

Of Purple and Passion

LENT

Track 1 – O Lord, Throughout These Forty Days – tune The Edinburgh Psalter, 1635

Text – https://hymnary.org/text/lord_who_throughout_these_forty_days

After His baptism by John, and before beginning His ministry, Jesus spent 40 days and nights fasting and praying in the desert. The number 40 is used throughout the Bible to indicate “a sufficient amount”. So, Jesus spent “a sufficient amount” of time alone praying and pondering His options, before setting out on a life course that would ultimately result in His crucifixion as a rebel.

The Church has designated 40 days of Lent as a time for reflection leading up to our observance of Jesus’ passion, crucifixion, and resurrection. I ask myself: (1) when have I spent “a sufficient amount” of time praying, or just pondering over my way forward in life? and (2) what would it take for me to commit to a course of action that would be deemed a rebellion against a higher authority – much less, one that would get me killed?

Track 2 – On My Heart Imprint Your Image – tune Johann B. Konig, 1691–1758

Text – https://hymnary.org/text/on_my_heart_imprint_thine_image

This one-verse hymn says it all for me in the first line: “On my heart imprint your image, Blessed Jesus, king of grace”. Just the title is enough to start a meditation on what it means to have the image of “the king of grace” imprinted on, incorporated into my heart – the center of my being. How can that change the way I actually live this earthly life?

Track 3 – In the Cross of Christ | Glory – tune Ithamar Conkey, 1815–1867

Text – https://hymnary.org/text/in_the_cross_of_christ_i_glory_towering

This hymn’s lyrics are fairly 19th-century-quaint to me. I think Christians have always tended to get into trouble when they ponder the word “glory” for very long, like Peter wanting to build three tents on the mountain to bask in the glory of the transfiguration event. It’s pretty clear to me that “glory” is not what the Christ Call is about. Glory or not, I enjoyed creating a string band rendition of this tune.

Track 4 – *Savior, When in Dust to You* – tune Joseph Parry, 1844–1903

Text – https://hymnary.org/text/savior_when_in_dust_to_thee

Interesting lyrics to find in a Lutheran hymnal, they recall the major points of Jesus' life and death, and ask Him to "Hear our penitential cry!" Two words can be applied here – repentance and penance. Our culture is not too fond of either word. "Repentance" is a concept, in diminishing favor, of turning around from a destructive path to a healthy, constructive way forward. We do it in little ways all the time; but we don't like the old baggage the word carries. "Penance" imposed by a priest after confession of sin is accepted dutifully by practicing Roman Catholics, while Protestants don't even want to go near that word. Still, Lent is supposed to be a time of self-examination and reflection. If I really do that, I'm sure to come up with something regretful for which I can repent. Does repentance necessarily carry a demeaning connotation?

Track 5 – *Were You There?* – tune African American spiritual

Text – https://hymnary.org/text/were_you_there_when_they_crucified_my_lo

Oh Lord, I couldn't begin to say enough about this favorite hymn of millions of American Christians. It speaks to me on so many levels, from its roots in the abject horror of slavery to its exquisite expression of grief. Many years ago, as a teenager, I was impressed by reading a commentary on this hymn from my favorite pianist at the time, the late Don Shirley. He was a gifted African American interpreter of the 20th century popular songbook, who held PhD's both in Musicology and in Liturgical Arts. Shirley pointed out, in the liner notes of his album of spirituals, that the title "Were You There?" should always contain the question mark; because the hymn is really an altar call, asking question after question for commitment to follow the Christ to the crosses of discipleship and to the Life beyond. It's so eloquently simple – "Were YOU there?"

Track 6 – *Jesus, Refuge of the Weary* – tune Herrnhut, c. 1735

Text – https://hymnary.org/text/jesus_refuge_of_the_weary

More than a "refuge of the weary", a veritable "Fountain in life's desert dreary" – the source of life-giving water in a parched landscape of fear and death. In these days of political and cultural divisiveness and downright meanness, I feel like I'm heading into that bleak desert – our culture declining into a post-democratic, neo-Neanderthalic nightmare. Can I find the Fountain of Life in such a world? Will it give me refuge and sustenance? And what about future generations? Will the polluted planet cease to sustain human life? Where would God be present after we destroy ourselves?

Track 7 – *Christ, the Life of All the Living* – tune Darmstadt, 1687

Text – https://hymnary.org/text/christ_the_life_of_all_the_living

A hymn about Jesus' atonement for our sins. The Christian Church has spent centuries promoting and explaining this concept; and after all these years, I'm still wrestling with it. I *do* believe that Jesus taught the nature of God's grace – the unconditional love that can never be deserved by me. I *do* acknowledge that Jesus' willingness to embody the ultimate example of God's resurrecting love, snatching life from the defeat of crucifixion and pointing to the life in God that supersedes death, has enabled my faith in the mystery that is God. Perhaps, that distillation is sufficient for me.

Track 8 – *Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed* – tune Hugh Wilson, 1764–1824

Text – https://hymnary.org/text/alas_and_did_my_savior_bleed

I had fun reinterpreting this tune from a pleasantly innocuous little waltz in a major key to one more symbolic of the evil afoot. By changing a couple of notes in the melody, a minor mode could be employed. With a dervish-style rhythm section and an oboe solo, this tune now has a much more sinister feel. I'm glad some wise hymnist changed the lyric line that contained "such a worm as I"; but that phrase was ever in my mind as I played the oboe part.

Track 9 – *Beneath the Cross of Jesus* – tune Frederick C. Maker, 1844–1927

Text – https://hymnary.org/text/beneath_the_cross_of_jesus_i_fain_would

I truly love this hymn. I love the music and, even more, I love the poem and the story behind it of the 19th century woman who penned it. Even though her life was eventually cut short by a frail physical condition, she and her sister chose to impoverish themselves in order to minister to the needs of those less fortunate in their community. It's more than worth Googling the name Elizabeth C. Clephane. Click on the "History of Hymns" link. I did 12 years ago, and have meditated many times on the life witness of this beautiful servant of the Christ.

Track 10 – *A Lamb Goes Uncomplaining Forth* – tune Wolfgang Dachstein, c. 1487–1553

Text – https://hymnary.org/text/a_lamb_goes_uncomplaining_forth_the_guil

This hymn has no meter or measure notation in the hymnal; but I added my own, at the same time trying to maintain the medieval feel of its natural rhythm. The innocence of a lamb permeates the melody. God's commission of sacrifice and Jesus' acceptance of the mission are told in a simplistic story form. The pastoral feel of the music belies the nasty spectacle of public torture coming on the following Friday.

HOLY WEEK

Track 11 - [All Glory, Laud, and Honor](#) - tune Melchior Teschner, 1584-1635

Text - https://hymnary.org/text/all_glory_laude_and_honor

It's a big day! Jesus enters Jerusalem ahead of Passover riding on a donkey. The narrative indicates that there were enough followers gathered to make it quite a parade scene. This tune is often used as the Palm Sunday processional hymn. I don't know what possessed me to give it this retro disco vibe; but now, every time I listen, I envision Priscilla, Queen of the Desert, with Terence Stamp sitting atop an old tour bus in a lawn chair, long scarf flowing, proceeding across the Australian Outback to the next drag show! If you haven't seen the movie, it's not a bad resurrection story.

Track 12 - [Love Consecrates the Humblest Act](#) - tune attr. Lucius Chapin, 1760-1842

Text - https://hymnary.org/text/love_consecrates_the_humblest_act

Of unknown origin, this tune has the typical, haunting melody of an Appalachian or Scottish folk ballad. There is a distinct purity of thought and purpose conveyed. It's Thursday, suppertime. Jesus' disciples gather in an upper room to celebrate Seder, the Passover meal. Upon entering, they are surprised by Jesus, their master teacher, the Son of God, kneeling in the role of servant to wash the filth of the streets from their feet. There will be even more and greater scandals surrounding Jesus as the night progresses - betrayal, arrest and denial. I like a pleasant surprise well enough; but these shocks on Maundy Thursday are the kind that upset the senses on every level. Can I get past the shock value to learn the lessons within? When am I a servant? Our culture thinks servanthood is something to take advantage of, not something we are called to do. Jesus was always turning the tables on conventional cultural thought.

Track 13 - [Go to Dark Gethsemane](#) - tune Richard Redhead, 1820-1901

Text - https://hymnary.org/text/go_to_dark_gethsemane

Oh, what a night for a sleepover in the local public garden! While the Jewish authorities plot with Judas to finally shut down Jesus' mouth and ministry, his disciples fall asleep, sated with food and wine from Seder. Jesus is left alone to agonize and pray over his impending death and what will become of his disciples. There are striking last lines to ponder in the 3rd and 4th verses: "Learn from Jesus Christ to die" and "Savior, teach us so to rise".

Track 14 – *Ah, Holy Jesus* – tune Johann Cruger, 1598–1662

Text – https://hymnary.org/text/ah_holy_jesus_how_hast_thou_offended

A little blues for Good Friday morning's hangover from a famous Lutheran hymnster, lamenting this sad state of affairs that's come upon the Jesus Movement. "Aw Man, Jesus! What have you done to offend all the government and religious authorities? OMG! You've gotten yourself arrested, interrogated, imprisoned, flogged, convicted for treason and sentenced to death by crucifixion. And later – later there will be hell to pay for any known associates. I'm gonna skip out of town and hide out at the lake – lie low, go back to fishing, like ... like I never knew the dude!"

Track 15 – *There Is a Green Hill Far Away* – tune Daman, 1591

Text – https://hymnary.org/text/there_is_a_green_hill_far_away

Since I started working with this tune from the Lutheran Book of Worship, it has been omitted from the newer ELW hymnal; and I'm not sorry to see it gone. The music didn't match the gravity of the subject matter. It all added up to a much too palatable WASPish confusion about crucifixion. So, I've started the arrangement with hammer and nails on wood, then the strings march in like the Roman Legion, as a wickedly eerie electric guitar wails. Soon we descend right into heavy blues. Everything I've read tells me that crucifixion was excruciatingly painful torture that was designed to humiliate and violate body, mind and spirit. I can only begin to imagine a scene of utter barbarism. It was not some pleasant green hill in a pretty little park far away. It was a desolate garbage dump on the road out of town with vultures circling around the skies, then dipping down to pluck at the remains of the dead. It was an ugly day, indeed!

Track 16 – *Jesus, in Thy Dying Woes* – tune Stockholm, 1697

Text – https://hymnary.org/text/jesus_in_thy_dying_woes

Pain. Humiliation. Thirst. Despair. Forgiveness. Delirium. Love. Breath.

Minutes became hours. Hours were as years. Time ceased to exist.

Death was God's embrace.

Track 17 – *O Sacred Head Now Wounded* – tune Hans L. Hassler, 1564–1612

Text – https://hymnary.org/text/o_sacred_head_now_wounded

I find the elegant, deep sorrow expressed in this hymn is cathartic, and have often indulged in being swept away with its passion. Perhaps, it best sets the tone for how those followers who took possession of Jesus' body must have felt as they prepared his remains and laid them in the

tomb. Will we just bid a final farewell and go on with life-as-usual? How then can we live, now that we've tasted of God's kingdom and seen His Son crucified in front of us? What good could possibly come of this tragedy?

EASTER

Track 18 – *Christ the Lord Is Risen Today, Alleluia!* – tune Robert Williams, c. 1781–1821

Text – https://hymnary.org/text/christ_the_lord_is_risen_today_christian

There's no segue in the hymnal from death to resurrection, nor should there be. It was enough shock to produce heart failure. One day He was dead and buried – the next, the stone was rolled away from the tomb, the body vanished – nothing but embalming shrouds left on the floor. Good God! Here He is – He's RISEN! Let's boogie!

Track 19 – *Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands* – tune Johann Walther, 1524

Text – https://hymnary.org/text/christ_jesus_lay_in_deaths_strong_bands

We often sang this hymn after Easter Vigil and the proclamation “Christ is risen!” at midnight, while the altar guild decorated the nave with Easter lilies and prepared the chancel for the first communion of Easter. I've tried to convey here the anticipation and joy of that liturgical moment.

Track 20 – *The Strife Is O'er, the Battle Done* – tune Giovanni P. da Palestrina, 1525–1594

Text – https://hymnary.org/text/the_strife_is_oer_the_battle_done

This improvisation is dedicated to all the faithful clergy who have staged the Easter story year after year, bringing their congregations through all the drama of the liturgy. Usually, church offices are closed on the Monday after Easter. Ah, the rest and relief! He is risen, indeed! Perhaps a glass or two of wine, before we begin planning how next we're going to be the Body of Christ to the world.

Track 21 – *Now All the Vault of Heaven Resounds* – tune Koln, 1623

Text – LBW 143, ELW 367

“Christ has triumphed! He is living! Alleluia!”

Track 22 – *Good Christian Friends, Rejoice and Sing!* – tune Melchior Vulpius, 1570–1615

Text – https://hymnary.org/text/good_christians_all_rejoice_and_sing

There is a quiet joy in the belief of a love and a life that will not die. At least in that sense, we know and participate in the miracle of resurrection. “And sing with hearts uplifted high: Alleluia!”

Track 23 – *Thine Is the Glory* – tune George F. Handel, 1685–1759

Text – https://hymnary.org/text/thine_is_the_glory_risen_conquering

Herr Handel new a thing or two about making a joyful noise.

Track 24 – *Now the Green Blade Rises* – tune French carol

Text – https://hymnary.org/text/now_the_green_blade_riseth

When playing in my congregation’s contemporary worship ensemble for the 8 a.m. Sunday service during the 80’s and 90’s, I always looked forward to this beautiful Easter carol. The music never ceases to transport me to a place of hope in the constant renewal of life.

Track 25 – *Jesus Christ Is Risen Today* – tune London, 1708

Text – https://hymnary.org/text/jesus_christ_is_risen_today_our_tri

There’s lots of ways to celebrate. Decades ago, I knew some crazy young Lutherans who used to dance the Bunny Hop around the periphery, and out of the nave with this hymn as the recessional after the 8 a.m. Easter service. LOL! However you choose to do it – from the ethereal heights of “Hearts of Space” to the gutsy abandonment of ZZ Top – celebration is an important ingredient to abundant life.

Track 26 – *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross* – tune Lowell Mason, 1792–1872

Text – https://hymnary.org/text/when_i_survey_the_wondrous_cross_watts

Too often I think, Christians have either gotten bogged down in a false sense of guilt surrounding the cross, or else concentrated on the resurrection at the expense of the profound significance of the cross as God’s way of discipleship. Can’t we just healthily ponder, from time to time, how the cross informs our lives as followers of the Christ? Could we survey the wondrous cross?