

Epiphany 7 (Series A)

“My Soul, Now Praise Your Maker” (*Lutheran Service Book*, #820)

Even in English translation, *My Soul, Now Praise Your Maker* is an almost perfect rendering of Psalm 103, each stanza encompassing consecutive psalm verses. In German it even repeats vocabulary from Luther’s own psalm translation, but most important—like the psalm itself—the hymn keeps taking us “back to basics”—sin and grace, Law and Gospel, human frailty and God’s eternity—beginning and ending with praise, and linked with a lilting folk-like melody in triple time.

In nearly every line, the grace of God is brimming over. Though we are mere “dust” and faded flowers (3), yet we are “partakers in (multiplied) mercies” (1), still “loved beyond measure” (2), “never forsaken” (4). All this because “like a tender father” God gathers us in his arms (3), “leaves no sufferer friendless” (1), “puts our sins away” (2) and “reigns forever” (4).

If you find yourself in need of such grace today, (and frankly, these days, who doesn’t?) sing this hymn! Unlike most Lutheran Reformation hymns (*A Mighty Fortress*, for example) where the text is not just restated but used as a springboard to proclaim the Gospel, Psalm 103 itself is so overwhelmingly “full of grace” that its author chose simply to paraphrase it straight out, more like the verse by verse psalm-hymns favored by John Calvin and the Swiss reformers.

The author of the hymn, Johann Gramann (1487-1541) was a pastor and educator and also one of Luther’s early opponents. He was secretary to the infamous Johann Eck who argued against Luther in 1519 at the Leipzig Disputation. Already at that time, Gramann notes later, he was impressed with how Biblical Luther’s insights were, and began to be won over to the Reformation.

Before joining Luther in Wittenberg, however, Gramann also served as rector of the St. Thomas School in Leipzig, which two centuries later became the workplace of J.S. Bach. Indeed, in his motet “Sing to the Lord,” Bach quotes—yes, *magnifies*—stanza three of this hymn, “For as a tender father,” by musically weaving a prayer right into it. “Continue to favor us, O God, for without you we are nothing,” Bach adds—urging us to pray in hope, “as dear children ask their dear father,” like Luther says in the *Small Catechism*.

What a remarkable blessing! God speaks forgiveness of sins, life and salvation to our hearts...and we respond. God’s gracious “speech” begins with an ancient psalm; continues in 16th century German; gets refreshed in the 18th; comes to us in English through a 19th century translation—all to our good in our own time!

Hear and sing this Word this week; find a creative way to use this hymn in your prayers.

David J. Susan
Madison, WI

{photo of David}

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My soul, now praise your Maker! Let all within me bless his name
Who makes you full partaker of mercies more than you dare claim.
Forget him not whose meekness still bears with all your sin,
Who heals your ev’ry weakness, renews your life within;
Whose grace and care are endless and saved you through the past;
Who leaves no sufferer friendless but rights the wronged at last.

He offers all his treasure of justice, truth, and righteousness,
His love beyond all measure, his yearning pity o’er distress;
Nor treats us we merit but sets his anger by,
The poor and contrite spirit find his compassion nigh;

And high as heav'n above us, as dawn from close of day,
So far, since he has loved us, he puts our sins away.

For as a tender father has pity on his children here,
God in his arms will gather all who are his in child-like fear.
He knows how frail our powers, who but from dust are made.
We flourish like the flowers, and even so we fade;
The wind but through them passes, and all their bloom is o'er.
We wither like the grasses; our places knows us no more.

His grace remains forever, and children's children yet shall prove
That God forsakes them never who in true fear shall seek his love.
In heav'n is fixed his dwelling, his rule is over all;
O hosts with might excelling, with praise before him fall.
Praise him forever reigning, all you who bear his Word—
Our life and all sustaining, my soul, O praise the Lord!

Text: Johann Gramann, 1487-1541; English translation prepared by Catherine Winkworth, 1827-78, altered. This hymn, the first important Lutheran paraphrase of a psalm, was requested by Albrecht the Elder, the Duke of Prussia and a staunch supporter of the Lutheran Reformation. (Martin Chemnitz served for a while as the duke's librarian.)

Tune: NUN LOB, MEIN SEEL found in *Concentus novi*, published in Augsburg in 1540.

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