



To Jordan Came the Christ, Our Lord

Text: Martin Luther (1483-1546)

Tune: Johann Walther (1496-1570)

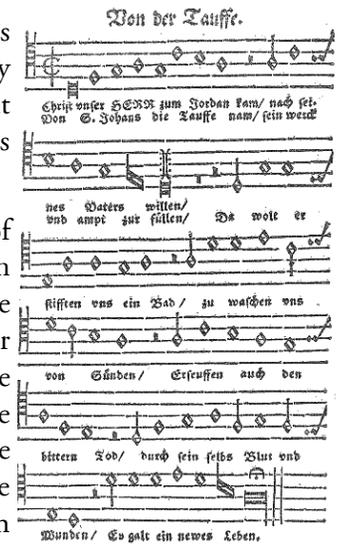
When Martin Luther wrote his *Small Catechism*, he divided it into six Chief Parts that cover the whole of Christian Doctrine. In an orderly fashion, he teaches on the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, the Office of the Keys (Confession and Absolution), and the Sacrament of the Altar (Holy Communion). This *Small Catechism*, intended to help teach everyday people the truths of God's Word, was eventually supplemented by hymns Luther wrote himself. It began with "That Man a Godly Life Might Live" (*TLH* 287), an exposition of the Ten Commandments. To teach the Creed he penned "We All Believe in One True God," *TLH* 251, which he also included in his 1526 *Deutsche Messe* as the replacement for the Nicene Creed. The Lord's Prayer is unpacked in "Our Father, Thou in Heaven Above" (*TLH* 458). "From Depths of Woe I Cry to Thee" (*TLH* 329) is his hymn on Confession and Absolution. Finally, "O Lord, We Praise Thee" (*TLH* 313) summarizes the Lord's Supper. It was not until later in his life that Luther took up the task of writing a hymn on Holy Baptism. Finally around 1540 he wrote "To Jordan Came the Christ, Our Lord" to round out his catechetical hymns. Sadly this hymn did not receive much reception in English hymnals until *Lutheran Worship* (1982). It is unclear why this hymn was not included in *The Lutheran Hymnal*.



Martin Luther

Though this hymn fits perfectly for that day, as well as any time a Baptism is performed, Luther likely wrote it in Eastertide. In Easter week of 1540, Luther preached a series of sermons on Holy Baptism. It is likely that these sermons were the inspiration for the hymn, although its date of publication was not until 1541. That Luther wrote it with his section on Baptism in the *Small Catechism* in mind is quite clear, as the order of the stanzas follows along with the order of the questions and answers

in his *Catechism*. Originally he titled this hymn, "A Spiritual Song of our Holy Baptism, which is a fine summary of What it is? Who established it? What are its benefits?"



This text and tune were a favorite of Johann Sebastian Bach. He used this hymn as the basis for his Cantata (BWV 7) for the Feast of the Nativity of St. John the Baptizer (June 24). He also wrote two chorale preludes and a fugue on this tune. The imagery he uses is remarkable. The accompaniment surrounding the hymn tune is a series of quickly flowing notes, which immediately call to the listener's mind flowing water. Albert Schweitzer, a nineteenth-twentieth century German theologian and musician writes, "The chorale prelude on Baptism, *Christ unser Herr zum Jordan kam*, represents running waters. In the last verse of the chorale, Baptism is described as a wave of salvation, stained with the Blood of Christ, which passes over humanity, removing all blemish and sin. ... Do we not believe that we see waves rising and falling, with the faster waves tumbling over the slower waves? And is not this musical imagery addressed more to the eye than to the ear?"

The first stanza from a 1577 German hymnal.

The first stanza captures thoughts from Luther's "Flood Prayer" in the Baptismal liturgy. Because Jesus has been Baptized, He has designated it as the means by which He gives us "a cleansing from transgression." Stanzas 3 and 4 retell the account of Jesus' Baptism by John in the Jordan. Stanzas 2 and 5 go hand in hand, as 2 begins to explain the gifts Baptism gives, while 5 repeats Christ's command to Baptize all nations. Stanza 6 becomes more characteristically Luther, as he gives the cautionary tale of what become of the one who rejects this free gift of God and trusts in themselves: they abide in sin, shame, and despair, and ultimately they are lost forever, "eternal death their portion." He ends on a teaching note, that our physical eyes are unable to see the mysteries at work in the Sacraments. Specifically, "all that the mortal eye beholds is water as we pour it. Before the eye of faith unfolds the power of Jesus' merit." Faith sees the forgiving Blood of Jesus in the water, the Blood that reveals God's love that opens heaven to us because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.