

Devotions – March 7-13, 2021

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Sunday, March 7, 2021

Beneath the Cross of Jesus (ELW #338)

(Tune: St. Christopher)

Text: 1 Corinthians 1:18 (NRSV)

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

One of the things I have missed the most during the past year of COVID-19 suspended in-person worship is singing hymns with fellow worshipers. This week, as we find ourselves in the season of Lent, I want to share some thoughts based on seven hymns that I have always loved singing during Lent. A bibliography will be provided at the end of Saturday’s devotion.

Today is one of my favorite Lenten hymns, “Beneath the Cross of Jesus”. The words of this beautiful hymn of commitment were written by Elizabeth Cecilia Clephane (1830-1869). A Scottish Presbyterian, Elizabeth, despite her physical limitations, was known throughout her community of Melrose, Scotland, for her happy and cheerful nature, and for her loving spirit. Her nickname in the community was “Sunbeam”.

“Beneath the Cross of Jesus” was written one year before Elizabeth died at the age of 39. She was a devoted student of the Bible and this hymn is filled with many biblical references.

I believe that for us as Christians there is no neutral ground when we face the cross of Jesus. We either accept its atoning work and become a new person, or we reject it and remain in our sinful self-centered state of being. As I sing this hymn and take my stand with Christ and my redemption accomplished at Calvary, I find I am compelled to make two confessions: “the wonder of his glorious love and my unworthiness.”

St. Paul reminds the Christians in Corinth (and us) that the cross seems like foolishness to those who do not understand its necessity. Today, as I once again “take my stand” in “my abiding place” beneath Christ’s cross, I imagine the blood flowing from my Savior. And as Elizabeth Celphane affirms in verse 2 of her hymn, “My eye at times can see the very dying form of one who suffered there for me.” Faith in the blood of Christ cleanses all of us from sin. It was God’s loving plan for the redemption of the world.

Let us pray: *Lord Jesus, from your cradle, to your cross, to your risen presence, I rejoice in the “wonder of [your] glorious love.” Amen.*

Beneath the cross of Jesus I long to take my stand;
the shadow of a mighty rock within a weary land,
a home within a wilderness, a rest upon the way,
from the burning of the noontide heat, and the burdens of the day.

Upon the cross of Jesus my eye at times can see
the very dying form of one who suffered there for me.
And from my contrite heart, with tears, two wonders I confess:
the wonder of his glorious love, and my unworthiness.

I take, O cross, your shadow for my abiding place;
I ask no other sunshine than the sunshine of his face;
content to let the world go by, to know no gain nor loss,
My sinful self my only shame, my glory all the cross.

(ELW #338)



Monday, March 8, 2021

Blessed Assurance (ELW #638)

(Tune: Assurance)

Text: Hebrews 10: 21-23 (NRSV)

“Since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.”

What a challenging world we live in. There is the ongoing pandemic, racial bias, inequality of all kinds, classism, political conflict, unemployment, and a whole host of other issues that we face every day. I am thankful that even during these tough times that we all have the blessed assurance that “Jesus is mine”. It does not matter our skin color, our economic status, whether we are tall or short, or thick or thin -- we can all say, “Jesus is mine.”

This hymn helps us celebrate the fact that God exists and loves us more than anything. John 3: 16 tells us, “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” God loves the whole world. God sent his Son to die for the whole world, not just for one group of people. All of us. In the death and resurrection of Jesus we all have the blessed assurance that each one of us is an “heir to salvation” and a

“purchase of God,” and that we are “born of his Spirit” and “washed in his blood.” This good news is our “blessed assurance.” This good news is our song that we sing as we “praise [our] Savior all the day long.”

It seems that one day Fanny Crosby (1820-1915) visited at the home of her friend Phoebe Knapp who was playing music on her organ. “What does this sound like to you, Fanny?” Knapp asked. Crosby thought for a moment and came out with the words that comprise the first verse of this hymn. That was the way that many of Crosby’s poems were written. Blind from the age of six months due to improper medical treatment, she wrote over 8,000 gospel song texts. It was at the age of 30 at a camp meeting that Crosby experienced a profound deepening of her faith: “I felt my very soul was flooded with celestial light. From that moment on,” she said, “the words I wrote were a song of the heart addressed to God.”

It was Phoebe Palmer Knapp (1839-1908) who wrote the tune “Assurance”.

Today let us give thanks for the blessed assurance of faith in Christ Jesus and what he accomplished on our behalf.

Let us pray: *O God, thank you for the blessed assurance that you are always near to me. I am secure in that promise all the day long. Amen.*

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine! Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God, born of his Spirit, washed in his blood.

Refrain

This is my story, this is my song, praising my Savior all the day long:
this is my story, this is my song, praising my Savior all the day long.

Perfect submission, perfect delight, visions of rapture now burst on my sight;
angels descending bring from above echoes of mercy, whispers of love. (Refrain)

Perfect submission, all is at rest, I in my Savior am happy and blest,
watching and waiting, looking above, filled with His goodness, lost in His love. (Refrain)
(ELW #638)



Tuesday, March 9, 2021

In the Cross of Christ I Glory (ELW #324)
(Tune: Rathbun)

Text: Galatians 6:14 (NRSV)

May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

Lent is a time for us to keep our eyes focused on the cross of Christ. Jesus died that we might be saved, be forgiven, set free from our sins and have the hope of an eternal life with him. It was St. Paul who wrote in his letter to the Galatians: “May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” It was this verse that Sir John Bowring (1792-1872) apparently had in mind when in 1825 he penned the words of “In the Cross of Christ I Glory.”

Tradition says that Bowring was sailing past the coast of Macao, China. On the shore were the remains of an old, fire gutted church. Above the ruins, he saw the church’s cross still standing, and this image, and Galatians 6:14, provided the inspiration for his hymn. Incidentally, the title of this hymn was carved on Bowring's tombstone.

Much has happened in this world since these words were penned nearly two centuries ago, but the impact and power of the cross of Christ still stands. All kinds of people have tried their own ways to find power, hope, peace and understanding. But all have failed, and their futile efforts have become the wrecks of time. But Christ, through his sacrifice on the Cross and his resurrection from the dead, alone is the only way to freedom, peace and hope. He alone can change lives. He and his power are the same yesterday, today and forever. May we recognize and celebrate that each day of our lives.

The writing of the tune for this hymn is also most interesting. It was composed 25 years after Bowring’s text by an American organist and choir director. The composer Ithamar Conkey (1815-1867) was very disappointed at one Sunday morning worship service when only one of his choir members, a faithful soprano named Mrs. Beriah Rathbun, showed up to sing. Before the evening worship service that day, Conkey composed a new tune for Bowring’s text and named it Rathbun after his one faithful choir member.

Let us pray: *Lord Jesus, I pray that my remembrance of your cross would add more luster to my day. May I walk in the glow of its peace and joy today and every day. Amen.*

In the cross of Christ I glory, towering o'er the wrecks of time.
All the light of sacred story gathers round its head sublime.

When the woes of life o'er take me, hopes deceive, and fears annoy,
never shall the cross forsake me; lo, it glows with peace and joy.

When the sun of bliss is beaming light and love upon my way,
from the cross the radiance streaming adds more luster to the day.

Bane and blessing, pain and pleasure, by the cross are sanctified;
peace is there that knows no measure, joys that through all time abide.

(ELW #324)



Wednesday, March 10, 2021

Just As I Am, without One Plea (ELW #592)

(Tune: Woodworth)

Text: John 6:35, 37 (NRSV)

Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away.”

How often have you wished that if only you were in different circumstances or had some special talent, then you could better serve God? Today’s hymn was written by a bed-ridden invalid who felt useless to do anything except express her feelings of devotion to God.

She could not believe the cold hard facts. The prognosis of her disease was eventual paralysis. For 30 years Charlotte Elliott (1789-1871) had experienced an active and normal life. The verdict of her future health caused her to become very despondent and frustrated. And as the months grew into years, her frustrations grew into anger. Why would God allow such a thing to happen?

One day in 1822, Swiss evangelist Caesar Malan came to visit Charlotte. She explained her hopelessness, her despair and how unfit she felt to come to Jesus. Malan told Charlotte that Jesus spoke of himself as the bread of life and that whoever comes to him will not hunger (John 6:35). As they prayed she recognized the hungers of her present life. She hungered for freedom from depression. She hungered for peace and hope in her circumstances. That day she found herself able to say “Yes” to Jesus’ simple request to “follow me.”

The immediate change in her attitude was lasting. And each year after she celebrated her new spiritual birthday. It was on one such birthday in 1834 that she put her faith insights into the poem “Just As I Am.” It expressed her “formula of faith” as she explained it to others. After Charlotte died at the age of 82, more than a thousand letters were discovered in her papers from people around the world, expressing their thankfulness that their lives had been redirected by this one hymn.

The tune for Charlotte’s poem “Woodworth” was composed by American gospel musician William Bradbury (1816-1868).

This hymn speaks to my soul, especially during Lent. “Just as I am, though tossed about, with many a conflict, many a doubt, fighting and fears within, without.” Yet my Lord Jesus “wilt receive, welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve; because thy promise I believe.” And so, “O Lamb of God, I come, I come!”

As we respond in simple childlike faith to our Lord, we will find all that we need, not only for our personal salvation but also for the particular place of service that our Lord has for us.

Let us pray: *O precious Lamb of God, you bid'st me come to you. Today, just as I am, I come! I come! Use me as you will. Amen.*

Just as I am, without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me,
and that Thou bid'st me come to thee, O Lamb of God, I come, I come!

Just as I am, though tossed about with many a conflict, many a doubt,
fightings and fears within, without, O Lamb of God, I come, I come!

Just as I am, thou wilt receive, wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve;
because thy promise I believe, O Lamb of God, I come, I come!

Just as I am, thy love unknown has broken every barrier down;
now, to be thine, yea, thine alone, O Lamb of God, I come, I come!

(ELW #592)



Thursday, March 11, 2021

Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross (ELW #335)

(Tune: Near the Cross)

Text: Galatians 6:14 (NRSV)

May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

The cross was a superb triumph over Satan, death, and hell. Never was Christ more a king than when he shouted from the cross: “It is finished.” Out of his horrible suffering on that cross, Christ carved out his victory and his kingdom. The victory of the cross assures us that we no longer need to be kept separate from God--either in this life or for eternity. Even now we can approach God’s “throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to

help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16). And the best for us is yet to come--“the golden strand just beyond the river.”

This simply stated hymn was written by Fanny Crosby (1820-1915) whom we met this Monday past. As she did with many of the over 8,000 hymn texts she wrote, she wrote this poem to fit an existing hymn tune that had been composed by William H. Doane (1832-1915). Doane was a successful businessman as well as a composer and publisher of numerous gospel songs. He was a wealthy man when he died and he left much of his fortune to philanthropic causes, including the construction of the Doane Memorial Music Building at the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago.

As I sing Crosby’s poem, I am reminded that my salvation and healing flows from that cross on Calvary’s mountain. It is near that cross that Christ found me a trembling soul. Jesus found me! And Jesus on his cross saved me. So I’ll “watch and wait, hoping, trusting, ever, till I reach the golden strand just beyond the river.” “In the cross be my glory ever, till my ransomed soul shall find rest, beyond the river.”

Let us pray: *O Bright and Morning Star keep me ever near the cross and shed your beams of love and forgiveness over me today. Amen*

Jesus, keep me near the cross, there’s a precious fountain;
free to all, a healing stream flows from Calv’ry’s mountain.

Refrain

In the cross, in the cross be my glory ever;
till my ransomed soul shall find rest beyond the river. (Refrain)

Near the cross, a trembling soul, love and mercy found me;
there the bright and morning star sheds its beams around me. (Refrain)

Near the cross! O Lamb of God, bring its scenes before me;
help me walk from day to day with its shadow o'er me. (Refrain)

Near the cross I’ll watch and wait, hoping, trusting ever,
till I reach the golden strand just beyond the river. (Refrain)
(ELW #335)



Friday, March 12, 2021

When I Survey the Wondrous Cross (ELW #803)

(Tune: Hamburg)

Text: John 19: 17-18a (NRSV)

“Carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. There they crucified him.”

The music of Isaac Watts (1674-1748) was creating quite a controversy. He readily expressed the unrest in his soul about the music of the church, which Watts said was “the part of worship most closely related to heaven. But its performance among us is the worst on earth.”

He wrote the contemporary music of his day and was also considered by some to be a rebel. He was a minister in a Dissenting Congregational church. His deep faith flowed into the music he composed, which expressed feeling and experience. Throughout his lifetime, he composed more than 600 hymns and they were all very different from the Psalms that were being sung in his day directly from the Bible.

The best example of Watts’ unique music is this much-loved hymn, “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.” It has been labeled by some as the greatest hymn in the English language. In this hymn Watts gives us an intimate look at Jesus as he hangs on the cross and compels one to stand in awe of such deep love that would suffer such agony.

Author William J. Reynolds once wrote: “Rather than using an expected adjective such as ‘cruel,’ ‘tragic,’ or ‘rugged,’ Watts describes the cross as ‘wondrous’. Such graphic language reminds us that an instrument of cruel torture and death became God’s wondrous instrument for our salvation.”

Allow the words of this beautiful hymn to paint the picture of Christ’s sacrificial present to you.

Let us pray: *O Lord, forbid it that today I should boast in your death and your precious gift of salvation. I give to you today my soul, my life, my all. Amen.*

When I survey the wondrous cross on which the prince of glory died,
my richest gain I count but loss and pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast, save in the death of Christ, my God;
all the vain things that charm me most, I sacrifice them to his blood.

See from his head, his hands, his feet, sorrow and love flow mingled down;
Did e’er such love and sorrow meet, or thorns compose so rich a crown?

Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present far too small;
love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.

(ELW #803)



Saturday, March 13, 2021

Were You There (ELW #353)
(Tune: Were You There)

Texts:

But they shouted all the more, “Crucify him!” Mark 15:14b (NRSV)

It was nine o’clock in the morning when they crucified him. Mark 15:25 (NRSV)

When you think of spirituals, often upbeat songs such as “Swing Low Sweet Chariot” and “Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho” comes to mind. However, some spirituals, such as “Were You There” are much slower and thought provoking. The tune and words are almost haunting as we are asked if you are there when my Lord was crucified. Were you there? Did you see it? Did you experience it? Did you feel what our Lord was feeling? Are you a witness?

The imagery grows with each verse as we are placed at the scene of the Crucifixion. Can you see the scene? Can you hear the sound of the nails being pounded into his hands and feet? Can you see the pain on his face? Can you smell the blood as his side is pierced? Can you feel the tremble of the earth as it shakes? Can you feel the air cool as the darkness covers the sun? Can you feel the stillness of death as he is laid in the tomb?

“Were You There” was likely composed by enslaved African-Americans in the 19th century, people who could relate to the pain and brutality that the Christ suffered while on the cross.

By the late 1800s, the spiritual had moved from the cotton fields into congregations of all nationalities. This spiritual was first published in the 1899 Old Plantation Hymnal, which was composed by William Eleazar Barton. In 1940, it was included in the Episcopal Hymnal. “Were You There” was the first spiritual to be included in any major American hymnal.

This song serves as a reminder that Good Friday and Easter are for everyone regardless of the color of our skin, our nationality, our economic status, our background, age, social standing, or anything else that would seek to separate us one from another.

Let us pray: *Lord Jesus, my Savior, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for your death and glorious resurrection from which you bought my salvation. Amen.*

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Oh! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?
Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?
Oh! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?

Were you there when they pierced him in the side?
Were you there when they pierced him in the side?
Oh! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when they pierced him in the side?

Were you there when the sun refused to shine?
Were you there when the sun refused to shine?
Oh! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when the sun refused to shine?

Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?
Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?
Oh! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?

(ELW #353)

References Used for This Past Week's Devotions

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