

Nearer My God to Us

“Nearer My God to Thee” is an 1841 hymn written by an English woman. It’s famous in America as the dying prayer of the assassinated President McKinley (*101 Hymn Stories*, 106). It’s infamous among Missouri Lutherans. Her 1927 hymnal had it; was taken out of the 1941 hymnal, put back in the 1982, and removed again from the 2006 hymnal. We sing it on Thanksgiving Eve. Our text isn’t about us getting nearer to God but about Him getting nearer to us. Three times we have the Greek word *engizō*. It means come near, to join. But each time it only refers to Jesus not those with Him. It documents our God drawing ever nearer to us.

First He arrives; the NIV translates ‘approached’ Bethany but it’s our word *engizō*. This is the on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives. On the western slope is Gethsemane and on the top is where Jesus ascended into heaven from. This is a key place in Jesus’ ministry. Jesus arrives here and pauses to gear up to make a kingly entry into Jerusalem. John lets us know that He has entered into this city at least 3 other times as an adult. Luke tells us He arrived here as a 40-day old infant and again as 12 year old boy. Never are we told He rode in. This time He makes a point to. In fact, no place else but here does Scripture tell us Jesus rode a donkey. That makes this significant.

Jesus is asserting His royalty. They are praising Him as “the King who comes in the name of the Lord” and when the Pharisees want Him to rebuke the crowds for saying it, Jesus says it’s so true that if they stop “the stones will cry out.” He asserts His deity as well. Instead of translating Jesus telling the owners, “The Lord needs it”, it could be translated, “The Lord of it has need.” And Jesus has no doubt that they will send an unused colt to a stranger. He is the Lord and King of both the owners and the owned. Palm Sunday is not Passion Sunday for Lutherans historically. From the earliest centuries that was the 5th Sunday in Lent. Go back and read the Collect for it. Today is all about the Palms for us. There’s the looming shadow of Calvary, but make no mistakes this is Jesus’ “Mary Tyler Moore” moment. Yes, there’s a certain pathos to this – think dramatic irony – but it’s not the Passion, yet.

And look at the adoration Jesus accepts. People who have limited clothing spread it before Him to walk all over. Note how Luke doesn’t mention branches as Matthew and Mark do nor palms as John does. I’m thinking this is significant to Luke’s source. They gave “the shirt off their back” sort of thing. Everyone knows Sir Walter Raleigh threw down his cloak so Queen Elizabeth could walk on it and not get soiled, but no one, but Jesus, knows these names. And the phrase “they put Jesus on it.” is not dignified enough, not royal enough. This is a Greek technical term more like ‘formally seat, perhaps ‘ensconce.’ When David wants to cement Solomon as his choice for king, he commands they seat Solomon on his donkey (1 Kings 1:33). The LXX uses this same Greek word for their doing so, and you’ll remember Solomon being on that donkey is the detail reported to those wishing to usurp his throne (v. 44).

Ever nearer our God comes to us. First stop Bethany on the side of the Mount of Olives. Second stop is when the road starts to descend and the city first comes into view. At the military crest of the Mount Olives, Jerusalem can first be seen. And the people go nuts. Luke 19 records: “When Jesus came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen.” The city will go out of view as they descend and come back into view in the last verse of our text. Both this stop and the last are noted by the same Greek word *engizō*, but only with reference to Jesus. This is the Jerusalem Jesus described earlier in Luke 13 as the killer and stoner of prophets and said it was impossible for a prophet to be killed anywhere but here. Jesus knows this; hasn’t forgotten it, but goes anyway. Why? As Karen Carpenter sang, “to be close to you.”

The crowds aren’t focused on Jesus’ prophesies about a prophet killing city. They’re focused on Jesus “for all the miracles they had seen.” There are 2 crowds here; one that has journeyed from Galilee with Him and the crowd native to Jerusalem. You should be able to hear what they’re saying: “He turned water into wine.” “He cast out demons.” “We saw Him raise the Widow of Nain’s son years ago.” “That’s nothing; we just saw Him raise a 4-day-dead Lazarus.” “I was there when He fed thousands with just 5 loaves and 2 fish.” “I’m the woman who had spent all my living on doctors and was no better. He healed me.” “I’m the leper full of leprosy whom Jesus healed by willing it.” “I was there just days ago when He healed blind Bartimaeus.” “O yeah! I was in Jerusalem when He healed a man who was born blind!”

What miracles do you think of when Jesus comes among us today? Yes, the ones in Scripture, but as Jesus told His apostles, even greater things than these have we seen. “I’ve seen a baby reborn into everlasting life in a baptismal font.” “O yeah, I’ve seen an old man forgiven for a lifetime of sins, he couldn’t forgive himself for.” “Well I’ve seen the Body and Blood of Jesus on this altar, in my hand, giving this flesh and blood of mine immortality.” No, no, this isn’t too much; this isn’t over the top. This is right on message. Hear the crowds out. They break into songs you ought to be familiar with.

They sing the ancient *Sanctus*. “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord.” The 3 other Gospels tell you they sing the Hosanna we do. The *Sanctus* is in Jewish, Greek, and Latin liturgies and was always introduced like we do as being sung by both angels and people (*The Pastor*, 183). It is found in the liturgy at the end of the 1st century (Sasse, *The Lonely Way*, II, 167). But it dates to Isaiah’s vision of the Seraphim (Is. 6). But this isn’t the only song of angels they sing. They sing a bizzarro version of what Luke 2’s angels did, and only Luke’s account records this. In the *Gloria in Excelsis* the angels sing of glory *in heaven* and peace *on earth*. The throng here chant of *peace in heaven* and *glory in the highest*. Like Caiaphas last week they could be speaking truer than they knew. At Christmas God announced a unilateral peace treaty. Here Jesus comes to meet terms. There is no peace on earth till the wrath of God in heaven is satisfied. That only happens when God the Son drinks all of the Cup of God’s wrath. And when God announces He has accepted that payment by raising Jesus on Easter, there’s glory in heaven. Satan is cast out once and for all then. He has no more standing in heaven after God’s Law has been satisfied by Jesus.

We’re to our third use of *engizō*. Jesus has drawn ever nearer and has arrived at Jerusalem. We know that Jesus has at least been on the road 3-5 days, some think longer. When Jerusalem appeared again, this time closer and never to go out of sight, the crowd really goes nuts. Go home read Psalms 120-134. These were the Psalms the OT Church sang as they ascended to Jerusalem on their pilgrimages. From any direction you came up to the city. You all know the *De Profundis*. That’s Psalm 130 one of the Psalms of Ascent. Chant it. “Out of the depth have I cried.” “But there is forgiveness with Thee that Thou mayest be feared.” “Let Israel hope in the Lord: for with the Lord there is mercy, and with Him is plenteous redemption.” These types of thoughts would be on the mind of the crowd.

The crowd goes nuts, but Jesus cries. That’s what Luke and only he records: “As Jesus approached Jerusalem and saw the city, He wept over it.” There are 6 words for crying in Greek. Dr. Luke uses this one on purpose. It means “to weep audibly, cry as a child.” On this Passover when the Lamb whom the millions of Passover lambs over the centuries have pointed to arrives, Jesus sobs. Why? Wait for it. It’s the Blood of this Lamb that has the power to shield sinners from certain death for their sins. His Blood alone can cause the angel of Death, of Wrath, and Judgement, to fly on by. Isaiah had predicted this moment 700 years before: Is. 53:6-7 “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth; He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before shearers is silent, so He did not open His mouth.” Got news for you; sheep may be mute while getting sheared but do you think that’s true while being beaten, slapped, kicked, whipped, nailed? A bleating, hurting sheep is a very sad thing to hear. Yet Jesus doesn’t resist, object, or claim His innocence. Because He’s suffering, being damned in our place, and we deserve it.

So why does Jesus sob on this day of celebration when the people claim Him as their king? Jesus doesn’t sob like a child for Himself and His innocent death. He’s not crying because He knows His heavenly Father is about to forsake Him to all the powers of darkness. Jesus doesn’t cry for Himself but for us. The verse after our text tell us Jesus is weeping because the crowds don’t realize that all the miracles they shouted about, all that they had seen and would see Jesus go through are the things that would bring them peace, but they’re blind to this. They’re missing it. Are we? Are you?

Luke loves to leave dangling questions. Do you see how far God Almighty journeyed to draw near to you to be able to save you, redeem you, rescue you from Self, World, and Devil? Do you know that in the next week you’re going to see the Passover Lamb, the Scapegoat, and the Sacrificial Lamb suffering, sighing, and dying for you, just you? If you were the only sinner of all time, He’d still be doing it. There’s not one sin that prevents the peace of God that passes all understanding coming ever nearer to you till it touches, washes, rebirths you. Well? Amen

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