Eternal Father, Strong to Save

***Lutheran Service Book* 717** | study by Gregory Just Wismar

Introduction

What hymns would you like to have sung at your funeral? Some people very carefully choose what hymns they would like to incorporate into that service; other people do not make any selection in that regard. "Eternal Father, Strong to Save" has become associated with the funerals of some great figures in American history, including presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy. Known as the "Navy hymn" in the United States, the original text and tune are both creations of gifted Englishmen. The two "middle stanzas" in the version used in *Lutheran Service Book* (*LSB*) were written at a later time by an American clergyman. The hymn is an expression of confidence in the ability of God to grant His protection to all travelers. The words remind us of our dependence on the grace of God not only for the success of our earthly journeys, but also for the completion of our final journey from earth to heaven.

- Have you given any thought to what hymns you might like to have sung at your funeral? What factors have helped you to make your choices?
- For many people, this hymn brings to mind experiences they have had "on the waters" of some sort. Can you recall a time when your experience on a lake, river or the ocean has reminded you of God's creating powers?

Exploring the Scriptures

Although the Old Testament people of God for the most part avoided large bodies of water, there were "storm stories" that became part of their shared experience and part of their worship life. Read Ps.107:23–32.

- What was the result for those who called out to the Lord? What was the psalmist's suggested response for the deliverance received?

The Bible begins with the event of creation that centers on the primeval ocean. Read Gen. 1:1–2.

- Where was the Spirit of God hovering at the time that creation was begun?
- How are we reminded by the creation narrative of the central role of water on our planet?

One of the most stirring Gospel narratives is the account of Jesus stilling the storm on the Sea of Galilee. Read Matt. 8:23–27.

- What physical description of the storm by the Gospel writer makes the experience of the disciples in the boat come alive for the reader?
- How is the divine nature of Jesus displayed in this account? Where might we see His human nature in these verses?

The Gospels also share the account of Jesus meeting the disciples on the Sea of Galilee. Read Matt. 14:22–33.

- Matthew describes Peter's attempt to walk on the water. How does Jesus show His lordship here?
- How does Matthew "put us in the boat" in his telling of the events of that evening on the water of the Sea of Galilee?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

"Eternal Father, Strong to Save" was originally written by William Whiting (1825–1878), an English schoolmaster, for a student of his who was sailing across the Atlantic to America. In the middle of the nineteenth century, transoceanic travel was still considered to be very perilous. Whiting wanted his student to be encouraged by the poem that he wrote as a farewell gift.

- How do the words of the original hymn (stanzas 2 and 3 of that poem are listed on the page following *LSB* 717) give a sense of encouragement to a traveler?

Text

The creation account relating to the waters in Genesis 1 is expressed in a different way in the book of Job. Read Gen. 1:6–10 and Job 38:8–11.

- In what way does each of these accounts speak to the power of God over the water?
- How does the first stanza of the hymn reflect that it is God who sets the limits for everything in creation?

- How does Whiting include all three persons of the Holy Trinity in the four stanzas of the hymn?
- What words chosen by Whiting show the strength of the seas through which ocean travelers sail?
- How does the choice of words increase the sense of awe that is felt when God's power in nature is displayed?

Making the Connection

The hymn "Eternal Father, Strong to Save" is centered on the theme of God's providential care. Read Psalm 93.

- How could remembering the words of the psalmist help us when we become apprehensive about taking a journey?
- How might the thoughts of the hymn be shared with others who have travel fears?

LSB 717 has been chosen as the Hymn of the Day for Proper 14A, the Sunday when Job 38:4–18 is the Old Testament Lesson and Matt. 14:22–33 is the appointed Gospel. Read both lessons.

- What does the hymn writer express in stanza 4 as the best response to the God whose power is seen in the deliverance of His people?
- What might be fitting expressions of "glad praise from air and land and sea"?

In Closing

"Eternal Father, Strong to Save" is a hymn of trust that is appropriate for times of personal travel and for times when others are traveling as well. Its use as a hymn for funerals is understandable, in that our final traveling to God's eternal presence — that place where "the sea was no more" (Rev. 21:1) — is the greatest of journeys.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 717, first in the way it was originally written, and then with the two replacement stanzas. How do both versions impart a sense of confidence for a Christian traveler — for whatever journey lies ahead?

Prayer

Lord God our Father, You kept Abraham and Sarah in safety throughout the days of their pilgrimage, You led the children of Israel through the midst of the sea, and by a star You led the Wise Men to the infant Jesus. Protect and guide us now in this time as we set out to travel. Make our ways safe and our homecomings joyful, and bring us at last to our heavenly home, where You dwell in glory with Your Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Before Travel, *LSB*, p. 287).