

Psalms, Hymns, & Spiritual Songs

A Long-winded Explanation of the Hymn of the Month

“Be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ...” (Ephesians 5:18-20).

Throughout his letters, St. Paul unfolds the manifold mysteries of God, often breaking forth in downright poetic rapture. But Paul is not just a theologian—he is a *pastor*, and he understands that not all Christians are the secluded monks sitting atop Mount Athos. We live real lives with each other in the real world... and applying the Faith can be hard. Bombarded by the busyness of life at best, and with the sundry evils of Satan at worst, how can a Christian remain faithful?

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Okay, Pastor Paul, what if I don’t have a good voice? And besides, that advice just seems... well, kind of cheesy.

Maybe it does... but maybe Paul knows what he’s talking about. You might not go around the office chanting your psalms in a bold *fortissimo*, but Paul understands something very human in this advice.

Just as your body is a physical expression of the food you eat to build it up and maintain it, so also our souls express the spiritual food with which we feed them. A daily intake of personal negativity, petty arguments, and chaffing bitterness (let alone any of the crazy media these days) can bend and twist our soul into sad conformity with this world. How does one combat this persistent evil, especially when the Faith comes so unnaturally to fallen creatures such as us?

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How many songs do you have memorized? I'm sure you know "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star," "Jesus Loves Me," and "The Star Spangled Banner," to name a few. And that doesn't even begin to count songs from the radio. We even say that a song is "stuck in our head"—an explicit admission that tune and lyric can take our own mind captive without our permission. Whatever the reason, we are wired to remember musical words, even long into senility when our memory has abandoned us.

While there are many reasons for singing our liturgy and hymns, not least among them is that song implants those words of Scripture deep within our breast, beyond even Satan's taloned reach. Can you even say the words "This is the Feast" without hearing their triumphant tune? How about "Away in a Manger"? It's doubtful I can recall all the words without singing it to myself first. But boy, when I sing it, I remember... and with tears.

God knows this. Why do you think He devoted an entire book of Scripture to hymnody (for indeed, the psalms are *songs*, not spoken poetry)? God made you to sing. Even if you sound more like Barney Fife than like Pavarotti, *God made you to sing*. He knows that you will be harassed by the ceaseless cacophony of this world, and so He has girded you with song: song that bears His Word of hope, that sings the Truth against falsehood, that instills the Faith in spite of this faithless generation.

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Pastor that Paul is, he too knows this. In his letter to the Ephesians, he tells us that we should be wise rather than unwise, imitating Christ... but to put these broad lessons into concrete daily practice, he prescribes the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Of course, the average Greek did not just go traipsing through Ephesus with his first-century version of the Lutheran Service Book (even the wealthy were lucky to have books, or scrolls, as it were...). Rather, these songs—from the liturgy, hymnody, and psalms—were learned by heart. Whether in the safety of their home or before the roaring crowds of the colosseum, the song of Scripture dwelt within them.

It is with this in mind that, for a year now, we at Christ Lutheran have been singing through the psalms, one by one, each week at Sunday School Opening.

And more, we have been singing a “Hymn of the Month” to help us become increasingly familiar with the songs of our Faith—perhaps even to memorize them! It is my hope to begin introducing these hymns with a brief newsletter article each month, giving a little context and explanation to each one. I heartily encourage you to add these hymns to your morning devotions, drive-time playlist, or even gym regimen (don’t tell me Thy Strong Word doesn’t get your blood pumping...); internalize them in whatever way you can. In so doing, you will steel yourself against the mighty throes of Satan, even with a simple song.

So then, be filled with the Spirit, dear Christians of Christ Lutheran, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.