

Worship the Lord

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Crises, Hymns, and Faith

By Bryan Gerlach

This article covers several themes and purposes. It shares thoughts and resources related to the COVID-19 crisis. It calls attention to the power of hymns—especially in a time of national crisis and private anxiety. It shares some resources planned for *Christian Worship: Hymnal* (CW21). It points to two new Congregational Services video resources.

By the time this article reaches readers, the crisis may be resolving. But that's not how it feels while writing on April 5. And even if we are on the downside of the infection rate when you read this, the spiritual themes covered by hymns mentioned below will continue to strengthen and comfort God's people and witness God's truth to a broken world even as it returns to normal.

All Is Well

A well-received new song at the WELS leadership conference last January was *All Is Well*, by Steve and Vikki Cook. The final verse affirms "...with newborn eyes we will behold the **glory of the risen Lord**."¹ Consider how this song might fit in a (streamed) service during the Easter season. If a soloist or small group sings this song after the sermon and the preacher has intentionally referenced its meaning during the sermon (All is well—in spite of global pandemic and personal anxiety—because of God's promises and Jesus' resurrection), it will be a powerful synergy of sermon, song, and context.

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This song is featured in a new video resource: *Worship Led by a Modern Ensemble*. This video features the Trinitas ensemble from Trinity, Waukesha, WI. It demonstrates leading worship with an ensemble of piano, guitar, and other instruments. The focus is on songs of the liturgy, psalms, and hymns. Some settings of the liturgy, slated for CW21, are crafted to work either with organ

Please share!

Pastors, please share this issue with appropriate musicians—either the printed copy or the link.

(and other instruments) or with a modern ensemble; the melodies remain the same while the musical accompaniment varies.

The video, available at welscongregationalservices.net/download/w014/, includes interviews that can help parish musicians and leaders to think through rationale and best practices. *All Is Well* begins at 16:28.

By special arrangement, a melody/text graphic for *All Is Well* along with an organ accompaniment is available at worship.welsrc.net/downloads-worship/worship-the-lord/. The song works best with piano,² but not every church has a good piano for leading the entire congregation. If a soloist sings the song with piano accompaniment, the organ version can serve as preservice music.

Do Not Let Your Hearts Be Troubled

The hymnal supplement (CWS) includes David Haas' hymn by this name. It will also be in CW21. The text gives valuable comfort in time of crisis and echoes the Gospel for Easter 5, Year A. The first verse points to something far better than "safer at home": "In God's [eternal] house there are many places for you alone to dwell in safety."

In the cantor/responsorial tradition from which this hymn comes, verses are sung by a cantor with the congregation singing the refrain. This custom grew out of reforms in the Roman Catholic

church instigated by the Second Vatican Council in an attempt to encourage more participation.³ But Lutherans, accustomed to being “the singing church,” often want to sing the whole song, whether Gloria or hymn. A challenge for some, then, is that the CWS accompaniment doesn’t support congregational singing of the verses in the usual way—by placing the melody in the top voice of the accompaniment. That’s because the original intent was to accompany a cantor.

A congregation very familiar with the verses or with stronger than usual music reading skill can certainly sing the verses to the original accompaniment. To make it easier to sing this song in other congregations (and in those without a good piano), the accompaniment edition for CW21 will include an organ accompaniment that clearly states the melody. By special permission, this arrangement is available for free download at the previous link. The organ version can also be used as service music, perhaps with a gentle registration during the offering or communion distribution.

Vital hymn singing—and playing

While it’s no secret that the Getty movement has popularized modern hymns, some might not realize that the Gettys are champions of old hymns as well. I attended the 2019 Getty *Sing!* conference in Nashville and was struck by the frequent use of old, traditional hymns often in old, traditional arrangements—even a cappella. I’ll never forget hearing 10,000 people singing *Holy, Holy, Holy* unaccompanied and in harmony without printed music! And the same for *O Sacred Head, Now Wounded* about which one wag has said that American Evangelicals, who so love this old German hymn, think it’s an early American tune. Hans Leo Hassler (d. 1612), composer of the tune, might be amused.

10,000 people singing O Sacred Head, Now Wounded

The Trinitas video champions a “both/and” approach to musical variety for the congregation. An entire service led by an ensemble is for the entire congregation, not a niche audience with a musical taste preference. It’s not “contemporary worship”; it’s just worship for the united body of believers in a given place that Sunday. Same for services led by an organ.

If organ accompaniment feels draggy or lacking in pulse, an organist can gain insights and improve skills from another new video resource: *Effective Service Playing: The Partnership between Organist and Congregation*, presented by David Kriewall (welscongregationalservices.net/download/w013/). This is an online masterclass for organists, delivered by a video and a PowerPoint file or PDF. This masterclass seeks to improve performers’ ability to play in a way that best supports congregational singing. This video serves both for those who have had years of lessons and those who are self-taught. It’s not a video to view quickly in one sitting. It’s something to study and ponder with hymnal in hand and trying out some of the performance examples during a practice session.



A draft for the preface to one of the new hymnal accompaniment volumes discusses the musician’s privilege in worship.

Our worship this side of heaven is a foretaste of the feast to come, a highpoint in every Christian’s week, the “event” that drives congregational health and vitality because here God again delivers salvation to his people. It is a high calling and privilege for musicians to assist worshipers in this most central and important activity—to help them sing out about salvation that comes from our God. That’s why attention to hymns and liturgy is always more important than preservice music and postludes. In hymns and liturgy God’s people actively participate in proclaiming his salvation.

We hope that *Effective Service Playing* will help organists to improve, whatever their current skill level.

Theologia crucis

“All is well because of God’s great love.” Is it easier to trust the truth of Romans 8:28—“We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him”—in hindsight? Perhaps. But the ability to “validate” God’s promise in this way is not necessary to trust his promise even when we can imagine no reason for hardship or disappointment. “The sun beams on behind the clouds, and in the dark still grace abounds” (from *All Is Well*).

“Don’t let worship be wiped out.”

As theologians of the cross, it’s good to ask “What shall we sing about?” What is the content of songs during a crisis? There are many themes, but a particular Lutheran emphasis flows from the *theologia crucis*. We can gain insight from Lutheran choral music during the Thirty Years War (1618-1648). American Christian perspective on life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness knows that God doesn’t promise health and prosperity. These are not inalienable rights. If they vanish, we don’t blame God but rather trust his working “for the good” in a world broken by sin and its consequences. One song from that three-decade war prays in part: “O God, we thank you that you have alleviated our pains through your dear Son, the pains brought to us by filthy sins.” This doesn’t mean that a specific sin caused a war or any other crisis, only that

we live in a sin-damaged world. Another song makes us thankful for streamed worship when it prays: "Grant us again your heavenly peace; don't let churches and schools be destroyed, don't let worship [Gottesdienst] and good order be wiped out."⁴

It's probably true that many people prefer to sing happy songs. But note the frequency of lament and penitential themes in the psalms, the hymnal of the Old Testament. Even in our culture there are "popular" examples of musical lament, whether the Blues or sad Country-Western songs. So it's valuable now and then to give a rationale for the sad and serious hymns we sing, whether by verbal or printed comment.

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For not a few of us a Thirty Years War perspective on the fragility of life has been reinforced. It is good to speak in both sermon and song to the temptations faced by us who live in a comfortable "first world" context. Am I really worried that I'll get the virus? Or that the market and my 403b won't rebound, if not this year then certainly within my retirement horizon? God's promises in Christ are our ultimate confidence, not the wonders of pharmaceutical rescue and economic recovery. One of the new Getty/Townend hymns begins: "Still, my soul, be still and do not fear though winds of change may rage tomorrow. God is at your side; no longer dread the fires of unexpected sorrow."

One day we will face death, but not in despair or defeat. Rather, with the confidence found in *All Men Living Are but Mortal*. This hymn from TLH, updated by Hymnal Project director, Michael Schultz, is included in CW21 with the tune to which the text was originally sung, JESU, MEINES LEBENS LEBEN (CW 114). The author, Johann Albinus (1624-1679), was born during the war. He lost his father at age 11 and his stepfather at age 19, five years before war's end. Consider these stanzas in light of our current crisis:

All men living are but mortal
and will surely fade as grass;
only through death's gloomy portal
to eternal life we pass.

When this body here has perished,
then will heav'nly joys be cherished
where the saints, in glorious dress,
live and reign in righteousness.

Therefore, when my God shall choose it,
willingly I'll yield my life,
nor will grieve that I should lose it,
with its sorrow, pain, and strife.
In my dear Redeemer's merit
peace has found my troubled spirit,
and in death my comfort this:
Jesus' death my source of bliss.

Jesus for my sake descended
my salvation to obtain:

death and hell for me are ended,
peace and hope are now my gain.
With great joy I leave earth's sadness
for the home of heav'nly gladness,
where I shall forever see
God, the Holy Trinity.

This hymn is posted for free download along with other resources mentioned in this article. The text most people associate with JESU, MEINES LEBENS LEBEN, is *Christ, the Life of All the Living*, which will also appear in CW21. Not a bad association! "All men living are but mortal," but in faith we affirm: "Christ, the Life of all the living, Christ, the Death of death, our foe."

Funeral

A "new to us" funeral hymn is *Now Calm Your Heart*. One hymnal committee reviewer commented, "Time to beef up the Death and Burial section with quality hymnody." This comment referred to the text. But pairing with the tune HAMBURG (*When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*) caused other reviewers to rate it low, even a blunt "no" as in "forget it!" Then WELS composer Jeremy Bakken, moved by the text, submitted a new tune that easily gained approval. Thus we have a very old hymn with Latin and German roots paired with a 21st century tune. If there are COVID-19 funerals in your church, familiar hymns are the first choice. But this hymn is available for free download (along with an mp3 audio file), perhaps best rendered by a soloist for now.

And this peek into the editing process: The original first line, from other hymnals, was "Now hush your cries and shed no tear." Really? A health-care professional in your church has died, and you say to grieving friends, "Stop crying, no tears"?⁵ The revised first line is not only more pastoral, it's also faithful to the original ancient hymn by Prudentius (d. c.413), *Jam moesta quiesce querela*, which comes to us via a German translation by Nikolaus Herman of Joachimsthal fame.⁶

Gerhardt

Paul Gerhardt (1607-1676) became an adult during the Thirty Years War. Some details of the war's impact on his life are in *CW:Handbook*. His difficult life was aptly described by an inscription



Vocalists from the *Trinitas* video

on a portrait, which reads, “Theologus in cribro Satanae versatus”—“a theologian strained in the sieve of Satan” (CWH, p717). His hymns help us to sing God’s promises in the face of tragedy and disruption.

Someone recently asked me about the new hymnal Web site’s emphasis on hymns from Getty Music: “I hope we’re not giving up Gerhardt to make room for Getty.” No, we aren’t. There are more Gerhardt hymns than Getty. In fact there are more Gerhardt hymns in CW21 than in CW93. One new Gerhardt translation with a “new to us” tune is *Entrust Your Fears and Doubting*. Like so many Gerhardt texts and others from his era, this text speaks powerfully to our current crisis. It is paired with the tune originally associated with Gerhardt’s text and bearing the name of his hymn in German: BEFIEHL DU DEINE WEGE. This hymn is also available for free download, along with an mp3 audio file.

Now and then one hears the objection that old German hymns can’t speak to our modern world. It’s certainly true that complex poetry and archaic language can be a barrier. So this hymn allows Gerhardt to speak in a 21st century idiom.⁷ Some also wonder about old music connecting with modern people, but so much depends on presentation and familiarity. Who would say that *Oh, Come, Oh, Come, Emmanuel*, from the 12th century, doesn’t connect? To gain an impression of how adaptable BEFIEHL DU DEINE WEGE is, search YouTube to find a remarkable variety of settings in various styles.

So much depends on presentation and familiarity.

The Trinitas video mentioned above starts with *God Himself Is Present* (CW 224). At 22:40 you can also hear *We All Believe in One True God* (CW 270) with just one voice, piano, and guitar. This is immediately followed by mention of sources for arrangements. Gerhardt gets a 21st century boost from the Hymnal Project in another way beyond fresh translation. The *Musician’s Resource* will include arrangements for modern ensemble similar to those featured in the Trinitas video. Some were used at the January national leadership conference, including arrangements for Gerhardt’s *Why Should Cross and Trial Grieve Me* (CW 428) and *My God Will Never Leave Me* (CW 418) with text by Ludwig Helmbold. *CW:Handbook* points out that Helmbold wrote this hymn to comfort friends who were fleeing Erfurt in 1563 to escape a plague.

Since so much depends on presentation and familiarity, how might you introduce Gerhardt’s hymn? I can hear a certain female vocalist at my church singing the first two stanzas. I know that most people would find this first exposure to a new tune to be utterly compelling as an expressive soprano sings words of comfort and prepares the congregation to join in on stanza 3, maybe with a clarinet or other instrument doubling the melody.

Then back to soprano for stanza 4 and congregation for 5. You don’t have a capable soloist in your congregation? Then use three people singing unison.

This article has focused on a present crisis and a future hymnal. In closing, some words from Hymnal Project chair, Jon Zabell, from his plenary address to the 2008 WELS worship conference, introducing CWS.

“The early Christians faced persecution to the point of death for their faith. Martin Luther had a weight of responsibility on his shoulders I can’t even begin to imagine, and he had powerful enemies and a tender conscience besides. Paul Gerhardt lived through war and poverty and buried his wife and four of his five children. Open your hymnal. Open your supplement. You can sing what they sang. You can trust what they trusted.”

¹ Full lyrics are available online. Some online performances of this and some of the more upbeat modern songs are often “too much” for typical Lutheran worship. But as the Trinitas video demonstrates, an ambiance suitable for Lutheran worship is easily achieved. Note also that this song, like so much of the Getty Music repertoire, is eminently singable by a congregation—in contrast to the soloistic and rhythmically complicated style of much “contemporary Christian music.”

² Purchase the piano or ensemble accompaniment if you want to use these options before the new hymnal is published.

³ More participation in contrast to the deficit implied by the title of Thomas Day’s book, *Why Catholics Can’t Sing* (Crossroad, 1990; updated version 2017).

⁴ CD 2, tracks 6 & 17 from *Friedens-Seufftzer und Jubel-Geschrey / Music for the Peace of Westphalia 1648*. CPO, 1998.

⁵ To be fair, the original text can be understood as “you will be able to find comfort....”

⁶ Brown, Christopher Boyd. *Singing the Gospel: Lutheran Hymns and the Success of the Reformation*. Harvard, 2005. He spoke on this topic at the 2008 WELS worship conference.

⁷ Compare a 19th century translation at hymnary.org; search for “Thy Way and All Thy Sorrows.”

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