

ELS Heritage Hymns

Scandinavian Hymns for Each Month of the Year



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Prepared by the Worship Committee of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Hymns are from the *Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary*. Permission is granted to use this material as desired.

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Hymn of the Month

JANUARY

“In Jesus’ Name”

ELH 4

“And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him” (Colossians 3:17, ESV). It is important to begin in the name of Jesus. The Norwegian immigrants used this hymn at the beginning of important endeavors – emigrating to America, building their homes, starting churches and schools. It was in every Norwegian and Danish hymnal from the time it was first published in 1645, and often was the first hymn in the book. This is a good hymn for the New Year, and as we emphasize Christian education and missions.

The three stanzas can be remembered from the first two lines in each. “In Jesus’ name/Our work must all be done” – serving in our vocations not for our self-interest, but in Jesus’ name. “In Jesus’ name/We praise our God on high” – as we “spread abroad His fame” in missions, remembering that it is not our burden but the Lord who does “great things by His Word.” To conclude: “In Jesus’ name/We live and we will die” – for to live is Christ and to die is gain. The hymn ends by affirming us in the central Bible teaching of justification by grace: “When at last, saved by His grace,/We shall see Him face to face,/Live with Him in Paradise.”

Secondary Hymn for the Month

“I Pray Thee, Dear Lord Jesus”

ELH 178

This was the final stanza of Thomas Kingo’s hymn about Jesus’ childhood, which many of our churches remember on the First Sunday after the Epiphany.

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Hymn of the Month

FEBRUARY

“I Walk in Danger All the Way”

ELH 252

This hymn is written to help us meditate during Lent on Jesus’ determination to journey to the cross (Luke 9:51) and his enduring of temptations in the wilderness and beyond (Matthew 4:1-11, Luke 4:13). In Lent we meditate on Jesus’ suffering for us: first, so that we know He has redeemed us; but second, so that we may be encouraged for our life of trial under the cross.

The hymn is constructed so that a portion of suffering in the first three stanzas is answered by a promise of rich comfort in the last three stanzas. “I walk in danger all the way ... I walk with angels all the way” (v. 1, 4). “I pass through trials all the way ... I walk with Jesus all the way” (v. 2, 5). “Death doth pursue me all the way ... My walk is heav’ward all the way” (v. 3, 6). The highlight of the hymn is the fifth stanza. The answer, in this life of trials, is Jesus: “Within His wounds I find a stay,” so although “Satan’s power assails me” even the sins we commit ultimately will not hurt us: “my path I safely tread,” through the daily cleansing given to me in Jesus’ blood.

Secondary Hymns for the Month

“Before Thee, God, Who Knowest All”

ELH 493

This hymn by Magnus B. Landstad fits well on Ash Wednesday.

“The Sun Has Gone Down”

ELH 575

Based on Martin Luther’s Evening Prayer, this hymn by Samuel O. Bruun may be sung at evening Lent services.

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Hymns of the Month

MARCH

“Over Kedron Jesus Treadeth”

ELH 295

Our *Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary*, its Rite I liturgy and its preservation of Norwegian/Danish heritage of church singing and hymnody would not be ours without Thomas H. Kingo. He is the Danish pastor and poet who produced the original 1685 Danish version and wrote many of its hymns. In this tradition, congregational singing is given a position equal to choral liturgical singing. Through their singing of the hymns, people in the congregation proclaim their faith to one another. The hymns are devotional too.

This is especially true of Kingo’s hymns for the Passion of Christ. He wrote a series of hymns which turn each part of Christ’s Passion into a sung sermon. The first part of each hymn tells what was done to Christ; the second part applies it for comfort to the Christian’s daily life. “Over Kedron Jesus Treadeth” is one of these Passion hymns. It is from the first part of Jesus’ Passion, in the Garden of Gethsemane. Over the first five stanzas, we “see how, anguish-struck,” Jesus experiences the depths of suffering for us. In the final three stanzas, comfort is applied to us: “When as flow’rs themselves I wither,/When I droop and fade like grass ...” then I hear of Jesus’ suffering “to cheer my singing soul.”

“On My Heart Imprint Thine Image”

ELH 593

The superscription on Jesus’ cross was the writing that Pontius Pilate placed over Jesus: “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews” (John 19:19-22). For the baptized Christian – on whom the cross has been imprinted on forehead and breast – the superscription that God sees is: “Jesus, crucified for me.”

This verse is from Thomas Kingo’s Passion hymn for Good Friday. That hymn is 29 verses long; this verse, centered on “Jesus, crucified for me,” is the exact center of the hymn by Kingo’s design. He places Jesus at the center, as Jesus is the center of the Christian’s faith and life. This verse has been used by many ELS congregations as a conclusion to each midweek Lent service. It also is used on Good Friday as we meditate on the gifts of Jesus’ death by crucifixion: “my life, my hope’s foundation, and my glory and salvation.”

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Hymn of the Month

APRIL

“Like the Golden Sun Ascending”

ELH 354

This Easter hymn is a prayer of thanks and praise. The hymn’s first stanza is an exclamation to the world – “thus my Jesus ... rose triumphant Easter morning” – but the rest of the hymn is sung to Jesus. The world can listen in, and learn of our risen Savior, but this is personal! “Thanks to Thee, O Christ victorious! ... Thanks because Thou didst arise, and hast opened Paradise!” The hymn ends with this: “Lord, I thank Thee and extol Thee,/And in heav’n I shall behold Thee.” Throughout this hymn, we speak to Christ of what He has done for us. This is praise: speaking back to God the great things He has done.

Like all great Easter hymns, this hymn emphasizes the finished work of Christ that has redeemed us: “Thou hast won for me salvation,/All my sins on Thee were laid” (v. 4). This is the Gospel. What sets this hymn apart is its extremely pastoral emphasis, using the Gospel in Word and Sacrament (v. 7, 10) as healing medicine for the wounded sinner. The hymn deals with great spiritual troubles and applies the comfort of the resurrection. “For my heart finds consolation,/And my fainting soul grows brave” (v. 3), addresses the one who is overtaken by sin, feels defeated by life and helpless, is forsaken or forgotten by others, suffers “sore distress,” or is despised and condemned by an unsympathetic world (v. 4). “Thou hast buried all my woe ... Sin and death shall not o’erthrow me/Even in my dying hour” (v. 6, 7).

Secondary Hymn for the Month

“Peace to Soothe Our Bitter Woes”

ELH 595

This hymn by Nikolai F. S. Grundtvig is for the Second Sunday of Easter, when we hear Jesus say to the hidden-away disciples, and later to Thomas too: “Peace be with you.”

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Hymns of the Month

MAY

“How Blest Are They Who Hear God’s Word”

ELH 586

This is a good hymn to learn and sing as Sunday School children, school children and catechism students end their school year and head into summer. It is based on Jesus’ words, “Blessed are they who hear the word of God and keep it” (Luke 11:28). In this verse, “keep” does not mean “obey it,” but “cling to it.” This is what the hymn conveys, that not only is it important to hear the Word of God and gladly learn it (v. 1), but it is important to treasure it, use it in battle, and be preserved in this faith “till my account is given before the throne in heaven!” (v. 3)

If children learn one verse of this hymn, it should be the second. It teaches how God’s Word sustains a person in trials and difficulty. “God’s Word a treasure is to me!” Why is it such a treasure? “Through sorrow’s night my sun [it] shall be,” and also “the shield of faith in battle” (Ephesians 6:16). We live in the church militant on earth, where faith is attacked daily. The Christian looks for reassurance to the promise that “faileth never”: God has written – in Jesus’ blood! – “my title as His child and heir.”

“He That Believes and Is Baptized”

ELH 241

This Baptism hymn by Thomas Kingo is short, but very sweet! Because it is short, it is easily memorized. It is a good hymn for Pentecost, because of the prayer for God to give His Holy Spirit (v. 2). Many chief Bible verses about baptism and eternal life are put right into this hymn (Mark 16:16, Romans 6:3, 2 Cor. 5:17, Rev. 7:9).

The first stanza teaches that baptism gives eternal life and brings the blessings of Jesus’ work of redemption to the baptized. This includes being placed in the church that includes those in heaven! The baptized infant even stands before God righteous through the gift of faith. “Baptized into the death of Christ” means baptism gives strength to walk in newness of life. The second stanza is a prayer that the Holy Spirit will lead us to grow in grace by holy baptism; the blessings of baptism are for each day!

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Hymn of the Month

JUNE

“Built on the Rock”

ELH 211

On June 25, 1530, the Lutheran people confessed their faith before the emperor in the words of the Augsburg Confession, under threat of the loss of life, family, property, church buildings, and freedom. They “built on the Rock,” Jesus Christ. The Rock is Christ (1 Cor. 10:4), and the Rock is the confession of faith revealed to us by the Father that Jesus is the Christ (Matthew 16:16-18). This is a hymn written to lift up hearts that are afraid for how God’s church on earth is faring.

The people who founded our synod 100 years ago had to give up churches and schools in order to confess the truth. They dealt with the sinking feeling that “steeple are falling,” they were ready to be “but two His name to tell,” and they prepared to “gather with our King/E’en in the lowliest dwelling.” This hymn applies to such times of trial the comfort in God’s promises, especially in baptism: “He through baptismal grace us owns ... He draws near/ And little children embraces.”

This hymn echoes with the words which God speaks to us and the words of faith which we speak in His presence. First, God speaks to us: “Spirit and life are all His words, His truth doth hallow the temple. ... Beautiful things in them [the churches] are said ... Here sounds the word that doth proclaim Christ ... [Here] He His message is bringing.” Then we speak the faith given by Him: “Praises to Him we there may bring, His wondrous mercy forth-telling ... We our earthly temples rear, that we may herald His praises.”

Secondary Hymn for the Month

“When Sinners See Their Lost Condition”

ELH 111

In this hymn by Magnus B. Landstad, the emphasis is on the Christian home: “God’s kingdom comes with pow’r and glory, To young and old, to man and wife.”

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Hymn of the Month

JULY

“Ye Lands, to the Lord”

ELH 56

One of the Norwegian Synod’s founding fathers, Ulrik Vilhelm Koren, wrote this hymn. He served as president of the synod until 1910. Before he died, he warned against doctrinal compromise on the doctrine of election, and his words helped strengthen those who refused to compromise by joining the merger. As president, Koren exercised pastoral leadership in writing “An Accounting” (a Scripture-based evaluation of the true doctrine of election) and “Can and Ought a Christian Be Certain of His Salvation?” – to which, guided by Scripture passages, he answered a resounding “Yes!”

This hymn sings Psalm 100 verse by verse. In each stanza Koren has us sing the refrain: “Glory be to God! ... Sing praise unto God out of Zion!” This steadily reinforces that God receives all the glory for our salvation. The end of the hymn – “To all generations His truth shall still endure” – has become a theme of our synod, and a reminder to pass on God’s truth to the next generation.

Secondary Hymn for the Month

“In Jesus I Find Rest and Peace”

ELH 437

This hymn by an unknown Scandinavian author expresses trust in God’s providence.

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Hymn of the Month

AUGUST

“Thy Love, O Gracious God and Lord”

ELH 449

This hymn is a sung sermon based on Luke 19:41-48, the traditional gospel lesson for the Tenth Sunday after Trinity/Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost (usually observed sometime in August). In this hymn we are meditating on Jesus’ weeping over Jerusalem, that He still loves people who reject Him.

The first three stanzas lay out God’s love for everyone – “Thou hast loved our fallen race” – expressed in Jesus’ incarnation, fulfilling of the Law, atoning death on the cross, and sending of the Spirit to give faith. The last six stanzas take up the question in the gospel lesson: “Why is Thy heart still yearning/Since the great world rejects Thy Word?” The answer to this is a beautiful pastoral appeal which declares that God is “full of sweet compassion” and wants only to “give us joy for sorrow.” The last verse demonstrates one of the strengths of our *Hymnary*: including the “funeral verse” which often ends a Lutheran hymn. The final verse preaches the emphatic certainty of arriving in heaven to enjoy everlasting life: “O Jesus, at my dying breath/Hold Thou my hand securely ... And I shall find in Paradise/The joys of life unending.”

Secondary Hymn for the Month

“As After the Water-Brooks”

ELH 462

This hymn by Nikolai F. S. Grundtvig is based on Psalm 42.

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Hymn of the Month

SEPTEMBER

“Lord Jesus Christ, My Savior Blest”

ELH 258

This is a good hymn to learn and sing as Sunday School children and catechism students begin their school year. Throughout the hymn, we are directed to God’s Word as our comfort, support, and guide; yet we are simultaneously directed to Christ our Savior. In this hymn, Christ and His Word are never separated. This is a heritage of the Lutheran emphasis that Christ is given by means of His Word. To lose the Word is to lose Jesus, and to have and to hear the Word is to have Jesus and hear His very voice.

The melody is happy. It sings with a childlike spirit of joy and optimism. Embedded within this cheerful melody are words about life under the cross: “I trust in Thee;/Deliver me/From misery;/Thy Word’s my consolation,” and: “When sorrows rise,/My refuge lies/In Thy compassion tender,” and: “... This will I plead/In time of need./O help with speed,/When troubles overtake me!”

Secondary Hymn for the Month

“Praise to Thee and Adoration”

ELH 596

This hymn by Thomas Kingo is a good hymn for the beginning of catechism and Sunday School instruction for the year; the events of Jesus’ life and redeeming work are joined with a prayer to be kept faithful.

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Hymns of the Month

OCTOBER

“There Many Shall Come from the East and the West”

ELH 200

Magnus Landstad was a writer and translator of many hymns, and publisher of the 1870 Norwegian hymnbook that many Norwegian immigrants brought with them to America. This is one of Landstad’s greatest hymns. It is based on Jesus’ words recorded in Matthew 8:11-12: “I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven ...” (ESV)

Our Lord sees in advance people from many nations sitting at the Supper of the Lamb in heaven with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This is a promise, so it is the Gospel. The hymn’s second verse preaches the Law, the message of warning, that many do sadly resist God’s grace and will be “eternally lost and unfriended.” But those who are saved are those who “hear when our Shepherd doth call/in accents persuasive and tender.” In verses 3-5 we are praying with humility that God’s work of grace would bear fruit in us: “O may we all hear ... O that we the throng of the ransomed may swell ... God graciously make us in heaven to dwell ... God grant that I may of His infinite love/Remain in His merciful keeping.” This is underscored by the closing of every verse: “Have mercy upon us, O Jesus!”

“God’s Word Is Our Great Heritage”

ELH 583

Nikolai F.S. Grundtvig (author of “Built on the Rock”) wrote this hymn verse on the 300th anniversary of the Reformation to be an additional verse to Martin Luther’s hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” It is often used as the festival hymn verse on Reformation Sunday (following the exordium, another old Norwegian Lutheran tradition). As we sing this we are reminded that God’s Word is the means by which faith in Jesus is obtained and passed on to our children and each generation. The prayer that closes this verse asks for God to help us “keep its teachings pure” in our churches “throughout all generations.”

Secondary Hymn for the Month

“Built on the Rock”

ELH 211

This is our Hymn of the Month from June; but its emphasis on being built on the Foundation that is Jesus Christ alone, and its strong emphasis on the centrality of the means of grace for preserving us in the true faith, make it fitting as the chief hymn on Reformation Sunday in this special anniversary year of the ELS/Norwegian Synod.

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Hymns of the Month

NOVEMBER

“Behold a Host, Arrayed in White”

ELH 553

We wish we could see the people who are in heaven, if only for a moment. In Revelation 7:9-17, the Lord allowed St. John to see them and write down what he saw, to share with us. They are “a great multitude that no one could number ... standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands.” John is asked, “Who are these, clothed in white robes?” He does not know and is then told that they made it “out of the great tribulation” by having their robes “washed and made white in the blood of the Lamb.” (ESV)

In this hymn we sing about this, to a sweet Norwegian folk melody. It is a hymn that acknowledges life under the cross: “So oft, in troubled days gone by,/In anguish they would weep and sigh ... Ye did the joys of earth disdain,/Ye toiled and sowed in tears and pain.” In answer to this, it is a hymn rich in comfort: “At home above the God of love/For aye their tears shall dry.” Yet we still sing the true teaching of justification, directed to Christ and His promises: They “in the flood of Jesus’ blood/Are cleansed from guilt and blame ... And praise the Lord, who with the Word/Sustained you on the way.”

“I Know of a Sleep in Jesus’ Name”

ELH 525

The best hymns use the full wealth of God’s Word to teach the faith and comfort the conscience. This hymn shows how Scripture teaches in more than one place that death is a sleep. St. Paul calls Christians “those who sleep in Jesus” (1 Thess. 4:14); in the gospel we hear that “all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth” (John 5:28-29); and Jesus said that Jairus’ daughter was “not dead, but sleeping” (Mark 5:39) before He took her by the hand and raised her with His voice.

This hymn brings these things together: “I know of a sleep in Jesus’ name,” we sing in the first verse – when we Christians die, we sleep in Jesus. “He calls out aloud, ‘Ye dead, come forth!’/In glory we rise to meet Him,” we sing in the fifth verse – His voice will wake the dead on the last day. “O Jesus, draw near my dying bed/And take me into Thy keeping,/And say when my spirit hence is fled,/“This child is not dead but sleeping,” we sing in the last verse. At our deathbeds, Jesus is there to raise us from death like the daughter of weeping Jairus. Jesus dries our tears as He turned Jairus’ tears from sorrow to joy.

Secondary Hymn for the Month

“O Happy Day When We Shall Stand”

ELH 590

This hymn, sometimes sung at graveside committals, places the hope of the resurrection in the forefront.

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Hymns of the Month

DECEMBER

“On Mary, Virgin Undefined”

ELH 268

This is actually a revision of a Roman Catholic hymn to Mary. The hymn we sing has no problem saying God bestowed His favor on Mary, but clearly gives all the glory to Christ: “To *Him* be praise forever!” This hymn teaches the Gospel very clearly: “He hath us all from sin set free ... For full of grace and truth is He ... All shall be saved/Who trust in Him, believing ... Grant me Thy grace, I pray Thee!” It works very well in Advent, especially verse 3 which says not only that the Old Testament prophets were inspired by God, but that they were speaking of Christ’s saving work; “and faithful proved their saying.”

“Thy Little Ones, Dear Lord, Are We”

ELH 144

Hans Brorson originally titled this “A Little Hymn for Children.” Not only does it tell little children of Christ’s birth, but it teaches them about their baptism. How are we His little ones? Through baptism! We cannot “come His lowly bed to see” by our own reason and strength, but the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel. This is why we learn to say, “O *draw us wholly* to Thee, Lord” - He must draw us, and “wholly.” How does He “true faith and love ... impart?” The first way: in baptism. The great prayer in this hymn is: “Keep us, howe’er the world may lure,/In our baptismal cov’nant pure,” until He brings us to heaven. “Grant us, our Savior, ev’ry one,/To stand in heav’n before Thy throne.”

Secondary Hymns for the Month

“I Am So Glad When Christmas Comes”

ELH 127

This Christmas hymn by Marie Wexelsen has a great baptism connection.

“In This Our Happy Christmastide”

ELH 150

This hymn by H. A. Brorson speaks of the crosses we bear even at Christmastime (for Christmas Day or Christmas 1).