

Proper 23 (October 12, 2014)

“A Multitude Comes from the East and the West” (*Lutheran Service Book* #510)

A multitude comes from the east and the west  
to sit at the feast of salvation,  
with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob the blest,  
obeying the Lord’s invitation.  
Have mercy upon us, O Jesus!<sup>1</sup>

O God, let us hear when our Shepherd shall call  
in accents persuasive and tender,  
that while there is time we make haste, one and all,  
and find Him, our mighty Defender.  
Have mercy upon us, O Jesus!

All trials shall be, like a dream that is past,  
forgotten all trouble and mourning.  
All questions and doubts have been answered at last,  
when rises the light of that morning.  
Have mercy upon us, O Jesus!

The heavens shall ring with an anthem more grand  
than ever on earth was recorded.  
The blest of the Lord shall receive at His hand  
the crown to the victors awarded.  
Have mercy upon us, O Jesus!

Text: Magnus B. Landstad, 1861; Translated: Peer O. Stromme, 1909  
Swedish language title: "Der mange skal komme fra oest og fra vest"  
Tune: "DER MANGE SKAL KOMME" (*Swenska Psalmboken*, Stockholm, 1695)  
Both text and music are in the public domain.

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The Old Testament reading appointed for Proper 23 in *Lutheran Service Book* happens also to be the first reading for Easter Day in Series B. I love that reading and, even in years other than “Series B”, have used it to shape the Eucharistic liturgy for the Easter festival. For me, it is one of the most image-rich, promising, jaw-dropping moments in the entire pericopal system. It begs us to open our mouths wide to sing “This is the feast”, and then to open them again to receive the sacramental bread and wine at the communion table. And we do that with so many who, though they come from the east and the west and the highways and byways only at Christmas and Easter to attend the feast, are still welcomed with open arms by the Lord of the banquet.

But here we are in the back half of the Time of Pentecost, and I find myself this season preparing a worship agenda for a corner of our campus that, because of scheduling issues (Morning Prayer on the

second Sunday of the month), will not actually eat and drink at the table of the Lord. And so I am constrained to rethink to some extent the implications for worship that these texts bring “to the table.”

However, unless we abandon the prescribed texts altogether, this day in the church’s calendar is still about the great feast that the Lord has prepared for His people, and how they respond to His gift. Isaiah 25 is connected to Jesus’ parable that Matthew identifies as a *wedding* banquet and Luke, a *great* banquet. The Gospel text in both versions provides a contrapuntal grounding to the eschatological ecstasy of the Old Testament reading. Here, in spite of the gracious invitation of the One giving the banquet, we see rejection of Jesus’ call, and that for personal but (at least from the tone of the gospel text) trivial reasons.<sup>2</sup> The Gospel set over against the Isaiah passage calls us to consider that we are all among those who turn away from the Lord’s invitation. While I am quick to recognize and deride the many excuses of others who so blithely stay away from worship, I am also compelled to ask myself about the ways I turn *my* back on Jesus’ gracious gift of His presence. Perhaps today I need to be seriously considering the ways I find to reject God’s invitations (at which I am so religiously good), and be praying earnestly for those who need yet to respond to His loving call. And perhaps I need to consider ways in which my witness draws others to, or repels them from, the banquet. It is not idle redundancy to end each stanza of the above hymn with the personal and corporate cry: “Have mercy upon us, O Jesus.”

The Hymn of the Day washes us, stanza after stanza, in this eschatological ecstasy. Oh that we were there (from another hymn) with “angels and archangels and all the company of heaven”: trials and mourning gone, questions and doubts answered, singing at last with the heavenly chorus (and finally in tune, we pray), experiencing at last the feast of which we had only the weekly (or biweekly) foretaste on earth.

Whether we are at the communion rail or not this week, we are refreshed in this latter part of the Pentecost season by such a Scriptural feast and its hymnic complement, if we dare to sing it. For whenever we are gathered at the feet of Jesus, we are at the feast. Here and now the risen Christ is ever present, always in Word, always in the remembrance of the baptismal bath, often in the blessed event of an actual real-time sacramental washing. These are all ways in which the Spirit of Christ gathers people—even in “these gray and latter days”<sup>3</sup>— to the feast at which our Lord presides. He is “host at our table”<sup>4</sup>, wherever that may be.

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<sup>1</sup>Langstad’s original hymn has seven stanzas, which appear in Stromme’s original translation in *The Lutheran Hymnal* (1941). Subsequent Lutheran hymnals have included only these four stanzas. However, even though social media could only have been science fiction in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the author seems to have had some strange inkling of the Facebook phenomenon in his second, now largely forgotten, stanza. If not devotional, it is at least historically curious.

*But they who have always resisted His grace  
And on their own virtue depended  
Shall then be condemned and cast out from His face,  
Eternally lost and unfriended. ☺  
Have mercy upon us, O Jesus! [Indeed!]*

<sup>2</sup> Matthew (chapter 22) covers the excuses more categorically than Luke, who, (chapter 14), specifically offers a three-fold “field-cow-wife” set of excuses. You might want to sing (and have some fun with) that song – “I Cannot Come to the Banquet” – in Year C.

<sup>3</sup>"O God, O Lord of Heaven and Earth", stanza 4. Martin Franzmann, 1967.

<sup>4</sup>"Gather Your Children", stanza 4. Jaroslav J. Vajda, 1985.

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