our need.

Holy, most righteous God!

Holy, most mighty God!

Holy and most merciful Savior!

Forever our Lord!

Let despair not bind us with its threats of deepest hell.

Have mercy, O Lord!

Through the midst of hells of fear our transgressions drive us.

Who will help us to escape, shield us, and revive us?

Lord, you alone, our Savior.

Your shed blood our salvation won;

Sin, death, hell are now undone.

Holy, most righteous God!

Holy, most mighty God!
Holy and most merciful Savior!
Forever our Lord!

Give us grace abounding; keep us in the faith.
Have mercy, Lord!

Text: Martin Luther (1483-1546) Janzow translation copyright © 1982, CPH.

Tune: MITTEN WIR IM LEBEN SIND

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

- The word “harrow” in Janzow’s translation for *Lutheran Worship* may warrant a word of explanation. (*Lutheran Service Book* #755 and *Christian Worship* #54 both go back to *The Lutheran Hymnal* #590 wording “powers of hell”. [*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* does not include this chorale.] A couple of generations ago (when Janzow was growing up in rural Canada and the upper Midwest of the US) a harrow was a common farm implement consisting of a heavy frame with big, hanging metal teeth used to break up plowed ground. Today a disk harrow is used. Though dated, “harrow” is a jarring image for literally the “jaws/maw of death” (‘Höllen Rachen’) that can bring terror. We still use “harrowing” to describe a very distressing experience.

NOTE: The Center has recently published an appraisal of the hymn texts and translations of Samuel Janzow written by David W. Rogner, chairman of the English department at Concordia University Chicago. The book, *Dawnlight Breaks*, is available from the Lutheran University Press website or through Amazon.