



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094

(920)261-2570

A Stephen Ministry Congregation

www.goodshepherdwi.org

New Year's Eve

December 31, 2015

“Abide With Me”

Rev. David K. Groth

COLLECT: Eternal God, we commit to Your mercy and forgiveness the year now ending and commend to Your blessing and love the times yet to come. In the new year, abide among us with Your Holy Spirit that we may always trust in the saving name of our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

“Abide with Me” was written by a Scottish Anglican named Henry Francis Lyte. He wrote the poem in 1847 and set it to music while he lay dying from tuberculosis. Upon completing it, he died three weeks later. Interesting enough, the survivors reported that the Titanic’s band played the hymn as the ship was sinking. During the Second World War, wounded British paratroopers also sang it when it became clear they were behind enemy lines and surrounded. My mom and I sang it to my dad as he lay dying. But it’s not just a hymn at times of death. It’s a hymn for life. It’s a prayer that God remain present throughout life, through trials, and through death.

The first verse of “Abide with Me” says “The darkness deepens”. We can all sense it, not just for the night but for this age. And when the darkness deepens, we are inclined to look to others for help. We are inclined to put our trust in man, in the Department of Homeland Security, or in the “best heart hospital in the Midwest”, or in the next President, or in the guy with the hot hand on the trading floor.

But the truth is there will come a time for us all when no man can help. There comes a time when even the best doc in the world will not be able to keep your lungs from filling up with fluid . . . if that’s what your lungs are determined to do.

So Psalm 146 says, “Do not put your trust in princes, in human beings who cannot save. For when they die they return to the ground (too) and all their plans come to nothing.”

We are Christians. In desperate times and prosperous, we put our trust squarely on the Lord. “For while we were still helpless” Paul wrote, “at the right time Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:6). And Psalm 18 says, “In my distress I called upon the LORD; to my God I cried for help. From his temple he heard my voice, and he heard my cry” (v. 6). The Lord is the Helper of the helpless.

We know it. We trust it. We confess and sing it. “When other helpers fail and comforts flee, help of the helpless, Lord abide with me.” We sing the first verse.

1. “Abide with me, fast falls the eventide.
The darkness deepens; Lord with me abide.
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, O abide with me.”

Verse 2: “What but Thy grace can foil the tempter’s pow’r?” Early Christian ascetics or monks believed living solitary, austere lives in the most remote places would help them avoid temptation. But remember, it didn’t work for Jesus. He was tempted when alone in the wilderness. So why should it work for his followers?

There are no places so remote that the devil cannot follow. If astronauts ever do land on Mars, the tempter will already be there, waiting. Anyway, when facing temptations, solitude doesn’t always help and may, in fact, hinder. Luther said when the devil harasses us we should seek the company of our friends and go out for a drink. I suppose that depends on who your friends are. For some of you, your best bet is solitude!

In any event, it’s important to know we are no match for the devil’s might whether alone or in a crowd. It’s also important to know the devil is no match for the Lord. In fact, he’s already been defeated.

We are not dualists. That is, we do not believe good and evil, God and the devil are going at it toe to toe and it’s anybody’s guess as to who will come out on top. No. The decisive victory has already been won. In Revelation 12 its

Michael and his angels who wage war against Satan, and the dragon was defeated and thrown down to the earth with all his angels. Notice the Lord didn't even have to bother himself. It was enough to send Michael. But that same passage makes clear the ultimate victory over Satan was won at the cross. He was conquered "by the blood of the Lamb" it says.

So when the tempter comes calling on you, at least pray to the Lord for strength. Nothing more fumigates the devil than prayer. And when the devil, the great Accuser comes to remind you how great a sinner you are and therefore no genuine Christian, tell him his argument is not with you. It's with the Lord, who has already died and risen for you, already redeemed you and to whom you graciously and irrevocably belong through Holy Baptism. For in the end, only God's grace can foil the tempter's power. We sing the second verse.

2. "I need Thy presence every passing hour;
What but Thy grace can foil the tempter's pow'r
Who like Thyself my guide and stay can be?
Through cloud and sunshine, O abide with me."

Verse 3. "Come, Friend of sinners . . . abide with me." Sometimes what we need most is someone to listen to us, someone you trust so much that you can relax and be yourself and they'll still love you. You can give them the rough first draft of yourself, and they'll still read it and see the potential in it and gently make suggestions as to how you might make it better. I hope you have someone like that in your life, and I hope you can be someone like that for another.

Our society has invented the word "cocooning". That's when you retreat to the safety of your home, pull the blinds, plump up the pillows, pop the corn, and plug in a DVD. That can all be very nice and restorative. But it's not enough. We also need Christian friends, because the T.V. is not going to hear out your rough draft, and the T.V. is not

going to pray for you. The computer is not going to carry you to the house where Jesus is, and punch a hole through the ceiling in order to lower you down before Jesus. Truth be told, the T.V. doesn't know you or care one whit about you. We all need to cultivate and keep Christian friends and we need to be Christian friends to others.

There's a saying, "Tell me who your friends are and I'll tell you who you are." We prefer to have friends that won't drag us or our reputations through the mud. Jesus, thankfully, never worried about that. He was constantly reaching out to the outcasts and socially undesirable, even reclining at table to eat with them. In the 1st century who you ate with was a big deal. It meant that you accepted them and were at peace with them. As a result, the opponents of Jesus started calling him "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" (Mt. 11:16-19).

"Friend of sinners." They meant it as an insult, but thanks be to God, they hit the nail right on the head. He is "Friend of sinners" and never more so than when he dangles dead on a cross. This evening, the "Friend of sinners" is here for us, again at table with us. It can only mean he loves us and is at peace with us. We sing the third verse.

3. "Come not in terrors, as the King of kings,
But kind and good, with healing in Thy wings;
Tears for all woes, a heart for every plea.
Come, Friend of sinners, thus abide with me."

The fourth verse talks of "Life's little day." In a few hours it will already be 2016. Every year on this evening, I'm struck by how fast it's going. The psalm for today latches on to that theme. "You return man to dust . . . You sweep them away as with a flood; they are like a dream, like grass; in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers." So "Teach us to number our days so that we may gain a heart of wisdom." Teach us to appreciate how short life is, so we don't fritter away our days but make good use of them according to Your will.

That's a common theme in the Bible, but especially in the book of Job. Job 9: "Our days are swifter than a runner; they fly away. . . [our days] skim past like boats made of papyrus, [our days] are like eagles swooping down on their prey." Job 14, "Man born of woman is of few days and full of trouble. He springs up like a flower and withers away; like a shadow, he does not endure." Again from Job, "Men are like grass sprouting on the roof." Can you picture it? (Flat ancient roofs had dust on them, patches of shallow dirt, but no subsoil. Therefore, any grass that sprouted on a roof had no chance for a long life.) Job 24: men are like "foam on the surface of the water." Can you hear all those little bubbles softly popping? And from Job 7, "My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle" (Job 7). Can you see it going back and forth, clicking and clacking, beating out our days one after another?

Life is short. Never once have I heard the elderly in our church say otherwise. They are more likely to talk about "the law of accelerating time"—which is the longer you live, the faster time seems to fly.

The good news is the Lord knows how short our lives are, and that stirs up his compassion. Ps. 103, "As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on us, for he remembers we are dust." That compassion and love drove Him all the way to the cross, to defeat our enemy of death. The Good News is this life (as good as it can be), is not nearly as good as what God wants for us. He doesn't want to leave us stuck here eternally on this messy, broken world. The Good News is he numbers our days and eventually brings them to a close. The Good News is this life is short, but eternal life is not. And so another famous hymn says, "When we've been there ten thousand years, we've no less days to sing God's praise, then when we'd first begun". We sing the fourth verse.

4. "Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;
Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away;
Change and decay in all around I see;

O Thou who changest not, abide with me.”

“Where is death’s sting? Where, grave, thy victory?” Christ’s death has turned our death into a good night’s sleep, something for which we even start looking forward. Again, from our elderly I hear it often. A: “Life went by so fast“, and B: “I’m ready to go home.” In fact, some of them get impatient and begin to sound like Old Testament prophets, “How long, O Lord, how long?”

Death is still an enemy, but it’s not the greatest enemy, and by no means the enemy it once was. Paul even mocks death as a hapless enemy. “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” We would say: Is this all you got? Because Christ has died and Christ has risen, we can lie down and sleep in peace.

A 16th century English poet by the name of John Donne wrote a sonnet, the first two lines and the last two lines I repeat:

Death be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for, thou are not so . . .
One short sleepe past, wee wake eternally,
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

We sing the fifth verse.

5. “I fear no foe with Thee at hand to bless;
Ills have no weight and tears no bitterness.
Where is death’s sting? Where, grave, thy victory?
I triumph still if Thou abide with me!”

Martin Luther said there should always be cross somewhere close to the pulpit, so that just in case the preacher didn’t do his job, at least the Gospel will be visibly present. Similarly, in Lutheran hospitals across the land, (before they were sold to larger health care providers), every room had a cross on the wall opposite the patient’s bed. It wasn’t some kind of good luck charm. It wasn’t there to keep the devil out. And it wasn’t meant as a reminder that there’s always someone who has it worse off than you do (which is of little comfort

anyway). The cross was there to remind you: 1) you're safe in his grace because he already did that for you, and 2): there's always hope. The one who loves you enough to do that, to take care of your biggest needs, also loves you enough to take care of these other needs, if that's his will for you.

The simple presence of a cross can be a great preacher. That's why in many countries around the world it's not permitted to be displayed in public. It's too strong a symbol, too strong a preacher, and those autocrats or political parties who like to set themselves up as little gods find that preacher to be threatening.

The simple presence of a cross can be a great preacher: You're safe. There's hope. So, "hold thou thy cross before my closing eyes, shine through the gloom and point me to the skies."

Finally, we sing verse six.

6. "Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes;
Shine through the gloom, and point me to the skies.
Heav'n's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows
flee;
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me."