

NEAR THE CROSS TOGETHER

(by Pastor Fred Krebs, St. Paul Lutheran Church)

(In a normal year during Lent in Mason, we would join together for 6 weeks of Wednesday noon community luncheons with devotions at our various churches. As we are still being advised to keep large meals and gatherings to a minimum due to COVID, these weekly email Community Devotions and Prayers will take the place of our noon community luncheons this year.)

When life does not go as we expect, we are caught off-guard. We ask why. We may question human wisdom. We may even question God. We try to reason things out. Soon we realize that not everything in life can be understood by our limited understanding. Our faith teaches us that our Lord walks with us even in the midst of (and often especially in the midst of) occurrences and events which we least understand. Lent calls us to draw near to the cross of Jesus, for it is in the cross that our Lord shows his deepest kind of empathy toward the sufferings and challenges which we face in life. "...God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength." (1st Corinthians 1: 24-26)

One of my favorite songs of Lent is *Near the Cross*. The words to this hymn were written by Fanny Jane Crosby, a prolific writer of gospel songs in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Others of her most popular hymns are *Blessed Assurance*, *To God be the Glory*, *Pass Me Not*, *O Gentle Savior*, and *Safely in the Arms of Jesus*. Fanny played the guitar, piano, harp, and organ and had a lovely soprano voice, but she generally paired her hymn words to the tunes of other church musicians of her time. Those words and tunes still live and ring in our hearts today!

Fanny Crosby's life was filled with many struggles. She was born in a small town in New York on March 24, 1820. At the age of just 6 weeks, she developed an illness which caused her to be blind for the rest of her life. When she was only 6 months old, her tiny life was again shaken by the death of her father. She was raised by her mother and grandmother who had little financially but who grounded her in the Christian faith and made sure she received instruction in music and an education. Fanny graduated from the New York Institution for the Blind, where she became a teacher of English grammar, rhetoric, and American History. She met many of our U.S. presidents and was the first woman to speak in front of the U.S. Senate while working tirelessly to establish more and better education for the blind. In the many places she lived, she was active in churches of a variety of Christian traditions. She had a special heart for Christian rescue missions.

Fanny married a young teacher who was also a graduate of New York Institute for the Blind, Alexander Van Alstyne Jr. "Van" (as he was called) was a progressive man for those times, and Van insisted that Fanny continue to use her maiden name in all her publications. Van was also a musician and liked composing tunes. Several of Van's tunes were paired to a few of Fanny's lyrics. When she married, Fanny had to leave her teaching position, as married women were not permitted to retain their teaching posts in that era. For the rest of her life, she continued writing and publishing countless hymn lyrics and poetry. Fanny and Van had only one baby girl,

who died shortly after birth. They forever grieved her loss, yet trusted that she was in the arms of the Lord. Van died in 1902. Fanny died in 1915, at the age of 94.

Fanny Crosby could have simply given up, considering the challenges she had to face in life. Yet she continually chose faith. She chose to believe that her Lord would always be with her in every moment of life, facing every obstacle with her. She drew near to the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ and wrote these stirring words:

*Jesus, keep me near the cross, there's a precious fountain;
Free to all, a healing stream flows from Calvary's mountain.
In the cross, in the cross, be my glory ever;
Till my ransomed soul shall find rest beyond the river.*

May the words of this hymn be our communal prayer as we keep near the cross together this Lent, as members of many churches, of various traditions, united in the love of God through the cross of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(Lent community offerings to the Mason Food Bank may be contributed online at masonministerialalliance.org OR checks can be written to MMA Food Bank and mailed to Nanci Gibbons, Food Bank Director of Operations, Box 966, Mason, TX 76856.)