Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

**From Depths of Woe I Cry to Thee**

*Lutheran Service Book* Hymn #607

Ash Wednesday

02.17.2017

Today is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. As we will for the rest of our mid-week services, we will be examining the Hymns of the Day for these weeks of Lent. Today’s is the Hymn of the Day for Ash Wednesday, *From Depths of Woe I Cry to Thee*. If you would, please open to it, number 607, and keep it open as a reference.

If you look to the bottom of the page, on the left side you can see who wrote the text and composed the tune. In the case of this hymn, both were done by Martin Luther. On the right side of the bottom, you can see the name of the tune, the numbers representing the meter (how many syllables per “line”), and below that the Biblical texts which inspired that particular hymn.

As you may note, this hymn is mainly a paraphrase of Psalm 130 by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther.

According to the *Companion to the Hymns*, vol.1, pp. 703-704:

This early “metrical psalm of Luther’s is important to twenty-first century Lutherans for several reasons: (1) it became one of Luther’s favorite songs, expressing the comfort of the psalm and the hope that is ours in the Gospel; (2) it is a superb explication of the proper distinction between the Law and the Gospel and the doctrine of justification by grace through faith; (3) it expresses humanity’s deepest sorrow, and for this reason it was sung at time of mourning, for instance, at the funeral of Luther’s protector and patron, Frederick the Wise, in the Castle Church at Wittenberg on May 9, 1525, and during Luther’s own funeral ceremonies, as his body lay in stat at the Market Church of Our Dear Lady in Halle in 1546; and (4) because it is a versification of a penitential psalm, the hymn was commonly used as a catechetical aid to reinforce the meaning of confession as described in Luther’s Small Catechism… It’s usage, however, was not limited to times of confession or to funerals. It was also used as an Introit, a psalm hymn, a Gradual between the lessons, and a hymn before the sermon during various seasons of the church year. (such as Ash Wednesday)

Luther’s tune, *Aus Tiefer Not* is the melody which is wedded to this text, is a very fitting marriage of text and music – they are made for one another. I know, it sits rather stridently in us, but that is as it should be. There is an expectant, eager, waiting in this melody – done so on purpose. If you close your eyes and sing the first line, you can see how the text has shaped the melody. You can hear it in the first verse with the descending opening 5th on the word *depths*… Close your eyes please, so you can see it. (sing) *From depths of woe I cry to Thee…* Did you see and feel the “depths?” Keeping your eyes closed, listen again to the next phrase… (sing) *Bend down Thy gracious ear to me…* Did you see and feel the “bending down” of God’s gracious ear? Text is tied intrinsically to the tune.

In the concluding musical phrase, the melody strikes the ear as unresolved, there is an expectant waiting to it. Note the words which lead into, and then accompany that musical phrasing. In verse one it is, *Who then could heaven ever win,* (sing) *Or stand before Thy presence?* Expectant melody with questioning words waiting with for the tension to be resolved. Who could win heaven? Who could stand before the presence God? The other verses are the same – but we will get into this more as we examine this incredible hymn, beautifully marrying text and tune.

With these thoughts in mind, let us dive into this incredibly rich hymn and discover what we have been confessing since it was written in 1523, for almost 500 years.

Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent, and in the Collect of the Day, we hear a reflection of the overarching theme for all of Lent:

Almighty and everlasting God, who hates nothing that You have made and forgives the sins of all those who are penitent, create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of You, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ, You Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, ever One God, world without end. Amen.

Our hymn is that prayer, as it is the thought and prayer expressed in Psalm 130. It begins in the depth of despair we rightly feel for our sins. Often it is what we reflect upon in the late hours, that nagging in our hearts which brings us to shed silent tears, that sin against someone which causes sleep to eludes us.

*From depths of woe I cry to Thee, In trial and tribulation; Bend down Thy gracious ear to me, Lord, hear my supplication. If Thou rememb'rest ev'ry sin, Who then could heaven ever win Or stand before Thy presence?*

If God were to remember every sin, where would we be? There is no way we could obtain heaven by our own merits. No! In fact, we could not even stand in His presence. Do you hear the unresolved issue in the tune at that last phrase?

This leads us into the second verse. *Thy love and grace alone avail To blot out my transgression; The best and holiest deeds must fail To break sin's dread oppression. Before Thee none can boasting stand, But all must fear Thy strict demand And live alone by mercy*.

We acknowledge that only God’s love and grace are any help at all, that only in the redeeming sacrifice of Christ is every last transgression paid in full. In that redeeming sacrifice, even those works which we – and the world – might seem to think are “holy,” fall far short. Left on our own, we would have nothing but fear of God. So, we live alone by mercy. Again, that closing phrase comes with that tune, giving the feel of something unresolved. In this case, it is that longing hope for God’s mercy. It is not that we do not believe it is there, but it is something for which we wait with longing expectation… *And live alone by mercy*.

As we live in mercy, we hope. In what do we hope? In the government? No! In our family and friends? Sometimes they even fail us, just as we have failed them – all of us sinners. So where do we go for hope? *Therefore my hope is in the Lord And not in mine own merit; It rests upon His faithful Word To them of contrite spirit That He is merciful and just: This is my comfort and my trust. His help I wait with patience.*

We hope in the Lord, not in our own works. And how can we be sure of the things of the Lord? Because our hope does not rest upon our feeling, our emotions, or anything that we might have in our heart. Our hope rests in the Lord because that Hope is founded upon what is declared in the Scripture, God’s faithful word. God’s Word declares to us the promise of God’s Messiah, and the work He has accomplished for us in His life, death, and resurrection. And in His Ascension, that mercy of God is delivered to us in Word and Sacrament. Again, our verse ends with the expectant tune, *His help I wait with patience.*

It is what we expectantly await to receive each week. Do you hear it in that 4th verse? *And though it tarry through the night And till the morning waken, My heart shall never doubt His might Nor count itself forsaken. O Isreal, trust in God your Lord. Born of the Spirit and the Word, Now wait for His appearing.*

We await His appearing. We do not doubt His might to forgive. We know we are not forsaken. We do trust in the Lord. And that trust is born of the Spirit and the Word, as you and I well know from Jesus’ Word to Nicodemus, and as Luther extols in His Small Catechism, that is a reference to baptism. But now we wait for His appearing to grant us His mercy and help – a Word of Absolution, the Body and Blood of Christ – our comfort and trust.

Yes, there is a certain anxious anticipation in our hope. It is again reflected in that melody we are not familiar with. *Now wait for His appearing.* We wait for it in Word and Sacrament… and we wait for His appearing to bring about the last day. On that day, our baptismal identity will realize its fulness. God’s grace and mercy ushering us into His eternal kingdom.

This brings us to the last verse. *Though great our sins, yet greater still Is God's abundant favor; His hand of mercy never will Abandon us, nor waver. Our shepherd good and true is He, Who will at last His Israel free From all their sin and sorrow.*

Yes, we know how great our sins. We see the evidence of sinfulness in our lives, in the lives of those around us, and they are plainly evident in the world in which we live. This is not looking at them as if to point a finger, but we see the pain, sorrow, suffering, and tribulation which they bring to all.

But God’s grace and favor are greater still. His merciful hand never abandons us. It never wavers. We remember God’s Word proclaiming what a Good Shepherd He is. We receive that mercy every time we gather together – for when we gather together we are freed from sin and sorrow – forgiveness is granted and bestowed.

But there is that expectant tune again, waiting… *Who will at last His Israel free From all their sin and sorrow.*

Yes, that last day is coming. And while we still live in the midst of this “great tribulation” we hope and pray for that last day when, by His grace, He will take us from this veil of tears to join Him in His kingdom forever.

What a wonderful hymn in which to enter our Lenten journey to the cross, looking to what it has accomplished and what it will deliver. Come, Lord Jesus, yea quickly! Amen.