


Text: Is 52:13-53:3, Rom 5:6-10, Phil 2:5-11, Acts 3:13-15
Songs of the Passion Series

 5th Lent Midweek
Hymn: *My Song Is Love Unknown*

Love Unknown

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear friends in Christ: In an earlier meditation in this series, I said that some of the classic hymns of the Lenten season just sort of soar above the rest. This evening's selection is one of them. *My Song Is Love Unknown* is a lovely hymn; but it's unusual for a number of reasons. First, it may surprise you to know that it was never intended by its author to be a hymn. Samuel Crossman wrote it as a devotional poem during that period in English history when it was widely held that the only allowable songs to be used in worship were the Psalms of the Bible. He was one who believed that the creation of any new hymns was wrong – even bordering on sacrilege. He would have been scandalized to know that one day someone was going to set his words to music and that we'd be singing them today. But then, you might say he asked for it by starting his poem with the words "My Song". Hey, if it's a song, you sing it!

A second thing that's unusual about this hymn is that the tune that we associate with it isn't the original. When it was first set to music, about 200 years after Crossman wrote it, it was widely sung to a tune composed by John Edwards called "Rhosymedre". The tune still appears in our hymnal – but for a different hymn. It's #863, *Our Father, by Whose Name*. (And I'd like to pause here and ask [the organist] let you hear what that would sound like. As it's played, try to imagine the words of this hymn to *that* melody. Oh, and to make the words fit the tune, you have to repeat the last line. [Music] ... It works; but it just doesn't feel right, does it?) In any case, the familiar tune we use today was written in the twentieth century by a composer named John Ireland; so even though the words are several centuries old, because the music is relatively new I still think we can call this hymn "contemporary Christian music".

Another thing that's unusual about this hymn is that though it's based on certain texts of Scripture (the ones read earlier), it makes allusion to and pulls in thoughts and ideas from all over the Bible. With that in mind, I'd like to spend our time this evening taking a journey with the author of the words through the passages of Scripture that motivated him to write his poem so long ago. My hope is that in so doing we might share even more of his wonder and bewilderment at our gracious God's *love unknown*.

We might begin by asking what exactly he means by saying that his song is "*love unknown*" since that phrase never appears in the Scripture. It's true that the Bible as a whole has been rightly called "the story of God's love" – and we know the story. In what sense, then, can it be said that God's love is *unknown*? What he's pointing to is the truth that God's love is like nothing we know among ourselves. Ever since the fall into sin, the love of mankind has been of a self-serving nature. We love only those who love us, or those whom we perceive will be kind to us or in some other way reciprocate any attention we expend on them. Mostly, we love ourselves. But God's love is different. God's love is always directed outward. He thinks only of the good of others – even those who hate and reject him. God demonstrates his love, as St. Paul says in Romans, "in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us." He sacrificed his Son for those who were in rebellion against him in order to bring them back to himself. That is, as the hymn writer says, he gave his Son for those who through sin had lost the capacity to love so that through his death for them, they might become loving again. That's what God's *unknown* love is.

The line that follows in the first verse, “Who am I that for my sake the Prince should take frail flesh and die?” echoes the thought of the Psalmist we heard a bit earlier in the service when we asked, “What is man that you are mindful of him?” It’s a question born of that overwhelming sense of astonishment you get as you look up into the heavens at night and consider the vastness and majesty of his creation and you realize with utter amazement that God made all this for us and for our enjoyment. You think, “Wow, what is it he sees in us that he would be so extravagant?” I mean, it wasn’t enough to give us all that we have here on earth, which is plenty; but he even put whole galaxies up there just so we’d have pretty lights at night – and it’s all purely for our benefit. And now with space exploration and things like the Hubble telescope, we’re finding that what’s up there is a whole lot more astonishing than we once thought. But even more astonishing is that the God who made everything for us would, after we rejected him, send his own Son to enter the creation as part of it in order to suffer and die to redeem us and rescue us from our sin against him. It’s incomprehensible. What does he see in us? Maybe a better question is, “What is God that he is mindful of man? What really goes on in that infinite heart of his that he can so lavishly exert such tremendous effort to win us back to himself? One gets lost in wonder just thinking about it.

In verse two we skip over to St. John’s Gospel. The first line suggests the prologue in which we hear of the Word becoming flesh: God’s Son leaving behind his heavenly glory to take on our flesh and dwell among us in order to be our Savior. In the same section of Scripture, John also says, “He came to his own; but his own received him not. That’s what’s captured by the line, “Men made strange and none the longed for Christ would know.” It’s a consistent theme in John’s Gospel that the very people who should have recognized Jesus as the long expected Savior did not. Instead, they treated the Lord of Creation as if he were a stranger to them.

But through the Light given them and the work of the Holy Spirit, some did receive him. To them he gave the power to become the children of God. They became members of his own family. Thankfully, we are among them. That’s the idea presented in the second half of verse two. It’s later in John’s Gospel, chapter fifteen, where it’s describing the night of Jesus’ arrest and he tells his disciples, “Love each other as I have love you. Greater love has no one than this: that he lay down his life for his friend. You are my friends if you do what I ask ... and what I ask you to do is to love each other.” What Jesus describes here is something completely new and different to our way of thinking. He changes the description of our fundamental relationship with God. It’s no longer a Creator/creature or a master/servant sort of thing. Now it becomes a partnership between friends and relatives. Jesus says that he is being a loving friend by dying for his *friends*. That’s the way he sees us. He wants us to show that we see him the same way by similarly demonstrating our love for one another.

Verse three begins by revisiting the events of Palm Sunday – a story recorded by all four of the Evangelists. We’re given a brief vision of the cheering crowd around Jesus waving palm branches while shouting “Hosanna!” and laying their garments on the cobblestones to make a crude sort of red carpet for him. But then the scene suddenly changes to the trial of Jesus only five days later. The same crowd has abruptly turned on him. Those who hailed him as their king are now demanding his death. And sometimes we wonder how that could have happened. It seems a bit far-fetched that people could really be so shallow and wavering in their allegiance ... and yet, isn’t that how we all behave? We assemble here weekly to sing his praises and proclaim our devotion, and then we step out into our lives and turn on him through our sins and vacillating obedience. What is that if not to betray him and effectively call for his death all over again?

The beginning of verse four, “Why, what hath my Lord done?” echoes the words of Pontius Pilate at the trial of Jesus. When the authorities and the crowd were demanding Jesus’ death, he asked them, “Why? What crime has he committed? I’ve examined him and I’ve found no fault in him.” Pilate never got a direct answer from them; only more urgent cries for his death. But he knew that one of the big reasons the authorities wanted to get rid of Jesus was their jealousy of him. They couldn’t stand the fact that he was becoming popular both through his teaching that openly criticized them and through his miracles. And every time he performed another miracle or bested them in a theological debate, his approval rating with the crowd shot up a few more points. So it happened, as strange as it seems, the more he showed the superiority of his understanding, and the more he healed people who were lame, blind, deaf, and what have you, the more they hated him for it. That might seem to be counterintuitive. You’d think that it would be more natural that you’d want to follow and love someone who was so wise, good, and powerful. But that’s not the way it is. And it’s important that we understand this. It’s precisely the wisdom and goodness of Christ that we as sinners cannot stand. His absolute goodness makes us look that much worse. *That* is the offense of the cross: the fact that we are *that* evil, *that* useless, *that* unable to save ourselves by our own imagined good works and efforts that the only thing that can save us is the sacrifice of one who is in every way perfect.

In verse five we are reminded of how Pilate tried one more stratagem to finagle the release of Jesus. Because it was a custom at the feast of the Passover to free one condemned prisoner, he gave the crowd the choice between Jesus and a notorious murderer named Barabbas. Pilate felt sure that for the sake of their own safety, if nothing else, they would choose Jesus. He was wrong. The crowd stood shouting, “Away with this man! Crucify him! Release to us Barabbas!” *A murderer they save, the prince of life they slay.* It’s so indecently wrong, so backwards. It displays the absolutely twisted logic of man’s corrupt mind – and yet, in a strange way, at the same time it displays the infinite wisdom and love of God. Kill the innocent one and free the one who deserves to die: that’s the very heart of the Gospel. And so we should see that Barabbas represents every one of us.

Moving to verse six, we are reminded of the words of Jesus recorded in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke when he said, “Foxes have their holes and the birds of the air their nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” Jesus had no real home on earth, and even in death he had to borrow a tomb from a rich man named Joseph. Here the writer of the hymn would have us see that just as Barabbas being released is a picture of how we are all freed by Christ’s condemnation in our place, so also the borrowed tomb shows that even in being buried, Jesus takes the place we belong. His entry into the dark, dank tomb opens for us the gate to the heavenly home in glory that he left behind.

The seventh and final verse is a doxology of praise marveling at the vast magnitude of both the love and the suffering of our Lord and Savior. And it’s here that we find one more thing about his hymn that’s fairly unusual, especially for our Lutheran hymnal. In fact, if I were to be hypercritical (yes, I know, that would be impossible for me; but *if* I were), I would lodge my only complaint about this otherwise splendid hymn at this point. The problem is that it seems to leave us standing at the sealed tomb singing the praises of the one laid to rest inside. And while I suppose that might seem somewhat appropriate for the season of Lent, in general it’s something of a theological taboo to speak so eloquently of Christ’s suffering and death on the cross and then neglect to follow through with good news of his resurrection. He who revealed God’s unknown love to us didn’t stay in the tomb, for if he had, we wouldn’t have anything to sing about. But he rose from the dead, he showed himself alive to his disciples. Even today he continues to reveal himself to us through his Word and sacraments. Through these means he

assures us of his constant grace and forgiveness. The fact that he rose is the guarantee that his sacrifice on our behalf was accepted, and therefore it assures us that we who trust in him will also rise to new and eternal life.

Please don't misunderstand me: the hymn still works just fine – but it's only because we *know* the rest of the story. All I'm saying is that it would be better if it spelled it out explicitly. Who knows, maybe one day someone – maybe even one of you – will write another verse for this hymn that does just that. In the mean time, there's still plenty here to meditate upon as we sing this hymn the way it is and through it, extol the love unknown of our friend who laid down his life for us: the Lord Jesus Christ. To him be our sweetest praises now and ever. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!