



February 17—20
Beginning with
Ash Wednesday

Lenten Devotions
inspired by Handel's oratorio
Messiah

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Introduction

Psalm 19:14

Let the words of
my mouth and
the meditation of
my heart be
acceptable in
your sight, O
LORD, my rock
and my redeemer.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

In Advent 2009, we began a series of devotions inspired by George Friedrich Handel's oratorio *Messiah*. This great piece of classical music has inspired so many, collecting texts from all over the Old and New Testaments to tell the story of Jesus, the Hope of Israel, the Savior of the Nations.

On my computer, my music playing program classifies the music I have saved onto the hard drive. Handel's *Messiah* is classified as "Christmas" music, and so many of us know it. However, more of the *Messiah* is about Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection than is about His birth. Indeed, the *Messiah* tells the whole story.

And so, this Lent, we set out to finish the story. Actually, we will not finish the story until the first week of Easter. Because the last set of choruses in the *Messiah* are about the Resurrection, we will save them until after Lent has concluded.

To fill the remaining days of Lent, we will add a special feature to this series. Each Saturday, as well as on Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday, we will examine the hymn of the day for the Sunday following or that day. Your church may not sing the hymn of the day, but, so long as your congregation is on the three-year lectionary, this hymn will certainly complement the readings you will hear.

I recommend as part of your devotions this Lent that you listen to Handel's oratorio and sing the hymns.

Yours in Christ,
Rev. Daniel Guagenti

Prayer

*Lord, as we set
about these
devotions this
Lent, bless us.
Give us ears to
hear your word
and open our
lips to sing
your praises,
Father, Son,
and Holy
Spirit.
Amen.*

February 20

LSB 657

A mighty fortress is our God,
A sword and shield victorious;
He breaks the cruel oppressor's
rod And wins salvation
glorious.

The hymn of the day for the first Sunday in Lent (lectionary series C) is Martin Luther's "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." Based on Psalm 46, the hymn has found its way into a cantata by Johann Sebastian Bach, a symphony by Felix Mendelssohn, the battlefield anthem of Gustavus Adolphus' soldiers, Dwight Eisenhower's funeral, and the doorbell chime of Ned Flanders on *The Simpsons*.

Legend has it that Luther and his companions sang this hymn when entering the Diet of Worms, a conference where Luther, despite the real threat that he would be executed for the Gospel, said, "Here I stand, I can do no other." No wonder the hymn is often called the "battle hymn of the Reformation." The rousing tune fits the call to fight the good fight of faith, to bolster one's faith despite all the devil may throw at us.

Indeed, the end of verse one and beginning of verse two, "Give the devil his due," concludes that we cannot stand against the devil alone. And yet "one little word [of God] subdues him."

What is that little word Luther envisions? Is it "grace"? or "Jesus"? Or perhaps this is a reference to one of the powerful exorcisms of the Gospels, like Mt 17:14-21. In that passage, we read of the disciples' inability to cast out a demon, and yet with one (unrecorded) word, Jesus rebukes and casts out the demon.

We learn from this passage, as from this hymn, that even when our faith is as small as a mustard seed, our God is a mighty fortress, able to do all things for us.

By Rev. Daniel Guagenti

Prayer

God Himself fights by our side With weapons of the Spirit. Were they to take our house, Goods, honor, child, or spouse, Though life be wrenched away, They cannot win the day. The Kingdom's ours forever! Amen. (LSB 657)

February 17

Romans 6:6

We know that our old self was crucified with Him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.

For centuries, the Church has begun the Lenten season with the penitent receiving ashes to mark them as belonging to Christ the Crucified. As we receive the ashes of His death, we remember our sins and confess our transgressions. We weep for the penalty of our sins. We become united with Him in grief over sin. We mourn for the One who dies in our place.

Our humble walk to receive the mark of ashes is possible because of the first mark we receive. We had carried the mark of Cain, but we received the sign of the cross at our baptism and were marked as children of God. The waters of baptism take us from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. Because we received the blessed water of baptism, we can confess Rom 6:5, "For if we have been united with Him in a death like His, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His. We know that our old self was crucified with Him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin."

During Lent we will examine the marks of sin in our lives. We will look at our Savior who carried our sins to the cross. We will see the marks of our iniquities on His hands. Our souls will long for the glorious celebration to come.

By Rev. Andrew Guagenti

Prayer

If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared. I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in His word I hope. Amen. (Ps 130:3-5)

February 18

Luke 24:25-27

[Jesus said,] was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into His glory?

It is ironic that we are using Handel's *Messiah* as the basis for our devotions this Lenten season. Ironic, because the best known chorus of *Messiah* is the one we would never sing during Lent, "The—well, you know—Chorus." The irony does not stop there, either. The theme of this very non-Lenten choral piece is the victory of Christ Jesus over the nations of the earth. In other words, it is really an Easter and, even more specifically, a Second Coming song. But we usually sing it at Christmas. Like "Joy to the World" (another Christ-returning-in-victory song), the chorus-that-shall-not-be-named-during-Lent seems to be sung at the wrong time of the church year.

But there is more to the Messiah's story than victory and glory. The prophets spoke of the Coming One and for the most part were badly treated and even killed. Jesus was born not in a palace but a stable, hunted by His own king and forced to flee to a foreign land. His followers misunderstood Him, one of his friends betrayed Him, and His government executed Him. Hardly something to shout Halle—well, hardly something to cheer about.

God did all of this that we may be saved. This is the mystery of forgiveness and salvation, that God takes into Himself the death and destruction our sin brought into creation, and thereby defeats it. There can be no victory without a cross, no glory without suffering, no life eternal without death.

Few know that Handel originally composed his work to be performed during Lent. Yes, Lent! George H. knew that the fulfillment of Jesus' work was at the cross, not the empty tomb. So we too, before we can sing for joy, should remember the words of the prophets, the suffering of Jesus, and what it cost God that we all might be saved.

By Rev. Charles St Onge

Prayer

Gracious Father, we remember Christ this Lent, and what our redemption cost. Amen.

February 19

Isaiah 35:5-6

Then shall the eyes of the blind be open'd, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb shall sing.

Isaiah is speaking about what will happen when the Messiah comes. We see Christ do all these things. The blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, and the mute speak.

Sometimes we end up thinking of these miracles just as specific blessings to the individual, good for that person. However, there is more to these healings than just that; they teach us about what Christ does. When Christ comes and takes the battle to Satan, He strides into His creation and begins to fix it of all the problems that arise from the Fall. When God first created man, man was not meant to be blind or deaf, so Jesus puts things to rights.

And of course, the greatest ill that He comes to put to right is death. We were not created to die. We die only because of sin. Christ our Lord comes and defeats our sin and death by going to the cross. When we see Him heal, when we see His passion, we see that He is fixing things for us, so that He may call us on the last day unto the new heavens and the new earth, which shall never pass away. Then we shall see and hear things beyond imagining, we shall dance and sing for all eternity! This is what Christ's passion wins for us.

By Rev. Eric Brown

Prayer

Heavenly Father, you sent your Son to defeat sin and Satan. Grant us forgiveness and Your strength as we struggle against the sin in our own life, and keep us focused upon Christ that we might obtain His victory for us. Amen.