



Comfort, Comfort, Ye My People

Text: Johannes Olearius (1611-1684)

Tune: Louis Bourgeois (1510-1561)

As the Church goes through her penitential season of Advent, she rejoices in the coming of her Redeemer. One of the greatest Old Testament Readings for the season is from Isaiah 40. Through Isaiah we hear Words from God that remind us of our comfort from God because “her warfare is ended; her iniquity is pardoned” (Isaiah 40:2).



Johannes Olearius

“Comfort, Comfort, Ye My People” was written by Johannes Gottfried Olearius. Olearius was born in 1611 while his father was Pastor of St. Mary’s Church in Halle, Germany. He entered the University of Wittenberg in 1529 where he eventually received a Master of Arts degree (1632) and later a Doctor of Divinity degree (1643). In 1643 he was appointed Court Preacher and Chaplain at Halle by Duke August of Sachsen-Weissenfels. He was later appointed to several positions in Weissenfels, positions he held until his death in 1684.

Olearius was a prolific writer, writing a Bible commentary, several devotional works, and also countless hymns. He was the compiler of one of the most influential 17th century hymnals, *Geistliche Singe-Kunst*, first published in 1671 in Leipzig. This hymnal contained 1,217 hymns, 302 of them written by Olearius. His hymns were very useful, since many filled gaps in existing hymnody, largely providing hymns for seasons and feasts of the Church Year which had few hymns or none at all. Many of his hymns were two or three stanzas long, simple in their construction,

and captured succinctly the importance of the topic at hand. Many of his hymns spread rapidly and were included in most hymnals at the time. *The Lutheran Hymnal* contains seven of Olearius’s hymns. He wrote two hymns for the Feast of the Nativity St. John the Baptizer, “When All the World Was Cursed” and “Comfort, Comfort, Ye My People.”

The hymn’s tune was written by Louis Bourgeois, a French composer and music theorist during the Renaissance. He is most famously known for his work composing hymn tunes for Calvinist hymnals. His most famous melody, Old 100th, is the tune for the Common Doxology (“Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow”). Little is known of Bourgeois’ early life. His first publication was a collection of folk songs in 1539 in Lyons, France. By 1547 he was teaching music in Geneva where he began to write tunes to which the Psalms could be sung. However, on December 3, 1551 he was arrested for writing new tunes for some Psalms. John Calvin freed him from prison, but the controversy continued. People did not want to learn new tunes and the town council ordered that his work be burned for being “too confusing.” Shortly after, Bourgeois returned to Lyons, never to return to Geneva. In 1560 he published a collection of secular folk songs, even though he denounced the style while in Geneva. This was his last publication before his death in 1561.

Although this hymn was written for the Feast of the Nativity of St. John the Baptizer, it is also a fitting Advent hymn. It captures the message of Advent, that Christ is coming for His people, not to punish them, but to give them the peace that flows from the forgiveness of their sins. As we sing this hymn on the Sunday that bids us “Rejoice in the Lord always,” we rejoice that “All that well deserved His anger He no more will see nor heed” (stanza 2). Our rejoicing comes from God as He changes our “pining sadness into ever-springing gladness.” Stanza three discusses the response of faith as it responds to God’s forgiveness. The forgiven soul longs to “prepare for God a way” and to “bow down to meet Him.” Finally all men see the fullness of God’s promise, that His forgiveness and “His Word is never broken.” “Rejoice in the Lord always!”