

Text: Matt 27:57-60, 1John 4:9-10, 1 Peter 1:18-19, Eph 2.4-6
Songs of the Passion Series

 6th Lent Midweek
Hymn: *O Darkest Woe*

Our God Is Dead

In the name of him who ransomed us with his precious blood, dear friends in Christ: Thus far in this series on the songs of the passion, we've devoted our attention to Lenten hymns that we are fairly familiar with. I daresay the hymn before us this evening is not one of them. I am certain that in the over two decades I've served here, this congregation hasn't sung it. Indeed, I am now into my 7th decade as a lifelong Lutheran and though it's appeared in all three of the hymnals I've used, I have never sung this hymn. I doubt that many of you have either.

Let me give you a little background on it. As you can see, a fellow named Friedrich von Spee wrote the first verse. A German, he was an ardent Roman Catholic. So ardent, in fact, that he became a priest and joined the Jesuits, an organization formed primarily to fight back against the Reformation. So, from a Lutheran perspective, he would not be counted among the good guys. In his favor, however, he is best known for his sharp critique of the use of torture in the interrogation of heretics (read that "Lutherans") and those accused of practicing witchcraft. Because people in torment will say anything to make it stop, he said that torture produced more "witches" than Satan ever did. He was also an accomplished hymn writer credited with the German texts of such hymns as *Ye Watchers and Ye Holy Ones* and *All Creatures of Our God and King*.

Johann Rist, the author of the other six verses, was the son of a Lutheran pastor who became interested in hymn writing at a very young age. He wrote three other hymns that appear in our hymnal including two we often use during Communion distribution. They are #625 *Lord Jesus Christ, Life Giving Bread* and #642 *O Living Bread from Heaven*. Rist later became a pastor himself. Anyway, in his studies he came across the verse written by Spee which inspired him to write a longer devotion on the theme.

Another person who deserves recognition is Catherine Winkworth. Without losing your place, kindly turn to page 1002 in the back of the hymnal. There you'll see her name listed near the top of the right hand column. If I'm doing the math right, she is credited with translating 45 of our current hymns from German into English including the one we're looking at this evening. She wrote many of her own hymns, but it happens that she spent a year in Dresden and there became acquainted with the rich tradition of Lutheran hymnody – something the English were still only getting started with. We English speaking Lutherans owe a lot to her for making it possible for us to sing the hymns of our forebears in a language we can understand.

The writer of the tune the hymn is set to is unknown, but it was clearly written specifically for this hymn. It's a sad, mournful tune that fits its dark theme. Even the name of the tune, *O Traurigkeit*, which means "O Sadness" sounds sad. It makes me sad just to try to say it.

Getting into the hymn itself, it's clearly a funeral song, a reflective postmortem on Jesus. Its opening verse places us with the two Marys weeping before the tomb, knowing that behind the stone lies the cold, lifeless, battered body of the Lord Jesus. And too there is the horrible shock of it all, wondering *how could have this have happened?*

But it's the first two lines of the second verse that hit us like a punch in the gut: *O sorrow dread! Our God is dead!* Here the astonishing truth is stated so starkly. And I know the very

idea causes some to resist. They ask, “How can God be dead? That’s not possible!” It *is* possible. And we’ve sung about it in other Lenten hymns. Consider: “When I survey the wondrous cross on which *the Prince of Glory died*”. That’s saying *God* died. Or this: “Well might the sun in darkness hide and shut his glories in, *When God, the mighty maker, died* for His own creatures’ sin.” One more: “Make me see how scourge and rod, spear and nails did wound you, How for them *You died, O God, Who with thorns had crowned you.*”

So, the idea is not unique to this hymn. It’s just that here it’s stated so plainly. There’s no escaping it. But we need to understand this. It’s true that God on his own, so to speak, cannot die. Nor can God in himself eat, drink, sleep, be born, grow, hunger, thirst, feel pain, and so on. But that’s the reason for the incarnation. In Jesus the only Begotten Son of God, *God*, takes on humanity. Now Jesus, who is God and man united in one person, can experience everything I mentioned – to include death. When Jesus is suffering on the cross, God is suffering. And when Jesus is dead, God is dead. And that’s key: no man alone could bear the sins of the world. Only a man who is God could do that. And we can be thankful that he did because our salvation depends on it.

But before we move on I want to clear up some potential confusion. In Jesus, God the Son dies. God the Father and God the Holy Spirit do not die. Only the person of God the Son who is incarnate dies. Furthermore, it must be remembered that death is not the cessation of existence. Unless Christ returns first, one day you will die; but you will continue to exist. You’ll still have a body and soul. They just won’t be together for a while. But death does not end existence. Now, how the death of God the Son works out in the mystery of the Holy Trinity and the mystery of the incarnation is a mystery beyond human comprehension. We’ll do well not to probe it too far lest our heads explode. But we must be able to confess that from the time Jesus gave up his spirit on the cross to the time of his revivification when his spirit returned to his body, *our God is dead*.

In the third verse Jesus is addressed as the “child of woe”. It reminds us of Isaiah’s words that he was “a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief ... he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows”. And in calling him “child” we are reminded that for this very purpose he was born. But then comes the question: Who struck the blow that killed our gracious Master? It’s tempting to pass the buck. It was the Jews. It was their priests and leaders. It was the Romans. It was those people back then. But no, we don’t get to do that. “It was I ... I have wrought this disaster.” Pilate tried to wash his hands of bloodguilt; but he couldn’t do it. And neither can we. Each one of us must confess “I did this. His blood is on my hands.”

The fourth verse addresses the Church collectively: “Thy Bridegroom dead!” It casts us in the role of Christ’s grieving widow. And yet there’s a hopeful note here. We are reminded of how in order to create the first bride, the Lord placed the man into a deep sleep, opened his side, and took out what he used to fashion her. Here the idea is that what now pours from the “deep sleeping” Savior’s side – the water and the blood – will be used to wash away the sins of the Bride of Christ and so give her new life. Mixing the metaphor a bit, Jesus is also referred to as the Lamb of God who by his death takes away the sin of the world.

The initial lines of the fifth verse bid us stare into the sinless face of our Lord as he lies in the stillness of death – there to find two things. First a steady confidence and sense of peace knowing that he died for *me*, to take away *my* sin. And then waves of all surpassing sorrow and grief knowing that my sin made it necessary for him to do it.

The sixth verse is a song of triumph declaring the massive victory Christ won for us over sin, death, and the devil by his rejection, suffering, and death. In addressing Jesus as the “Virgin’s Son” we are reminded of the miraculous circumstances of his conception and humble birth, and also of his having two natures: one divine, one human. And again we get that stunning truth of “how our God, detested, died”.

The final verse is a prayer to the now resurrected Lord Jesus Christ. You gave your life for those who were lifeless, dead in sin. Now when I face death, by the power of your resurrection give me life. And raise me up to glory with you. It’s bright and joyful end to an otherwise very dark hymn. May the Lord Jesus, our God who died and rose again, cause us to reflect on the truths this hymn proclaims and grant this final prayer to each of us for his own sake. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!