

# Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice

Lutheran Service Book 556 | study by Carl C. Fickenscher II

## Introduction

How does it feel listening to someone talk about himself or herself? Yeah, I know. It can get old fast. Somebody else's vacation pictures. Details of his surgery. Even personal testimony of what Jesus has done in her life. Borrrrrring! Or worse. Believe me — *I* know! I remember once when I had to listen to...

On the other hand, there are times when “I” and “me” and “my” are anything but dull — and not at all self-centered.

What makes the difference? Let's talk about that (yes, let us talk about that) as we study Martin Luther's “Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice.”

- What is it about another person's personal story that may become tiresome for us?
- Can you think of examples of other peoples' first-person accounts that you found quite engaging?

## Exploring the Scriptures

The Season of Easter carries us from the joy of the resurrection morn, through those 40 days Jesus showed Himself alive to His disciples, toward the Ascension of Our Lord, and finally to Pentecost. Thus, the last couple of Sundays before Ascension Day develop two major motifs, both of which show up in our Hymn of the Day.

First, as we near Jesus' visible departure to heaven, it's a moment to look back on the events of our salvation He has now nearly completed. Psalm 66 invites us to hear about these great events. Read Ps. 66:16.

- One problem: Do we really want to hear the psalmist talk about what God has done for *his* soul?
- What do you hope the psalmist really means?

Now read Psalm 67. Notice especially verse 3.

- What could cause “all the peoples,” rather than just the psalmist, to praise God?
- Any hints you see in the psalm of what God has done for everyone?

Read Ps. 98:1–3.

- Think of the events of Jesus' time on earth. What are some of the “marvelous things” the psalmist might have

foreseen Jesus doing? For whom did the psalmist see Him doing these?

The second major motif for these late Sundays of Easter is preparation for the coming of the Holy Spirit. The Gospel Readings for these Sundays all come from Jesus' last discourse to the disciples before His arrest. Read John 14:15–21; 15:9–17; 16:5–15; and 16:23–33.

- What activities of the Holy Spirit does Jesus promise?
- What special names does Jesus use for the Holy Spirit? If your group has different translations, compare how they render one of these names (14:16; 16:7). How does each different rendering express a unique blessing He brings? How precious will these blessings be in light of 16:32–33?

Now look again more closely at 16:13–15.

- What particular activity of the Spirit is described here? Does the Holy Spirit talk about Himself? About whom does He speak? See also John 15:26.
- What sorts of things does the Spirit say about Jesus? Consider, for example, John 15:13. How does He speak about Jesus today?

## Exploring the Hymn

### Background

“Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice” was probably the first hymn Luther wrote specifically for singing by a congregation in worship.

- What makes a truly *congregational* hymn, one to be sung together by dozens or hundreds of worshipers? Should a congregational hymn be one person talking about himself? Why not?

- The original title of “Dear Christians” was “A Christian hymn of Dr. Martin Luther, setting forth the unspeakable grace of God and the true faith.” Does that sound congregational? Why or why not?

## Text

The congregational character of this hymn is immediately evident in stanza 1. Read it, and remember the psalms you studied a few minutes ago.

- How, apparently, will the hymn summon up the call of Ps. 67:3?
- Where do you see Ps. 98:1 paraphrased?

OK, but what about Ps. 66:16? Well, perhaps surprisingly, this hymn is all about what God has done for “*my* soul.” Read stanzas 2–3.

- How many uses of “I” and “me” and “my” can you count? Pool your knowledge of the life of Luther to discuss how well these stanzas fit his story.
- So, is this hymn all about Luther? If so, singing it could mean our congregations are idolizing him.
- Who else fits this description? Read Rom. 3:9–20. Read, too, something Luther wrote in the Small Catechism: “Which are these [sins we should confess]?” (*LSB*, p. 326). Whoever we are, whatever our station in life, we are this one sinner Luther describes!
- Is this what makes a first-person account compelling — that it in fact applies to every individual?

What, then, has God done for my soul — for *every* soul? Read stanza 4.

## Making the Connection

So, Luther’s story is our story. More important, Christ’s story is our story.

- No need to talk about yourself out loud right now, but take a moment to talk to God silently about who you are and what you’ve done under the Ten Commandments, as Luther reminded in stanzas 2–3.

## In Closing

Hearing someone else talk about himself can indeed be thrilling if his story is one in which we also see ourselves. A hymn is properly congregational if it vocalizes the experience of all the worshipers. Dear Christians, *one and all*, rejoice! And rejoice to sing! Because what Christ has done personally, individually, for Luther, He has done personally, individually, for you!

- Sing or read aloud together all 10 stanzas of *LSB* 556 — with joy!

- Imagine that! God had *me* in mind even before He created the world! See 2 Tim. 1:9. We can all say that!
- How precious am *I* to Him? What did He give for me?

Everything God has done for me is now laid out in stanzas 5–9. Read through the familiar story — but notice the very personal way it’s told.

- Where do you see each of these passages reflected in the stanzas: 2 Tim. 1:10; Gal. 4:4–5; Phil. 2:5–8; Ps. 46:1, 7, 11; John 15:13; 17:6, 10, 21; 2 Cor. 5:21; Rom. 3:24–28?
- Which words in these stanzas are especially sweet to you? Consider “compassion”; “my brother”; “A servant’s form, like mine”; “To lead the devil captive”; “close to Me”; “rock and castle”; “Your ransom I Myself will be”; “For I am yours, and you are Mine”; “The foe shall not divide us”; “for your good”; “My innocence shall bear your sin.” What others are special to you?
- Is this first-person story self-centered?

And now, like these Sundays of the Church Year, we reach the end of Christ’s story. Or do we? Read stanzas 9–10.

- Which of those functions of the Holy Spirit does the hymn recall? Remember John 16:13–14, 33. Of whom, again, does the Spirit speak?
- How does the Spirit see to it that Christ’s story continues? For whom is His personal story now?

- Then — and this you surely will want to do aloud together — talk about why all of us dear Christians can rejoice at hearing Christ tell again what He has done for us. As you discuss, consider silently what it means that the sins known only to you and God have been forgiven by Christ.

## Prayer

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, because of Your tender love toward us sinners You have given us Your Son that, believing in Him, we might have everlasting life. Continue to grant us Your Holy Spirit that we may remain steadfast in this faith to the end and finally come to everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen (For steadfast faith, *LSB*, p. 311).