

Rev. Anthony T. Bertram

HE LEADS ME IN PATHS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS
Psalm 23:3-4; 8th Grade Graduation; May 21, 2024

When Mrs. Holmen informed me earlier in the school year that our eighth grade class, for the first time, would be writing a hymn for graduation, I wondered if they would pull it off. I was asked to help with the project, and I gave a few pointers – faithful hymns are built on God’s Word, hymns need an appropriate tune and I suggested they not pick one with a meter too complicated, and other stuff like that. Not hearing much more after that I concluded that it was a task beyond them. Boy, was I wrong! We just heard them sing their text with the help of 5th, 6th, and 7th graders.

Their song gets its title from the phrase repeated near the end of each stanza, “This I Believe.” Last Friday, after receiving their lyrics, I suggested one edit to their song. I convinced them to change the order of the second and third stanzas. The reasons I gave them are related to the Scripture this song is based loosely upon: Psalm 23, especially verses three and four.

Psalm 23:3 **He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake.**

Stanza one begins: “Is this the path that leads me to all righteousness?”

23:4 **Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.**

I suggested that their third stanza, which noted that Jesus will come in judgment “when that final trumpet sounds” and that “the end is near,” would fit better as the second. Their original stanza three asks, “Do we believe He sets us free?” and the answer is, “Yes.” By Jesus’ death and resurrection, He sets us from sin and death and will lead us through the **valley of the shadow of death** to dwell with Him forever. “The end is near.” Jesus promises, “**I am coming soon,**” but we do not need to fear that because our sins are forgiven.

The new third stanza mentions some very grown-up struggles: “doubt and deep despair,” yet remains hopeful in the face of them.

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He stays with me - even in doubt and deep despair.

He's still right here- right to the end.

He's truly present here with us.

This I Believe: He will not leave. (St. 3)

Psalm 23 again: **For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.**

Shame on me for doubting they would get this done, much less that they would do it so well! Now, I'm not saying that this hymn will endure for centuries in the church, but their teachers through the years who worked hard to provide these young people a good and faithful Lutheran education, their parents, and the rest of us have something to be proud of.

The outline of this hymn reflects a mature, Christian understanding of what it means to live by faith in this sinful world, "this valley of sorrows." We could descend into the "endless pit" of destruction, but it is better walk by faith in Jesus in the paths of righteousness. When we do face God's judgment at our deaths – if that comes first – or at the final trumpet on the Last Day, those who had other gods besides the one, true God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, will be bound in the chains of hell, but children of their heavenly Father will be set free from sin, from death, and the power of the devil to live forever.

Today we mark the end of elementary and junior high years for these students. These years – for the most part – are more sheltered from the great temptations that often come in high school and adulthood, when the devil and our sinful flesh fiercely attack faith and life with doubts, which can lead to despair when we realize our weaknesses and failures to live according to God's will. The key to resisting those temptations and even thriving in the face of danger is to hold fast to God's promises to us in Jesus Christ: **I am with you always.** We have learned to pray with confidence: **You are with me; Your rod and Your staff they comfort me.**

Jesus will not leave us or forsake us. Jesus sets us free from sin, death, and the devil, so we trust that our path now is the one that leads to all righteousness.

The hymn begins, “Is this the path that leads me to all righteousness?” That’s a good question. What is this “righteousness” and how do we know whether we are on its path or on the way “down unto an endless pit”? Lutheran schools teach clearly what our righteousness is. We have been justified, declared righteous with God’s own righteousness by faith in Jesus. We learn in the Small Catechism on the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, that **“through the washing or rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom [God the Father] has poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior... [we have] been justified by His grace [and have] become heirs having the hope of eternal life”** (Titus 3:5b-7 NIV). Holy Baptism “Is... the path that leads me to all righteousness.” First, Jesus’ baptism, and, then, our baptisms into Christ.

When Jesus went to John to be baptized by him, John would have prevented Him thinking that him baptizing Jesus, God’s perfect Son, was putting things backwards. Reversing how this sinful world exists and works was why our Lord Jesus came in human flesh. So that unrighteous sinners, who cannot stand before a righteous God and live, can stand before God without fear of His wrath, Jesus took our unrighteousness on Himself, our sins and the deaths that come from them. Jesus became unrighteous with our sin, and we become righteous with His righteousness when we are baptized into His name.

This is what He meant when Jesus told John that He actually needed to be baptized with a sinner’s baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. **“Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness”** (Mt 3:15). Because Jesus was baptized with our sins and for our sins, we are baptized with His righteousness for the forgiveness of our sins. Jesus died our death and rose so we can die with Him in baptism and daily, through our contrition and repentance, rise with Him to live with Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.

What is the path that leads us to all righteousness? It is the path that Jesus walked, into Baptism’s water and then to the baptism of His death on the cross and resurrection. Because His baptism is our baptism, His righteousness becomes our righteousness. **He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake.** This I believe. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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“This I Believe”

Text: 2024 SPL Fairmont 8th grade class

Tune: PREPARATION

- 1 Is this the path that leads me to all righteousness
Or down unto an endless pit?
Lord, please just guide me where to go.
This I Believe:
Christ’s all you need.
- 2 Am I prepared for when that final trumpet sounds?
Do we believe He sets us free
Or have we lived for our own gods?
This I Believe:
The end is near.
- 3 He stays with me even in doubt and deep despair.
He’s still right here right to the end.
He’s truly present here with us.
This I Believe:
He will not leave.