

At the Lamb's High Feast We Sing

Lutheran Service Book 633 | study by Richard J. Serina Jr.

Introduction

Do you remember the day of your Baptism? If you were baptized as an infant, then probably not. However, in the first few centuries of the Church, as it expanded through continuous missionary efforts, most new believers were adult converts. Whether Jew or Gentile, God-fearing believers or unbelieving pagans, they knew of a life before Jesus Christ. That also means they could see the stark contrast with life after Holy Baptism, a life awake to the mercy of God granted in those saving waters through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

This sense of new life in Christ is the theme of the ancient hymn “At the Lamb’s High Feast We Sing.” It shows the

intricate connection between the death and resurrection of Jesus on the one hand and our celebrations of Holy Baptism, the Sacrament of the Altar and the Season of Easter on the other.

- If you were baptized as an infant, what was your earliest memory of Baptism? What images do you associate with that first memory?
- If you were baptized as an adult, what do you remember about that blessed day? What images do you associate with it?

Exploring the Scriptures

The biblical background of today’s hymn is the Exodus of Israel from Egypt. There are two parts to the Exodus: the Passover, which precedes the Exodus, and the Exodus, when the people of Israel escaped Pharaoh’s army through the Red Sea. The Passover is recorded in Ex. 12:1–32.

- What did Moses command the Israelites to do on the night of the Passover? What kind of a lamb is reserved for this Passover sacrifice (v. 5)? How does this lamb symbolize Jesus?
- How would this save them from the fate reserved for the Egyptians in verse 12?

Eventually, the army of Pharaoh caught up to the Israelites in Exodus 14, as they crossed the Red Sea.

- What did the Israelites say to Moses when they saw the army of Pharaoh draw near to them as they stood before

the Red Sea (vv. 11–12)? How did Moses respond (vv. 13–14)? What happened next?

- How did God protect His people through the waters of the Red Sea?

God’s deliverance of Israel from Egypt through the Passover and the Exodus prefigures the way He rescued us from sin, death and the devil through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He gives us this victory in the waters of Holy Baptism and in the bread and wine of the Sacrament of the Altar.

- How is the death and resurrection of Jesus similar to the Passover?
- How is Holy Communion similar to the feast of the Passover?
- How is Holy Baptism similar to the crossing of the Red Sea waters by the Israelites?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

This ancient hymn was originally written to reflect the passage from death to life that all Christians receive at the font. How this occurred in the earliest days of the Church is slightly different from how we practice it now. Since the first converts to Christianity were adults, the Church provided an extensive period of instruction before receiving these catechumens into the shepherd’s flock through the waters of Holy Baptism. These Baptisms were reserved for one day of the year: Easter.

In the darkness before Easter dawn, the new converts would be led to the font, holding candles, where they would receive the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. After they emerged from those saving waters, they were clothed with a fresh white garment, representing their newfound purity through the righteousness of Christ. After Baptism, the new converts would enter into the assembly of believers as they celebrated together the Sacrament of Holy Communion in commemoration of the Lord’s resurrection.

- What similarities do you see between the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ during Holy Week and our Baptism into Jesus Christ at the font?
- What similarities do you see between the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ during Holy Week and our feasting upon His body and blood at the table?

Text

The first four stanzas of the hymn alternate between the subject of Holy Baptism and the subject of Holy Communion. Stanza 1 deals with the Church being “washed ... in the tide” that flows from the side of Jesus Christ, while stanza 3 sings of Christ’s “paschal blood” being poured out upon us as we pass “Through the wave that drowns the foe” like Israel.

- What is the “tide” that flows from the side of Jesus? How does this draw from the image of His death upon the cross? How are we washed in that tide?
- What is the “paschal blood,” and how is it poured upon us? Who is the “foe” drowned in this flood?

Stanzas 2 and 4 then refer to the Sacrament of the Altar. We sing of Christ as the “victim” of the Passover and the “priest” who offers not the blood of a lamb as a sacrifice, but His own blood in the wine of Communion. Likewise,

Making the Connection

Whenever we celebrate Holy Communion, we commemorate the paschal feast of Easter. In this Sacrament, both the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are symbolized. The bread and wine of the Sacrament do indeed give us a visual picture of the Lord’s death upon Golgotha. But He is not still dead in a tomb — He has risen again and is alive. When we bless those elements of bread and wine according to our Lord’s Words of Institution, we do not simply have a picture of Christ’s death. This Lord actually comes to us in His crucified and risen flesh, feeding us with that body and blood that hung upon the cross, was buried in a tomb, and rose again victoriously on the third day. By feeding upon

In Closing

Many among us cannot remember a day when we were not baptized. But that does not make the victory of Christ’s death and resurrection any less victorious or the forgiveness of Holy Baptism any less forgiving. Whenever we come to the table, Jesus impresses upon our hearts and minds His victory over death and the grave and strengthens our faith in the forgiveness He has granted us at the font. Beneath bread and wine, the crucified and risen Lord proclaims to us His death and promises us a share in His resurrection. We celebrate Easter, and with it our Baptism, each time we come to the table.

He gives us not the flesh of a lamb, but His own body at the feast of the Sacrament. Then, we sing of Christ’s body as the “manna from above” given to us here at the Communion feast.

- How are these stanzas speaking about Holy Communion? What does our Lord give us beneath the bread and wine of the Sacrament?

In the next three stanzas, we return to the paschal feast celebrated each Easter, when the earliest adult converts would receive Holy Baptism and come to the table for the first time. The Holy Triduum (the three days of Christ’s death, rest in the tomb and resurrection) represents the victory of Jesus over death and the grave, and so we celebrate that victory when we gather on Easter to receive His crucified and risen body and blood in the Sacrament.

- Stanza 5 speaks of Jesus as the “Mighty Victim from the sky.” What is meant by “from the sky”? How does that contrast with the powers that now lie “beneath” Christ?
- Stanza 7 sings of “Newborn souls in You to be.” How does this relate to the original context of our hymn? How are we all newborn souls on account of Holy Baptism? How does our celebration of Easter remind us of our new births in Christ?

His crucified and risen flesh, we receive the forgiveness purchased through His precious blood shed upon the cross and are granted a share in the eternal life He has promised us through His own resurrection.

- When you approach the table, what image comes to mind first: the death of Jesus or the resurrection of Jesus? Which one should come to mind?
- What does the crucified and risen Lord bring to you at His table? How should that shape what you believe about worship?

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 633.

Prayer

O God, You make the minds of Your faithful to be of one will. Grant that we may love what You have commanded and desire what You promise, that among the many changes of this world our hearts may be fixed where true joys are found; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for the Fifth Sunday of Easter).