



The Tree of Life

Text: Stephen P. Starke (b. 1955)

Tune: Bruce W. Becker (b. 1952)

The composition of Lutheran hymnody did not end at the Reformation. Though we did experience a significant gap in the output of Lutheran hymns, the twentieth century brought a revival. People like Martin Franzmann (“Thy Strong Word”) reignited the art. Later in the twentieth century, and into the present day, the Rev. Stephen P. Starke came onto the scene and continued adding to the Church’s song. Hymns like “The Tree of Life” prove that there is still something to be added to our hymnody and is part of the treasure that we will pass on to the generations to come.



Stephen Starke

The Rev. Stephen P. Starke is Pastor of St. John Lutheran Church in Bay City, Michigan, the church he has served since 2000. Since he started writing hymns in his last year studying at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, he has penned more than 175 hymns, 32 of which appear in *Lutheran Service Book*, the newest hymnal of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. In addition to his service at St. John, he served as the chairman of the Hymnody Committee for *Lutheran Service Book*, which was released in 2006.

While his hymns are based on Scripture, many of them have been written for various occasions, such as congregational anniversaries, thanksgiving for various pastors and teachers of the church, and even for his own daughter’s wedding. When asked what makes a good hymn, theologically-speaking, he said, “Theologically, a good hymn from a Lutheran perspective is Christ-centered, biblically grounded, doctrinally precise, and rightly distinguishes Law and Gospel.” He added that, “Lutheran theology

provides a unique foundation due to its Christ-centered focus. Our Lutheran understanding that the justification of the sinner by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone is the central theological truth of Holy Scripture. These two points are like two eyes that help provide vision and focus for a Lutheran hymnist.”

“The Tree of Life” is Starke’s favorite hymns of all the ones he has written. Since it was written in 1993 it has been translated in to Swedish and is in the process of being translated into Swahili for the new Kenyan Lutheran hymnal.

Starke says that his inspiration for this hymn, besides Genesis 3, was the Proper Preface for Passiontide. It reads: “*It is truly meet, right, and salutary that we should at all times and in all places give thanks unto You, holy Lord, almighty Father. On the tree of the cross You gave salvation to mankind, that, whence death arose, thence life also might rise again, and that he who by a tree once overcame likewise by a tree might be overcome, through Jesus Christ, Our Lord. Therefore with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven we laud and magnify Your glorious Name, evermore praising You and saying...*” This Proper Preface, and this hymn, rightly identify the cross as the reversal of the curse that came from the tree in the Garden of Eden. There, the fruit of the tree brought condemnation, but now, the Fruit of the Tree, the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, brings salvation.

Like so many of Starke’s other hymns, “The Tree of Life” begins by summarizing a passage of Holy Scripture. Stanzas one and two take the events of the Fall, Genesis 3, and set them to rhyme and music. Stanza two closes by saying, “O day of sadness when the breath of fear and darkness, doubt and death, its awful poison displayed within the world so newly made.” Fear, darkness, doubt, and death, along with sin, become the “cup of scorn and dread” that Jesus drinks on the cross. He takes all of these upon Himself and sheds His Blood to take them away from us and to give us life eternal in His Name. Forgiveness, the pure and sweet fruit of the Tree of the Cross, are offered to the world in Jesus’ Name. “The Lord invites the world to eat” (stanza 4) His Body and Blood for the forgiveness of sin, and to see in His cross the place where salvation was won for them. As we receive the Fruit of the Cross, may we be strengthened in faith until we attain the life eternal that it gives us!