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Study guide

What is your favorite hymn?

Reader stories

By Robert C. Blezard

Every time Lutherans sing “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” we are reminded anew that music is hardwired into our worship and devotion. After all, it was Martin Luther himself who composed that iconic Lutheran hymn—and many others—that still enrich our worship life today. Music stirs our souls and helps us open ourselves to the presence of God.

EXERCISE 1: MOVING MUSIC

“Music soothes the savage beast,” the old saying goes. Many would agree, including Martin Luther! In a preface to a 1538 collection of hymns, he lifted up music as a cure-all for the soul: “If you want to revive the sad, startle the jovial, encourage the despairing, humble the conceited, pacify the raving, mollify the hate-filled ... what can you find that is more efficacious than music?” Discuss:

- In what way does music, indeed, soothe the savage beast?
- When has music—of any kind, not just churchy music—soothed you or changed your mood? Or when have you observed this phenomenon?
- Do songs of faith and hymns move you in the same way that a popular song does? Or does it move you in the same way but in a different direction? Explain.
- Would you agree with Luther that music is a tonic for ailments of the soul? Why or why not?
- What hymns or faith songs lift your spirit? Can you say why? Is it the melody or the words? Or both?
- How do hymns or worship songs contribute to your sense of God moving in your life? In other words, how do they contribute to your faith?
- In addition to lifting the spirit of individuals, can music help change the mood of an entire congregation? Can you explain? When have you seen this occur?

EXERCISE 2: SERVANT OF THE GOSPEL

“Music is a servant of the Gospel and a principal means of worshiping God in Lutheran churches,” declares the ELCA’s 1997 statement “The Use of the Means of Grace.” “Congregational song gathers the whole people to proclaim God’s mercy, to worship God, and to pray, in response to the readings of the day and in preparation for the Lord’s Supper.” Discuss:

- What does it mean that music is “a servant of the gospel”? How does it accomplish this role?



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Study guide: What is your favorite hymn?

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- If music is “a principal” means of worshiping God, what are other means? How does music interact (blend) with these other means to craft a meaningful worship experience?
- How would you compare the experience of a worship service with music to a worship service without music? What does music add?

EXERCISE 3: YOUR FAVORITE HYMN

Prepare for the discussion by having a hymnal for each study group member and, if possible, a musician who can play hymns or songs. In turn, members can identify their favorite hymns or songs and then sing them together. For each, discuss:

- When did you first hear this hymn or song? What did you experience when you first heard it?
- Why do you like this hymn or song?
- What emotions does it arouse?
- What effect do the words have on you? The music? Which is more moving?
- How does this selection bring you closer to God or deepen your faith?
- When all have spoken, discuss how and why music can move our spirits.

EXERCISE 4: A DIFFERENT SONG

Lutherans are expanding their musical range! Is your church? Which hymnal does your congregation primarily use? The ELCA and its predecessor bodies have released several major hymnals: in 1958 (*Service Book and Hymnal*), 1978 (*Lutheran Book of Worship*) and 2006 (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*). But there have also been supplemental and specialty hymnals, including *With One Voice*, *This Far by Faith* (hymns in the African American tradition), *Libro de Liturgia y Cántico* (hymns for in the Spanish tradition), and *All Creation Sings* (focusing on the health of people and the planet).

Evangelical Lutheran Worship has become the standard hymnal for many Lutheran congregations. Is it for your church? *ELW* offers a range of musical styles, from traditional to contemporary, representing various ethnic heritages, including American, African American, Northern European, Hispanic/Latino, South American, African and other global traditions.

- If your congregation uses *ELW*, does it sample the variety of styles present? Why or why not? How might doing so enrich your congregation’s worship life?
- Has your congregation supplemented its primary hymnals with some of the newer offerings? If so, how are they used and how have they been received? If not, which might be best suited to helping your congregation stretch their variety and tastes?
- Would new and different music offerings make your worship more inviting to people you need to reach?



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EXERCISE 5: MUSIC TASTES

Many congregations face a generational musical dilemma: The “good old hymns” that are adored by the older members of the congregation don’t do much for many younger members, whose tastes are more modern. But some older members find contemporary Christian music to be less than worshipful. For this reason, hoping to reach as many people as possible, many churches offer services in both traditional (often with an organ) and more modern styles (often with a band).

- When it comes to worship music, do you prefer traditional hymns or the more-modern offerings? Can you explain?
- What emotions and thoughts are aroused by your preferred type of worship music? Why?
- Does your less-preferred variety of music have the same effect? Why or why not?
- Why might a certain type of worship music appeal to one person but not another?
- If a primary purpose of worship music is glorifying God and serving the gospel by opening people’s hearts and minds to God’s presence, does it make a difference which style of music folks prefer? Why or why not?
- How does music style assist a congregation in outreach and growth? Can style ever be a barrier to growth?
- Should a church try to satisfy every musical taste? How can a church wisely adapt its music to newer hymns and instrumentation while not alienating people who like the traditional offerings?
- What suggestions would you give to your pastor or worship leaders?

EXERCISE 6: MARTIN LUTHER’S HYMNS

“A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” may be Luther’s most popular and beloved hymn, but it wasn’t the only one. The reformer wrote dozens of hymns, many of which are found in the *ELW*. Explore his genius both by singing them and reading the insightful lyrics. As a study group, gather with a musician and review Luther’s hymns.

Start by reading the lyrics as a poem and discuss their rich meanings. Discuss ways that the hymn might tell afresh a story of faith (as does 268), voice a prayer (such as 517) or state a tenet of faith (such as 504).

Then sing the song and discuss how the lyrics and music praise God, pass on the faith and serve as a “servant of the gospel.”

- “Savior of the Nations, Come” (263)
- “From Heaven Above” (268)
- “Christ Jesus Lay in Death’s Strong Bands” (370)
- “Come, Holy Ghost, God and Lord” (395)



About the study guide author:

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- “We All Believe in One True God” (411)
- “In Peace and Joy I Now Depart” (440)
- “O Lord, We Praise You” (499)
- “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” (503, 504, 505)
- “Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word” (517)
- “Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice” (594)
- “Out of the Depths I Cry to You” (600)
- “Now to the Holy Spirit Let Us Pray” (743)
- “Our Father, God in Heaven Above” (746, 747)
- “Grant Peace, We Pray, in Mercy, Lord” (784)
- “Isaiah in a Vision Did of Old” (868)

EXERCISE 7: HUMMING HYMNS

- Do you ever find yourself humming or singing hymns? Which ones? When? What are you feeling at that time?
- Are there different hymns you choose depending on your mood? Which do you think of when you are happy? Sad? Needy? Thoughtful? Meditating on God’s grace?
- How do these hymns help your frame of mind?

What is your favorite hymn?

READER STORIES

Editor's note: The following collection of reflections is a response to a reader call asking people to share their favorite hymns.

"A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 503-505). It always fills me with the power of the Lord—especially if there is pipe organ accompanying.
—Lisa Holloway

"A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." It reminds us that God is our refuge and strength. In times of trouble, Martin Luther would say to Philip Melancthon: "Come, Philip, let us sing the 46th Psalm."
—Jack Puskar

"Lord Jesus, You Shall Be My Song" (*ELW* 808). As the anxieties and cares of these recent times have become more violent, more oppressive, there has been a concurrent rise in singing as a means of nonviolent resistance. The steadfast hope and courage of this hymn, with its acknowledgment of all that is dark and frightening, never fails to connect deeply.
—Scott Johnson

One of my dad's many favorites was "Lift High the Cross" (*ELW* 660). My brother would add a trumpet accompaniment to the organ. It's so powerful and everyone sings their hearts out. There were many wet eyes during that hymn in our small rural church amid the cornfields. We sang it at my dad's funeral, so it still pulls at my heart.
—Beth Lackey

"Blessed Assurance" (*ELW* 638). I hold it close to my heart as it was the last hymn sung at the last service my late husband and I attended together. Tragically, that night he had a fatal heart attack. The words comfort me.
—Heidi Couch

Martin Luther's "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" is the Fall Hymn of the Month. Learn more about the history behind this hymn on page 25.



“I Love to Tell the Story” (*ELW* 661). My mom sang it to me as a lullaby, and I sang it to my son.
—Melissa Rutz Mumaw

“Children of the Heavenly Father” (*ELW* 781). My mom was the organist at my church prior to her death, and she played this when the kids would go up for the children’s sermon.
—Debbie Kemerer

“Children of the Heavenly Father.” We would sing verses 1, 2 and 4 every week before junior choir rehearsal. After 11 years, I memorized it. I have many fond memories with the choir, singing during worship and caroling to our shut-ins and visiting with them. We are all children of God, and this song speaks that to me every time I sing it.
—Cindy Rivera

“I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say” (*ELW* 611). It’s written on my heart. It’s why Lutherans tear up when singing, because all these hymns are woven into our souls. We can recall standing next to our mothers and fathers, family, grandparents, singing all these songs and hearing voices crack with emotion.
—Sara Jones

“How Great Thou Art” (*ELW* 856), both because it reminds me of my grandfather and my childhood church, and because it rings true when I am hiking in the woods and onto mountaintops.
—Jeff Skrenes

I’ve loved “Grandioso És Tu (How Great Thou Art)” ever since I was a Pentecostal evangelical. But when I started giving drum classes, I started liking waltz-time hymns better. One that touched me when I met the Lutheran hymnary was “Amoroso e Humilde Servo (Lord, Whose Love in Humble Service)” (*ELW* 712), and I’ve been using it frequently in my classes to teach a drum and guitar style that’s particularly traditional here in Brazil, *guarânia*.
—Paulo Victor Raposo Cerqueira

“Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee” (*ELW* 836). The entire gospel presented within a melody bursting with sunshine and sea spray.
—Jennifer Juniper

“Beautiful Savior” (*ELW* 838) has been my favorite hymn since childhood. The melody and words have always brought me comfort, and singing it reminds me of my early faith and the steady love of Jesus throughout every stage of my life.

—Laura Christine

“Beautiful Savior” is a constant reminder of God’s love for all of us in Christ. Singing this hymn in good times and bad times helps me express my gratitude for all that God has given to me.

—Patricia Johnston

No hymn speaks to me more than “Borning Cry” (*ELW* 732). It reflects the joy God takes in our spiritual growth and development.

—Pamela Gustafson

“Borning Cry,” because it describes how God is present in all stages of life.

—Shari Stephenson

“When Peace Like a River” (*ELW* 785). The author lost children, I lost a son. But it can still be well with my soul.

—Janet Schade

“Gather Us In” (*ELW* 532)! It just reminds me of what the church is about. Bringing all peoples together to worship our Lord.

—Anthony D’Agostino

“Build a Longer Table” (*All Creation Sings* 1062), for its emphasis on inclusion.

—Connie Kincaid

“The Church’s One Foundation” (*ELW* 654). I’m moved to tears every time I hear it. It’s a powerful reminder to me that the church has never been called to perfection, but rather to grace, freely given in God’s perfect love. It reminds me that God’s greatest gift to the church is our calling to abide with one another in faithful community together.

—Andy Taming



“All Are Welcome” (*ELW* 641) beautifully captures who we strive to be as a church: a place where every person is valued, every voice is heard and everyone has a seat at the table. Its message of hospitality, community and peace reminds us that God’s love is for all people.

—Kristin Davenport

“All are Welcome.” Since I converted to being Lutheran, this song always makes me feel welcomed in church.

—Kalyn Botz

“Eternal Father, Strong to Save” (*ELW* 756). The connection to Psalm 107 never ceases to match the poetry of the sea and creation.

—Eric Schuck

“This Is My Song” (*ELW* 887). I first sang it at Holden Village, and it brings me to tears every time.

—Charisse Phillips

“Canticle of the Turning” (*ELW* 723), which is a riff on Mary’s song, which is a riff on Hannah’s song, that borrows from the songs of other women prophets. An awesome protest song, remixed.

—Elle Dowd

“Canticle of the Turning.” Speaks to my social justice work.

—Susan Bolduc

“Canticle of the Turning.” I heard it during chapel in my first year of seminary, and it has been the inspiration for my time in ministry ever since. It only felt right to sing it years later as I was ordained!

—Katie Hendrikson

“Canticle of the Turning.” It’s a prayer for a better future.

—Kristine E. Stauffacher



FUN FACT: Rory Cooney wrote this paraphrase of the Magnificat. He felt hesitation and self-doubt when he paired the beloved and sacred text with a completely secular melody, “Star of County Down.”

“When Long before Time (The Singer and the Song)” (*ELW* 861). I love the poetry, and the music suits it. I love how it tells the story of God’s plan for salvation in musical metaphor.
—Nicholas Carroll

“Earth and All Stars” (*ELW* 731). It reminds me of Walt Whitman poetry with an everyman feel. I love to find God in everything—“loud boiling test tubes” and all!
—Leslie Eichelberger

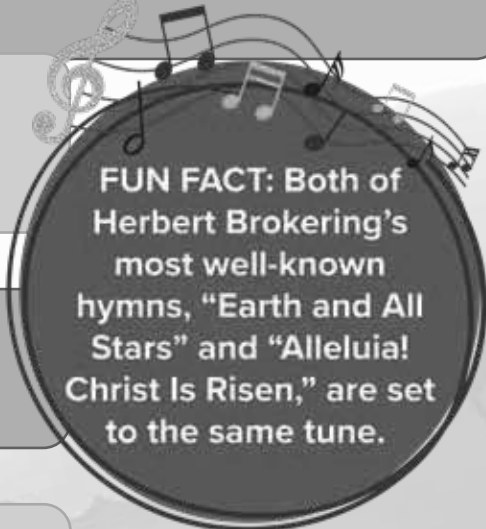
“Earth and All Stars.” Your work is important and is done in worship to God. I feel this message so strongly, I sometimes can’t even get through the song without choking up. It is important that people know their contribution to society matters to God, even if they aren’t someone who goes to church all the time.
—Stacie Bray

“Earth and All Stars.” It reminds us that we have much more to be grateful for than immediately comes to mind. God created people who use the talents he gave them, and for that we are grateful. Plus, it’s contemporary and I love the melody.
—Susan Bignell Robinson

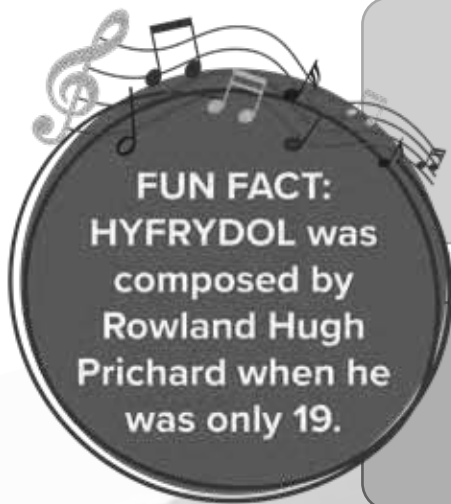
“In Deepest Night” (*ELW* 699), because it speaks of God’s faithfulness, in silence and in grief. A fitting and healing hymn for these days. Our trust in the faithfulness of God defines us as Lutherans.
—Carol Johnston

“Ah, Holy Jesus” (*ELW* 349). For more than 15 years, I served as my pastor’s acolyte every Sunday. Every Good Friday, it was sung, and it became one of the most meaningful parts of the church year for me. Now I sing it in the choir, and I still get goose bumps every year. For me, it’s more than a hymn. It’s a reminder of faith, friendship, tradition and the people who helped shape my walk with Christ. Through every stage of my life, the hymn has remained, faithfully telling the story of Christ’s love and sacrifice anew each year.
—Eric Pastore

Whenever I hear “Blest Be the Tie That Binds” (*ELW* 656), I am reminded that faith is not meant to be lived alone. God often works through the people he places in our lives, and this hymn celebrates those sacred connections. It reminds me that even when paths diverge, the bonds we share through faith, love and community continue to sustain us.
—Allyson DeHart



FUN FACT: Both of Herbert Brokering’s most well-known hymns, “Earth and All Stars” and “Alleluia! Christ Is Risen,” are set to the same tune.



I am convinced that music is a tool that the Spirit gives us to better understand the good news of the gospel. For me, it's just about anything set to the HYFRYDOL hymn tune. Being a cradle Lutheran and growing up in the church, it is a tune that has always stuck with me. However, every time I hear the melody, I mostly think of wonderful memories of being gathered with my family, friends and many people who were important to me.

—Trevor Kyro

I am an ELCA organist with lots of favorites. I will narrow it down to “Soli Deo Gloria” (ELW 878) by Marty Haugen. His description of Jesus in stanza 4 is beautifully worded, especially “incarnate love song of boundless grace.” And soli Deo gloria are the words I offer silently at the close of every service I play.

—Priscilla Lamparter Landis

“Here I Am, Lord” (ELW 574). I tear up every time we sing it. I can feel God reminding me that I am to be Jesus’ hands and feet on earth, and pray I am doing his will.

—Candace A. Milan

My favorite is the one I am singing at the moment. It’s impossible for me to choose a favorite. Some of my favorites would be half the hymnal.

—Fern Blake



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