

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“For Such a Worm as I?”

Rev. David K. Groth
Christ the King Sunday, 2011

“But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by mankind and despised by the people” (Ps. 22:6).

So what did you think about that sermon hymn [“Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed” LSB 437]? I love the tune. It’s not too difficult to sing. In fact, you can get your teeth into it, right? And I love the way Dawn plays it . . . strong and with authority . . . legato all the way through at a perfect cathedral pace. But what about the text? Clearly, this is not a new hymn: there are several clues that tell us that even in the first verse. The very first word “Alas!” It’s a word that expresses unhappiness, or pity, or concern. No one uses it today, at least not around here. No one ever says, “Alas! There was no trump in the blind!” Or, “Alas! That sermon was way too short!” No one says that around here.

There’s another clue in the first verse that tells us this is not a new hymn: it’s the mention of the Savior’s blood. Most new songs shy away from blood theology. We don’t want to think about that really, for the same reason that the blood underneath the pork chops at the grocery store is hidden and concealed by some sort of black, spongy thing. We prefer not to think about an animal being slaughtered so we can eat it. Ironically, we see all sorts of *people* hacked, stabbed and shot on T.V. but still, there’s very little blood, at least compared to the pools of blood that occur in reality. So even though sacrifice is at the very center of our faith, even though the cleansing blood of Jesus is white-hot Gospel, yet many songs and hymns and sermons in our age have been sanitized of the blood.

There’s yet a third clue in the first verse that this is not a new hymn: “Would he devote that sacred head for such a worm as I?” “Such a worm as I?” As everyone says these days: “Really?” Here you were, minding your own business, getting your teeth into this hymn, but then there’s this sudden, sour taste in the mouth. The hymn called you a worm! That’s offensive, isn’t it? That’s an affront to your dignity. If you are my age or younger, you grew up being told many times over that you are special, that you can be anything you want to be. But this old hymn just robbed you of all that and put the word “worm” into your mouth, and that *word* tastes no better than the thing it describes.

“For such a worm as I.” We don’t think of ourselves this way. Though many may struggle with low self-esteem, very few think themselves that low . . . in the dirt, like a worm. It’s sort of like singing “Chief of sinners, Though I Be”. It makes you think of Paul more than it makes you think of you. “I may be a sinner” we think, “but not *that* much of a sinner”, not the chief of sinners . . . and not a worm. In any event, most denominations have chosen to scrub up this hymn before adding it to their new hymnals. They no longer sing, “For such a worm as I”. They sing, “For sinners such as I.” It’s a little less offensive. Same way in the second verse. *We* sing, “Was it for *crimes* that I had done [that] he groaned upon the tree?” They sing, “Was it for

sins that I had done. . .” Again they softened it. It’s easier to think ourselves sinners than criminals. They have declawed the tiger within this hymn and turned it into a pussy cat.

Now, some of you are thinking, “Preacher, you’re splitting hairs again. Who really cares?” Well, before you tune me out, let’s dig just a little deeper and consider what’s at stake. What’s at stake? Very little, actually, if were just about this one hymn. But it’s not just about this one hymn. Changes to this one hymn only reflect what’s happening to the theology out there. People are less interested today in having a bloody Jesus on the cross for the forgiveness of their sins. They are more interested in thinking of Jesus as kind and caring, compassionate and long-suffering, loving, patient, inclusive. He is certainly all those things, but he didn’t come down to earth just to be our friend. He came down to be “Friend of Sinners” on the cross. He is long-suffering and inclusive. But that doesn’t mean he just winks at your sin. No, he takes it unto himself, and suffers long for it on the cross.” He is slow to anger, but only because his justice has been satisfied by the sacrifice of his Son. He is abounding with steadfast love and with mercy, and it is precisely that love and mercy that drove him to the cross. He is compassionate, but his compassion does not end with “Oh, you poor thing, you.” No, his compassion has a direction to it. Again, it’s to the cross because he cannot stand the idea of people suffering in hell. So he suffers the punishment of our sin for us.

That’s the primary problem between God and you: sin. And that’s why he sent us a Savior. If your greatest need was for healing, he would have sent you a doctor who could fix whatever ails you. If your greatest need was for money, he would have filled a manger full of gold for you. If your greatest need was for justice, he would have sent you an activist judge inclined to your cause. But apparently, he seems to think what you need most is a Savior because that’s what Mary placed in the manger. Remember, the angel told Mary to name him Jesus. Why? Because it means he will “save his people from their sins”. And that’s what we needed the most.

Given our faith then is mostly about our sin and his sacrifice, we do well not to minimize our sin, nor make light of his sacrifice. We do well not to soften our view of our sinful nature, nor to make light of the cost of our salvation.

What’s at stake? If we think our sin is little, then we have a little Savior. If we think our sin isn’t that big a deal, really, then we have a Savior who really isn’t that big of a deal in our lives. If we think ourselves as pretty decent people overall, then Jesus on the cross becomes mostly irrelevant. However, that he would suffer and die for such a worm as me . . . that’s grace, immeasurable grace.

“For such a worm as I.” You might still think of that word as a poetic cheap shot. After all, that’s about as low as it gets. But consider, though you don’t like to be called a worm, it was not too low a word for God to ascribe to himself. Psalm 22, “I am a worm and not a man, scorned by the people.”

I hope you recognize those words. Psalm 22 is the psalm we traditionally use at the end of the Maundy Thursday services as the altar is being stripped. It was written about a thousand years before Christ, yet the whole Psalm refers to Christ. In the 2nd century Tertullian wrote, “If you still seek predictions of the Lord’s cross [in the Old Testament, this] Psalm will at length be able to satisfy you, containing as it does the whole passion of Christ” (*ANF* 3:166).

On the cross Jesus said, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” An exact quote of the first verse of this psalm. “My God, my God why has thou forsaken me?” He was giving us a heads up: this psalm is about him.

On the cross, writhing in anguish and pain. In the psalm, “I am a worm and not a man.”

On the cross, being taunted and mocked. In the psalm, “I am scorned by mankind and despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they make mouths at me; they wag their heads.”

On the cross, the words of the chief priests ringing in his ears: “He saved others but he cannot save himself! He is the **King (!)** . . . he’s the king of Israel; let him come down now from the cross. Then we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now.” In the psalm: “He trusts in the LORD; let the LORD deliver him; let the LORD rescue him!”

On the cross, bleeding, beaten up, losing strength and breath. In the psalm, “I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint . . . my strength is dried up.”

On the cross, “I thirst” . . . a desperate thirst that comes when you’ve lost a lot of blood. In the psalm, “my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth.”

On the cross, between two thieves, and surrounded by the chief priests, the Pharisees and the scribes and the soldiers who had fun with his demise. In the psalm, “dogs encompass me; a company of evildoers encircles me.”

On the cross, cruel nails fasten him to the cross. In the psalm “they have pierced my hands and feet.

At the cross, they divided his garments into four parts but casted lots for the seamless tunic. In the psalm “they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.”

On the cross, “It is finished.” In the psalm, “Future generations will be told about the Lord. They will proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn – for he has done it.”

Already a thousand years before the event itself, all the details were mapped out. The whole psalm is about Jesus on the cross. The King of kings and Lord of lords, God’s Son, was not too proud to say, “I am a worm and not a man.”

As I was graduating from the seminary, the finishing touches were being put on that beautiful chapel, the Chapel of St. Timothy and St. Titus. For the most part, everyone was very happy with it which says a lot because it’s not an easy crowd to please. The chiseled stone, the stained glass, the organ, the acoustics, the chancel furnishings and paraments . . . it was all very well done and well-received. One thing, however, caused a stir. It was the cross of all things, suspended from the ceiling . . . a very simple cross. The figure of Christ is on the cross, but is represented simply by a squiggly bar of metal. Some didn’t like it. “Can’t we do better than that?” they said. “Must Jesus be represented by a squiggle?” But I think the architect was thinking Psalm 22, “I am a worm and not a man.” So far the King was willing to stoop!

One last thing. In the Hebrew, one word is used for both worm and maggot. (Sorry about that, but that’s just the way it is!) And so the word as we’ve been using it has everything to do with dead and decaying matter. In the book of Job, for instance, speaking of sinners he says, “The worm finds them sweet” (Job 24:20) because the wages of sin is death. And of his own disgusting skin diseases, he writes, “My flesh is clothed with worms and dirt; my skin hardens, then breaks out afresh” (7:5). But then, finally, in Job 19, one of the most beautiful confessions of the faith: “I know that my Redeemer lives, and at last he will stand upon the earth. And after

my skin has been thus destroyed yet in my flesh I shall see God!” (A more literal translation would be “after my skin has been worm eaten, or devoured by maggots, yet in my flesh I shall see God.” In our own flesh, we shall see God, and it’s because God was not too proud to become lowly for us. “I am a worm and not a man.”

So, “Fear not” God says to us in Isaiah 41, “for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand . . . “Fear not, you worm Jacob, you men of Israel! [Fear not you people of God.] I am the one who helps you, declares the LORD; [I am] your Redeemer.” Amen.