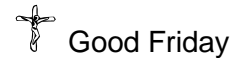


Evensong: *Abide with Me* (LSB #878)



In the name of him who for us gave his life on the cross, dear friends in Christ: Tonight we bring to an end our Lenten meditations on the evening hymns. And I saved this one for last not just because it's almost everyone's favorite, but also because of its message; for this is a hymn that is far more about facing the end of life than it is about facing the end of the day. This is a hymn about desperate need. It's about suffering. It's about loss. It's about disaster. It's about death. And that's what Good Friday is about too: how our Lord Jesus entered into deep need and suffering and loss and disaster and death for our sakes precisely so that he could abide with us forever. It was the obvious choice for tonight's service.

I don't recall ever having used it at a funeral, but it would certainly fit the occasion. We probably don't think about it because most funerals are held earlier in the day and an evening hymn might seem to be out of place. I have used this hymn numerous times when ministering to the dying and to their loved ones. It's a comfort for all when gathered around someone's deathbed we can sing these powerful words and proclaim the trust in Jesus they confess. Still, sometimes I worry that my own singing is so bad that it may hasten the passing of one who's dying; or worse, that it may only make them wish they could go sooner in order to escape the noise. So it's better, I've found, to sing with a group large enough for my own voice to go unnoticed.

The hymn has an interesting history. It was written in 1847, which just happens to be the same year our Lutheran Church Missouri Synod was founded. No connection there; but it makes the hymn exactly as old as our church body. It was written by Henry Lyte, a Scotsman, who became a minister in the Anglican Church. His religious training was extremely liberal: all that nonsense about how the Bible can't be trusted and is mostly myth and legend. It was later in his life, after he'd been serving as a pastor for a number of years and dealing with real people and their problems, that he actually became a believer in the Gospel himself. He then renounced all that liberal bible "scholarship" he'd been taught and began taking the Scriptures seriously. After that he was effective as a pastor and was dearly loved by his people. In the course of time, however, he contracted tuberculosis and his health declined rapidly. He wrote this hymn to use at the service at which he preached his farewell address to his congregation. The plan was for him then to go to Italy where it was hoped the better climate would help him recover. He never made it. He died three weeks later in route. So, in the end, the words of this hymn meant to convey comfort to his congregation served to help him face the hour of his own death. Lyte originally set the lyrics to a tune he knew – one that was described by others as dull and forgettable. It hardly matched or helped carry the power of the words. So later, a composer named William Monk wrote specifically for this hymn a more fitting tune called *Eventide*, which is the one we use today.

Like almost all of the other evening hymns we've studied in this series, *Abide with Me* is a prayer; but unlike the others, this one is addressed specifically to the Lord Jesus. It's based on a line that appears in Luke's Gospel. It's when the Emmaus disciples press Jesus to remain with them saying (in the King James' English) "Abide with us, for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent." And to fully appreciate their request, we really have to review that story. Recall that it takes place on the afternoon of the first Easter Sunday. The two Emmaus disciples are more or less fleeing Jerusalem. They want to get away from this place. It's been the site of the most devastating tragedy in their lives. Shortly after departing the city, they are overtaken on the road by Jesus himself, but their eyes are kept from recognizing him. He asks them why they're so glum. And they're stunned. "What? Are you the only stranger in town who doesn't know what's happened here in the last few days?" And it's funny in a way, because

he's the only one who actually does know what's happened. But he plays along. He asks them, "What's happened? Tell me."

In response they pour out the whole story: how Jesus was a great prophet and teacher who performed mighty miracles. We had hoped that he was the Christ, the one sent by God to redeem Israel. But our leaders turned on him. They had him arrested on trumped up charges and handed him over to the Romans to be crucified. They killed him. That was three days ago. And you want to hear something really crazy? Some of our women went to the tomb this morning. They found the grave open and the body missing. They told us angels said that he was alive again.

Here's the thing: they have the whole story. All of the details are correct. But because they don't believe the most important parts, namely that Jesus *is* the Christ and that he *is* alive again, none of it is good news. So they are crushed in spirit. They feel they were duped. They think they'll never believe in anything or anyone again.

And then Jesus takes them to task. "How foolish you are, and slow of heart to believe all the prophets have spoken. Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he unpacks for them all the Scriptures have to say about him. Imagine that: some three hours spent with Jesus as he opens their minds to understand God's great plan of salvation as it's revealed in Holy Scriptures – how in love he planned from the very beginning to send his Son to take on our fallen humanity and to die as the atoning sacrifice for our sins. And as Jesus speaks, the Holy Spirit is working through his words to bring their dead, faithless souls to life – to the eternal life of living faith in Jesus. They hang on his every word, remarking later about how their hearts burned with joy and hope as he spoke. They are so enraptured by his teaching that as they arrive at their destination some seven miles from where they started they urge him to stay. They still don't know it's Jesus; but now they believe. And they long for more of Jesus' powerful, life-giving, faith-building word. He accepts their invitation. And later at the table, when he blesses the bread and breaks it, their eyes are opened and they see who it is who's been talking to them all along.

It's this sentiment, then, that's being expressed by the words repeated throughout the hymn, *Abide with me*. It's the cry of the empty and inconsolable heart to be filled with faith and hope and courage and understanding and joy and meaning and purpose—all that and more that can only be satisfied by having close, personal fellowship with Jesus. St. Augustine once wrote that every human soul has a God-sized hole in it, and it can never rest or be satisfied until it's filled with God himself in the person of Jesus. *Abide with me* says to him, "Come, Lord Jesus, be *my* guest. Stay with me for then I know all will be well."

The awareness of our need for Jesus' abiding presence increases, as the first verse continues, as *the darkness deepens*. It's a broken, scary world out there. And it becomes a whole lot more broken and scary at night, or, what's really implied here, as we approach the end times – when each day the darkness in men's hearts is magnified, the love of many grows cold, the message of the church becomes muted or ignored, and sin and violence abound. In the face of all this we come to realize how helpless and needy we are, and how all the "helpers and comforts" we've placed our trust in (that is to say, our *idols*) are worthless. They invariably fail to bring the comfort and security they promise. Only Jesus, the Help of the helpless, can give us the refuge and peace of mind we long for.

The thought continues in verse two, but states it more emphatically: *I need Thy presence every passing hour*. It's not just when times are bad that we need Jesus; but also in the good

times. We often forget that, and end up treating Jesus as sort of a lifeboat on the ship of our existence: handy in an emergency, but not needed most of the time. How foolish. What do you think keeps the ship afloat and operating in the first place? This is even more the case considering the unseen enemy whom we forget probably more often than we do Jesus: the devil. He's out there and he means to destroy you. Thus the verse continues, *What but Thy grace can foil the tempter's pow'r?* This is the recognition that only with Jesus can I stand against Satan who attacks with his temptations and his attempts to deceive me or unsettle my faith.

The verse continues, *Who like Thyself my guide and stay can be?* This is Good Shepherd language. No one but Jesus can lead you safely through the terrifying valley of death's shadow to the quiet waters and green pastures. And so we pray, *Through cloud and sunshine, O abide with me.*

In the third verse we concentrate on *how* we want Jesus to come abide with us. Not in terrors, as the King of kings as he will on the Day of Judgment. This is what our first parents feared when after their fall into sin they heard the sound of the Lord walking in the garden. That's why they panicked and ran to hide. Indeed, no sinner can bear to stand in the presence of the Holy God. But you recall that the Lord did not dispense swift judgment against Adam and Eve. Instead he tenderly called them back to himself. He covered their shame and promised them a Savior. And so we ask Jesus to do the same for us: to deal with us gently and mercifully, to forgive our sins for the sake of his passion and death on the cross, and to clothe us in his righteousness. We ask him to join us in our sorry, broken state: *Tears for all woes, a heart for every plea.* Have pity, Jesus. Have compassion. Listen to my prayers. I *need* you. I need the Friend of sinners who forgives freely; not the Judge, Jury, and Executioner that I deserve.

There's a verse that appears in the old hymnal of 1941 that really belongs here, which unfortunately they left out. It goes, *Not a brief glance, I beg, [or] a passing word; but as Thou dwelt with Thy disciples, Lord: Familiar, condescending, patient, free; come not to sojourn but abide with me.* It expresses the longing of the heart for more than mere acquaintance with Jesus; that's not enough. I'm desperate for ongoing fellowship, for intimate communion; I want Jesus to be for me as a close member of the family – or rather for me to be to him that way. I want to be with the disciples at his table sharing meals. I want to be with Mary sitting at his feet as he speaks. Jesus, grant that to me. And of course, he does. This is what our worship is all about. Our confession and absolution is Jesus washing the disciples' feet. Our Scripture readings and their explanation, that's listening to him with Mary. And Holy Communion is Jesus gathering us to his table where he is both the host and the meal itself. Jesus does abide with us; but we pray in this petition that he would grant us to see and acknowledge it. I only wish they'd included it in the hymnal.

But moving on: in the fourth verse our prayer turns to a different sort of longing. It's the need for permanence, for something or *someone* rather who remains the same and does not change. You see, our lives are in constant flux. Things that once brought great pleasure fail to satisfy. And we know no good thing lasts. Sooner or later everything and everyone grows old, wears out, dies, and decays. And somehow the process seems to accelerate as we get older. When we're young, we have the luxury of time. The days pass more slowly; but as we advance in years we become conscious of how rapidly time flies and how little of it we have left. And perhaps this is a mercy because even the most hardened sinner must come to the point when he faces the prospect of his mortality – and what happens next. So it is that in this dying, decaying world we're forced to seek out the One who does not change, whose Word, whose

mercy, and whose love for us abides forever. *Him* we ask to stay with us as everything else gives way.

And the fifth verse tells us why: because with Jesus beside us there is nothing we need fear. If Christ is for me, who can stand against me? More than that, the aches, pains, and sorrows of life are all manageable. With Jesus, we know that they won't last. They are only for a time. What's more, we know that he has a plan. Somehow in his great wisdom, he intends the trials and tribulations we endure for our good. He is working through them to bring us even greater blessings in the life to come. We know that just as Christ had to suffer before entering into his glory, so we too who follow in his footsteps must suffer before being glorified. And knowing this, *ills have no weight and tears no bitterness* – not ultimately, anyway. With Jesus' abiding presence not even death is a cause for concern. It's a toothless tiger, a scorpion with no sting. Jesus beat death for us when he died for our sin. And we were united with him in his death for sin when we were baptized. Therefore death for us is past tense. It has no remaining power over us. And just as Christ was raised, so too will we be raised. The victory is already ours.

And so we pray in the final and capstone verse to remain focused on Christ's victory: *Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes.* At the hour of my death keep my heart and mind dwelling on this most important truth. As Paul said, "I am resolved to know nothing among you but Jesus Christ and him crucified." Jesus' death for sin is the heart of the Gospel. His death means your life. It means your death when it comes is not an end, but a beginning; a beginning of life in the light of the endless day, when heaven's morning breaks, when sin and shame will be forever erased, when your heart will be free to love and to serve in joy as God intended, when you will know Jesus as closely and personally as he knows you now, and when you will abide with him in glory forever.

This is why Christ came to earth. This is why he assumed our human flesh and blood. It's why on Good Friday he died on the cross for our sins: that we might abide with him. In this hymn we conform our will to his and we pray, *In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.* God grant it to us for Jesus' sake. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!