

2013_12_11 Midweek Advent 2 | Sermon
Ascension Lutheran Church, Batavia IL
Pastor David Pfeiffer

Advent Series:
Songs that Prepare the Way
Meditations on Hymns of the Advent Season

“O Lord, How Shall I Meet Thee”
1653 by Paul Gerhardt, TLH #58

INI

Let us PRAY: Oh, kindle, Lord most holy, Thy lamp within my heart. Amen.

To all who look for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, the grace of God which brings salvation be yours, dear fellow redeemed, (Titus 2:11-13)

In the chancel at the Lutheran church in Luebben Germany hangs a portrait with the inscription: *Theologus in cribro Satanae versatus* – “a theologian sifted in satan’s sieve.” This life size portrait of Paul Gerhardt echoes his life long struggles.

This thought was first expressed by Jesus as He warned Peter of the test which was to come, in Luke 22, “*Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren.*” (22:31-32).

In many ways, Paul Gerhardt’s life is a portrait of Satan’s sifting. From personal life tragedy to pressures to compromise, Paul Gerhardt found himself in Satan’s sieve. As a farmer sifts the grain from the chaff, Satan would throw Paul to the winds of trouble and temptation.

This is something each of us can carefully consider for ourselves as we prepare for our Lord’s coming. For those moments come to each of us; those moments of personal sifting; when your faith is put to the test. Where will we find weight? Where do we find value? Why should we not be lost to the wind and cast out as unwanted chaff?

In preparation for our Lord's coming, we rightly are found singing the songs of Zion – singing songs of preparation. And the song we consider tonight, asks the simple question: “O Lord, how shall I meet Thee?” May the Lord grant us that same resolve of Gerhardt, which in the midst of the Satan's sifting, seeks safety not in one's self, but in one's Savior. We consider tonight Paul Gerhardt hymn, #58 in The Lutheran Hymnal, “O Lord, how shall I meet Thee, how welcome Thee aright?”

Paul Gerhardt was born to a Lutheran pastor's family, March 12, in Grafenhainichen, Germany. His life would prove Luther's axiom true: *tentatio facio theologum* – “tribulation makes a theologian.” It would begin with the loss of both parents at a relatively young age.

Little information of his early life is actually available due to a fire set by Swedish troops which destroyed much of the town and its records. What would not be lost however, were Paul's hymns or his resolve for Christ's kingdom. Between 134 German hymns and 14 in Latin, Paul Gerhardt would go on to become one of the most well known and beloved hymn writers in the Lutheran tradition. What would outlast the wars and tragedy of Paul's life, was the desire of God's people, a longing to greet Him who is “their hope, their heart's delight” – a longing expressed in the hymn we consider tonight.

Paul's life would prove Luther's axiom true: His work and resolve would express what all of God's people desire – a longing to greet Him who is their hope, their heart's delight. So God would kindle in Paul and in you a spirit lowly to do that which pleased Him best.

Paul studied theology at Grimma, a place noted for its pious atmosphere and stern discipline. The school motto was: *Gottestfurcht und Gutesitte* – “fear of God and good behavior.” This respect for God's ways would be guided into a love of God's word when Paul entered the University at Wittenberg. There he would find himself at home and in agreement with the Biblical approach of Lutheranism and the Lutheran confessions.

Christian education and Christian influence upon our children and young people are God's means of equipping His people to praise Him later in life. Not all teachings will seem relevant to this or that difficulty I am going through right now. Yet all of God's teachings are a joyous song that we sing to the King who approaches us in Scripture.

He would eventually receive a call to be pastor at the church in Berlin. There He would be sifted as he took up post under Elector Fredrick William I of Prussia.

By this time, the controversies were not so much Catholic-Protestant disputes, but were now conflicts among protestants themselves. We sometimes movemnets of the Reformation as either Catholic, Lutheran, or Reformed. The controversies that would confront Gerhardt in Berlin were between the Lutheran and the Reformed teaching. Elector Fredrick himself was partial to the Reformed teachings. For years he sought to bring about compromise until finally he issued an edict. This edict stated that Lutheran pastors in his electorate were to stop preaching anything against Reformed teaching or they would be deposed of their office. The sifting of Satan was asking Paul to compromise Scripture, or else.

Gerhardt would lay in fetters, groaning, considering what his flesh really wanted – the easy way. But he would find his loyalty lay with the God who came to honor him first.

*A glory Thou dost give me,
A treasure safe on high,
That will not fail or leave me
As earthly riches fly.*

In 1667, Gerhardt would be leave earthly riches behind for the sake of confessing the truth. He was deprived of his office, his living, and would be left to rely on fellow Christians to support him during these years.

Such times of sifting come to each of us. Their are a hundreds other churches out there: closer to home, bigger, more appealing, more programs, less concerned with differences, Satan asks for compromise; Satan asks for you. It is a test of whether we will rely on ourselves to do what is best, or rely on the One who came to honor us first. It was the love of Christ which compelled Paul, and so it compels us. It compels us to believe and hold fast the truth, for in that truth, we find our liberty and we find God's love.

*Love caused Thy incarnation,
Love brought Thee down to me;
Thy thirst for my salvation
Procured my liberty.
O love beyond all telling,
That led Thee to embrace,
In love all love excelling,
Our lost and fallen race!*

That thirsts for our salvation, brought God to us; it brought God to our human sins and suffering. Our Savior's death remains the value and weight of all we possess. It gives us worth and keeps us grounded when the winds of Satan shift. *Although sin's debt, that fearful burden would cause our soul distress, your guilt the Lord has pardoned, and covered by His grace.*

However, like Pastor Gerhardt, the sifting we face are not just the pressures within; but also the pressures from without.

The setting which shaped this period in German history and the hymnody of Gerhardt was known as the Thirty Years War. This time of deepest gloom lasted from 1618–1648 devastated the land with famine and disease. It was really a series of a bitter conflicts between the countries of central Europe. Already at age 12, this would become the Germany Paul knew and lived in. The conflict would find its way into central Germany where Paul's home town of Grafenhainichen would be ruined by Swedish troops. Elector Johann Georg of Saxony had signed a contract to side with Swedes, but deserted the agreement. Swedish troops marched to Grafenhainichen demanding a war tax of 3000 gulden. Once they claimed their payment, they burnt the town down. Among the 400 buildings lost, Gerhart's house and home church were destroyed. It was a time when all joys had departed.

What devastations invade your life? Is it something as small as the stomach flu, or something as big as a fire which takes your home and all you own? What warfare has struck the place where you live? There come to us those moments when God reminds us of all we take for granted and all we need from Him to live. But it is in such events that the Lord humbles us, when He drives us to Himself and to His promises – *Ye need not toil nor languish. For He comes, He comes all willing, Moved by His love alone, Your woes and troubles stilling; for all to Him are known.*

In the later years of his life, Gerhardt would have many troubles to still. By the time of his passing, he already experienced the loss of three children in infancy, another later in life, the loss of his job, and, shortly after that, the loss of his wife. And yet the foes would be scattered by the sure truths which Paul held so dear:

*What though the foes be raging,
Heed not their craft and spite;
Your Lord, the battle waging,
Will scatter all their might.
He comes, a King most glorious,
And all His earthly foes*

*In vain His course victorious
Endeavor to oppose.*

Paul Gerhardt died on May 27, 1676, while praying one of his own hymns (Translated from the German): “death cannot kill us, but it rips our spirit out of many thousand of difficulties; it closes the door to bitter suffering and makes a way on which a man can go to heavenly joy.”

And so the portrait reads: *Theologus in cribro Satanae versatus* – “a theologian sifted in Satan’s sieve.” Though he was thrown to the winds of Satan’s ever changing schemes, Paul would not be cast out by God. God would find a grain worth keeping. Not by who Paul was, but in what Paul believed. So also for you. As Jesus said to Peter: “But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail.” The Lord prays for Simon Peter. The Lord prays for Paul Gerhardt. And the Lord prays for you. He prays for you that “when you have returned to Me, you might strengthen your brethren.”

We ask the question: “O Lord, how shall I meet Thee?” And God answers. But He answers not in earthly joys or the comforts of this world. Instead He uses the discomforts and sorrow of this world to make us ready; to drive us to His everlasting consolation; and to kindled within us, a desire to greet our Lord’s return with joyous songs and psalms...

*He comes to judge the nations,
A terror to His foes,
A Light of consolations
And blessed Hope to those
Who love the Lord’s appearing.
O glorious Sun, now come,
Send forth Thy beams so cheering,
And guide us safely home.*

Amen.