

HYMN INTERPRETATION

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“Thy Strong Word Did Cleave the Darkness” Martin Hans Franzmann

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has made notable contributions to the church’s hymnody. No small part of its legacy has been the continuing use of otherwise neglected chorales from the Reformation and post-Reformation decades. These majestic texts and tunes are still alive and well in “Missouri” parishes.

Faithfulness to this inheritance has not inhibited the production of new texts and tunes. Two names well know in Hymn Society circles are Jaroslav Vajda, text writer, and Carl Schalk, composer. One of their many happy collaborations is the eucharistic hymn, “Now the Silence.”

A text writer not as well known is Martin Hans Franzmann (1907–1976). Franzmann was educated in institutions of the Wisconsin Lutheran Synod, taught exegetical theology for many years at Concordia Lutheran Seminary, St. Louis, and, for the seven years prior to his death, was tutor of Lutheran theological students at Westfield House, Cambridge, England. The text which is the subject of this interpretation is characteristic of his work in its careful crafting, poetic beauty and theological depth.

“Thy Strong Word Did Cleave the Darkness” was written in 1961, during Franzmann’s tenure at Concordia Seminary, and is based on the seminary motto, *Anothen to Phos* (Light from above). The vocabulary of light persists throughout the six verses of the hymn, investing it with a wonderful unity. This unity is reinforced by the multiple “Alleluias” in praise of light which close verses one through four, with exultant variations of the language of praise in verses five and six.

Verse one is filled with echoes of the Genesis 1 creation story. God, solely by the Word, “Let there be light!” “cleaves” (a powerful verb that matches the Word’s modifier) the primal darkness and separates day from night. We are invited to sing thanks for the blessing of “created light,” the gift of God, who, by implication, is Light uncreated.

Verse two plunges us into a world, “dark as night and deep as death,” which is the consequence of our fallen condition. Yet the “Love that lit the sun and all the other stars” (Dante) does not abandon the lost creation in its plight but now shines upon us as “the light of salvation.” Without explicit reference to the Incarnation, the entire verse is an announcement of the One who came as “Light from Light” and whom “the darkness has not overcome.”

Verse three is a marvelous poetic condensation of Luther’s defining doctrine of justification by faith. We are not “righteous” in ourselves but are declared so by the “strong Word” of the righteous God. The light that broke over creation on earth’s first morning now breaks over and into our darkened lives until, as Charles Wesley earlier phrased it, we are “changed from glory into glory.” The verse, therefore, not only addresses our justification but our sanctification. In Johannine language, “We are now children of God and what we will be has not yet been made known” (I John 3:2).

With verse four the christological center of the hymn comes into clear focus. The cross, where the “strong Word” enfleshed in weakness and vulnerability was silenced, is elevated. But the cross is held before us not as the moment of the Word’s defeat but is proclaimed as its hour of triumph. As Jesus had announced on the eve of his execution, “The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified!” (John 12:23). Now the wisdom of God, always folly in human eyes, “breaketh forth in conquering might.”

In verse five the text shifts its mode from proclamation to supplication, a turn anticipated with the second person pronouns in verse four. Now the congregation is given words of prayer. We ask that we may have “tongues,” “throats” and “mouths” to speak the Gospel we have heard. The Evangel is to make us evangelists, and our worship is to be filled with the *phos hilaron* of God’s grace and glory.

The final verse soars in a triune doxology. The persons of the Trinity, while in two cases addressed by “name,” are all referred to by images derived from the hymn’s dominant metaphor: “light-creator,” “Light of Light begotten,” and “light-revealer.” Our attention is turned altogether away from ourselves, still making our pilgrimage through “the valley of the shadow,” toward God who is Light and worthy of all praise.

Such a text as this is clearly not “hymn lite.” It demands that we think as we sing. It weaves poetry and theology into a sturdy yet beautiful fabric. It can be argued that the editors of the *Lutheran Book of Worship* should have modernized the Jacobean forms in the original text. I am glad, however, that they chose not to alter Franzmann’s language. In any case, the church would be enriched by a wider use of this and others of his splendid texts. ❧

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1 Thy strong word did cleave the dark-ness; At thy
 2 Lo, on those who dwelt in dark-ness, Dark as
 3 Thy strong Word be-speaks us righ-teous; Bright with
 4 From the cross thy wis-dom shin-ing Break-eth

speak-ing it was done. For cre-at-ed
 night and deep as death, Broke the light of
 thine own ho-li-ness, Glo-rious now, we
 forth in con-quer-ing might; From the cross for-

light we thank thee, While thine or-dered sea-sons run.
 thy sal-va-tion, Breathed thine own life-giv-ing breath
 press toward glo-ry, And our lives our hopes con-fest.
 ev-er beam-eth All thy bright re-deem-ing light.

Al-le-lu-ia! Al-le-lu-ia! Praise to
 Al-le-lu-ia! Al-le-lu-ia! Praise to
 Al-le-lu-ia! Al-le-lu-ia! Praise to
 Al-le-lu-ia! Al-le-lu-ia! Praise to

thee who light dost send! Al-le-lu-ia!
 thee who light dost send! Al-le-lu-ia!
 thee who light dost send! Al-le-lu-ia!
 thee who light dost send! Al-le-lu-ia!

Al-le-lu-ia! Al-le-lu-ia with-out end!
 Al-le-lu-ia! Al-le-lu-ia with-out end!
 Al-le-lu-ia! Al-le-lu-ia with-out end!
 Al-le-lu-ia! Al-le-lu-ia with-out end!

5 Give us lips to sing thy glory,
 Tongues thy mercy to proclaim,
 Throats that shout the hope that fills us,
 Mouths to speak thy holy name.
 Alleluia! Alleluia!
 May the light which thou dost send
 Fill our songs with alleluias,
 Alleluias without end!

6 God the Father, light-creator,
 To thee laud and honor be.
 To thee, Light of Light begotten,
 Praise be sung eternally.
 Holy Spirit, light-revealer,
 Glory, glory be to thee.
 Mortals, angels, now and ever
 Praise the holy Trinity!

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