

Easter 6

“Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice” (*Lutheran Service Book* #556)

Lutheran hymns do not just sing, they teach. This is either the first or second hymn of Dr. Martin Luther but it exemplifies the best of Lutheran hymnody. Composed only six years after the 95 Theses were written, we find here a moving and deeply personal expression of Luther’s fears, his life, and the triumph of the Gospel through it all. Many believe this to be the greatest of the Lutheran hymns of confession and faith.

The personal struggle of Luther to find peace with God is part of the Reformation story and this hymn expresses both the despair of his failed righteousness and the exuberant joy of Christ’s righteousness for us. In the first stanza we find a call to raptured joy at the victory of Christ to redeem the lost and condemned sinner. From there proceeds a blunt description of Satan’s chains, of sin’s mark, and of death’s prison that turned life into a living hell.

Good works changed nothing. Free will was free only to rebel against God and His goodness. Fear so gripped the heart of the sinner until death itself seemed the only future. But. You have to watch sentences that begin with “but”! But God saw our despair and before it all went horribly wrong, God planned for our salvation. The Father’s heart seemed to have been lost to us but it was at work all along—doing the heavy lifting of our salvation.

Then Luther gives us the Church Year in miniature. “It’s time”—the eternal Son of the Father heads to earth, to wear our flesh and blood, to slay our enemy, and to win our freedom forevermore. Advent’s herald gives way to Christmas where the promise of God is incarnate of the Blessed Virgin by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Christ, the Rock of our salvation, comes to bridge the gap, living in us that we might live in Him. The shock of Good Friday is not the end of the story and we do not lose sight of what His suffering accomplishes. In the midst of Easter’s restoration of hope and joy, Christ cannot stay. He must ascend in order to reign over all things. But He sends to us His Spirit to be our Comforter, our Teacher, and our Guide into all truth.

Finally Luther begs those who would sing his words to follow him trusting in Christ alone. If our lives are to endure, if hope is to be born in our despair, and if life is to triumph over the grave, we *must* remain steadfast in Christ. The Word of the Lord faithfully preached becomes the powerful weapon of the Spirit against the lies and deceptions of the Devil. Just as in the familiar words of “A Mighty Fortress”, Luther leaves us with a final word, *the* final word, the treasure of great price—Christ, the Word made flesh, who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven into the womb of the Virgin that we might have life in His name.

So we sing a hymn that points us to the Church Year, the Creeds, the Catechism, the Cross, and the Crown. And if we sing this hymn of faith *in faith*, we shall endure to everlasting life.

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Dear Christians, one and all, rejoice, with exultation springing,
And with united heart and voice and holy rapture singing,
Proclaim the wonders God has done, how his right arm the victory won.
What price our ransom cost him!

Fast bound in Satan's chains I lay; death brooded darkly over me.
Sin was my torture night and day; in sin my mother bore me.
But daily deeper still I fell; my life became and living hell,
So firmly sin possessed me.

My own good works all came to naught, no grace or merit gaining;
Free will against God's judgment fought, dead to all good remaining.
My fears increased till sheer despair left only death to be my share;
The pangs of hell I suffered.

But God had seen my wretched state before the world's foundation,
And mindful of his mercies great, he planned for my salvation.
He turned to me a father's heart; he did not choose the easy part
But gave his dearest treasure.

God said to his beloved Son: "It's time to have compassion.
Then go, bright jewel of my crown, and bring to all salvation.
From sin and sorrow set them free; slay bitter death for them that they
May live with You forever."

The Son obeyed his Father's will, was born of virgin mother;
And God's good pleasure to fulfill, he came to be my brother.
His royal power disguised he bore; a servant's form, like mine, he wore
To lead the devil captive.

To me He said: "Stay close to me, I am your rock and castle.
Your ransom I myself will be; for you I strive and wrestle.
For I am yours and you are mine, and where I am you may remain;
The foe shall not divide us.

"Though he will shed my precious blood, me of my life bereaving,
All this I suffer for your good; be steadfast and believing.
Life will from death the victory win; my innocence shall bear your sin,
And you are blest forever.

"Now to my Father I depart, from earth to heaven ascending,
And, heavenly wisdom to impart, the Holy Spirit sending;
In trouble He will comfort you and teach you always to be true
And into truth shall guide you.

"What I on earth have done and taught guide all your life and teaching;

So shall the kingdom's work be wrought and honored in your preaching.
But watch lest foes with base alloy the heavenly treasure should destroy;
This final word I leave you."

Text: *Lutheran Service Book* #556. Martin Luther (1483-1546). Translated by Richard Massie (1800-87), alt. The text is in the public domain.

[This devotion was prepared for the website of the Center for Church Music, Concordia University Chicago. It may be downloaded and printed for local use.]