

Lenten Service Week 3

March 10, 2021

Sermon by Rev. Zachary W. Johnson

Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church

Pasadena, California

“What wondrous love is this O my soul.” There is such beauty in the simplicity of this hymn. At first it is unclear whether or not the poet of this hymn is asking a question, as if he or she is just encountering God for the first time. However, as one continues to sing the first stanza, it is clear through the lyrics “...that caused the Lord of bliss to bear the dreadful curse for my soul,” that the writer of this hymn is making a deep statement of faith. What wondrous love it is indeed for God to lay down his life for us broken people who, as hard as we try not to, allow sin to get the better of us.

The second stanza of this hymn gives word and voice to this sentiment: “When I was sinking down beneath God’s righteous frown, Christ laid aside his crown for my soul.” As this stanza is sung, at least for me, the words of Jesus from John 15 come to mind: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

Of course, the whole reason we are on this Lent journey is to witness once again the amazing love of Jesus as he gives his life to the cross so that we can remember that there is no power or entity in the entire universe that can separate us from God’s love. As we will see once again, not even death is strong enough to separate us from God.

In baptism we are forever tied to Christ Jesus, so that just as he died, we die to sin, and just as he was raised from the dead, so too are we raised to new life. After this we are anointed and marked with the sign of the cross. In doing so God claims us as beloved children and assures us with the gift of the Holy Spirit that we will never be separated from God.

Perhaps it is because of this amazing love poured over our heads in baptism that the poet writes the third stanza to sing: “To God and to the Lamb I will sing...” The Lamb being Jesus who acts as the sacrificial lamb at Passover. Just as the blood of the lamb painted



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upon the doors of the Israelites in Egypt that caused the angel of death to pass over their homes, Jesus gives of himself to be crucified so that death will pass over us.

Again, it is this story of God's love that we celebrate every Sunday through song, prayer, word, and table. Our liturgy is the holy drama that points us to the cross and the good news of resurrection. We experience this holy drama every week so that we are continually reminded of the wondrous love that comes through the cross.

We then share this amazing story through word and action outside the walls of our church so that, like the hymn states: " ...while millions join the theme I will sing." As we share the good news of God's love through Christ Jesus, we are doing the work of ministry as we help gather others into abiding in God's love.

Knowing that we are free from death is what frees us to abide in Christ's love, which is what brings the joy of living in God's kingdom here and now. We abide in God's love so that we may abide in the love of each other. The more we abide in the love of Jesus our love for each other grows. As it grows, we work hard to spread that love in the world. This action is the work of singing on because we have been freed from death. This is how the writer of this hymn chooses to conclude it. "And when from death I'm free I'll sing on, and when from death I'm free I'll sing God's love for me, and through eternity I'll sing on." This is the good news; that, our freedom from death gives us the freedom to sing of God's love out into the world so that all whom we meet will know the love and compassion of our God. And we can feel free to sing this hymn at any time so that we too can remind ourselves of God's unending love.

"What Wondrous Love is This" is an amazing hymn to sing and meditate on as we continue in our Lenten journey. Its words remind us of why we take this journey every year. And so, we sing on about the wondrous love of God through Jesus Christ, for that wondrous love is what abides in us throughout eternity.

Amen.



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