

In the Very Midst of Life

Lutheran Service Book 755 | study by Scott R. Schilbe

Introduction

We don't have to look too far beyond ourselves and our loved ones to understand that death surrounds us. The pressures of feeling age limiting our bodies or of seeing our loved ones mentally or physically decline burden us with feelings of hopelessness. We feel hopeless because we can do nothing to escape the situation. Our bodies, not to mention the natural disasters we witness through television and the internet, point us to the reality that the present world is fading away. We truly are living in the midst of death's vale.

Exploring the Scriptures

In the Bible are many accounts of individuals who felt death surrounding them and their families.

- Read Luke 7:1–10 and Mark 5:21–43. In each account, identify the person feeling burdened and the serious situation that was faced.
- According to 2 Cor. 1:8–10, for what beneficial purpose can God use our burdens?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

According to tradition, stanza 1 existed before Martin Luther (1483–1546) wrote stanzas 2 and 3. These two additional stanzas clearly confess the Christian's refuge during gloomy times of life: Jesus and His mercy.

Discuss how Luther's call to take refuge in the holy and all-merciful Savior becomes more personal after reflecting upon the following significant situations of Luther's life:

- His conflicts with the Roman Catholic Church and the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire after posting the 95 Theses, conflicts resulting in his condemnation after the Diet of Worms.
- Luther's family tragedies, especially living under the threat of deadly disease in 1527, and enduring the death of two daughters, Elisabeth in 1528 and Magdalena in 1542.

Text

This hymn provides interesting ways of describing death. In stanza 1, death is described as an enemy, a snare eager to trap us into fear and despair. However, repentant of our sinfulness, we flee to the only hope, the only holy God. Because of our holy and merciful Savior, we have nothing to fear.

Today's hymn, "In the Very Midst of Life," forces us to confront living in a sinful world, while also providing assurance that our holy and mighty God is the only one who eternally saves us from it.

- In your life, do you feel that the "Powers of hell" (st. 2) overtake you? How?
- To what refuges do you think people turn in times of need? Are these refuges outside the church?
- How does Heb. 2:14–15, 18 help you when you struggle with sin and death "In the very midst of life"?
- How does a faith that rests on Jesus speak in situations of apparent despair and tragedy? Read Lam. 3:22–33.
- Despite the unpleasant reality of living on earth, what eternal hope does Is. 51:11 and Rev. 21:1–4 offer you?

- How did Noah witness the snare of death surrounding him? Read Gen. 7:21–24.
- How did God deal with Noah's environment? Read Gen. 8:1.
- How did Noah react to his situation? Read Heb. 11:7; Gen. 8:10.

In stanza 2, death is portrayed as a valley through which we currently walk.

- How do the famous words of Ps. 23:4 help you realize that "death" is much more than the moment of physical death?
- What, according to Paul, is the source of this "vale" (Rom. 8:20; Rom. 5:12)? Who is your hope while living in this vale (Rom. 5:15–17; Ps. 23:4)?

In stanza 3, death is portrayed as utter woe. Again, Luther indicates that death is more than physical death; it is utter devastation.

- Contemplate times of your life when you've felt deeply distressed.
- Briefly review Jesus' passion. How did Jesus Himself experience utter woe and devastation? For what reason did Jesus experience it?

Making the Connection

As you examine the hymn, note that each stanza begins by sounding the realistic note of despair, yet each stanza ends by clearly pointing the singer to the merciful Savior. In this way, the hymn text parallels our natural feelings when confronting a crisis. It first gives voice to our hopelessness but then provides needed focus by pointing to Jesus.

The hymn guides us as we cope with suffering either in our lives or in the lives of others. It guides us to Jesus and to His atoning work. And it also guides us to repent of our fears and to cling to the ways in which God preserves us.

In Closing

Indeed, we constantly endure the sadness of living in a sinful world. This hymn helps us confront that reality, while at the same time it helps us look beyond that reality and cling to Jesus. Our holy and righteous God does show His mercy to us and saves, preserves and keeps us!

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB 755*.

Examine these two hymn phrases and discuss the related questions.

- “We mourn that we have greatly erred” (st. 1). In what ways do you express your contriteness over sin?
- “Lord, preserve and keep us / In the peace that faith can give” (st. 3). By what means does God preserve you in the faith?
- Choose a perplexing phrase from the hymn and discuss its meaning.

Prayer

Almighty, everlasting God, Your Son has assured forgiveness of sins and deliverance from eternal death. Strengthen us by Your Holy Spirit that our faith in Christ may increase daily and that we may hold fast to the hope that on the Last Day we shall be raised in glory to eternal life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen (Hope of eternal life in Christ, *LSB*, p. 313).