



Isaiah, Mighty Seer, in Days of Old

Text: Martin Luther (1483-1546)

Tune: Martin Luther (1483-1546)

As the Reformation swept through Germany, and later the rest of Europe, there was a great need for things in the language of the people. The Liturgy had always been in Latin. Though one principle of the Reformation was that of using language that was understood, Luther did not advocate for Latin to be thrown out of



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the churches. Rather, when he published the *Deutsche Messe* (“German Mass and Order of Service”) he said in its preface: “For in no wise would I want to discontinue the service in the Latin language, because the young are my chief concern. And if I could bring it to pass, Greek and Hebrew were as familiar to us as the Latin and had as many fine melodies and songs, we would hold mass, sing, and read on successive Sundays in all four languages, German, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew” (AE 53:63). He went on to explain the importance of learning languages for all Christians so that they could go out and preach the Gospel to all nations in their own languages, just as the Holy Spirit did at Pentecost.

Only grudgingly did Luther issue the *Deutsche Messe*. He said it was “arranged for the sake of the unlearned lay folk” (AE 53:63). In it, he paraphrased of the Ordinaries of the Divine Service (unchanging parts of the Liturgy; the Kyrie, Gloria in Excelsis, Nicene Creed, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei). He left us with the hymns that fill our hymnal: “Kyrie! God Father in Heaven Above” (TLH 9), “All Glory Be to God Alone” (TLH 238), “We All Believe in One True God” (TLH 251, second tune), and “Isaiah, Mighty Seer in Days of Old” (TLH 249). The only Ordinary he did not

paraphrase was the *Agnus Dei*. Rather, he commended simply the “German Agnus Dei.” What this is remains unclear, but it is likely a translation of the *Agnus Dei* used by Bugenhagen in his Braunschweig Church Order, which is the same *Agnus Dei* we sing each week from the page 15 Holy Communion setting. By these paraphrases Luther taught the Church what these Ordinaries teach and confess. Once one understood them, however, they were to begin attending the Latin Mass to learn the language of the Church.

In the *Deutsche Messe*, Luther calls for an order slightly foreign to us, but created to teach the people. He writes, “It seems to me that it would accord with [the institution of] the Lord’s Supper to administer the sacrament immediately after the consecration of the bread, before the cup is blessed. . . . Meanwhile, the German Sanctus (Isaiah, Mighty Seer in Days of Old) or the hymn [O Lord, We Praise Thee] (TLH 313), or the hymn of John Huss, [Jesus Christ, Our Blessed Savior] (TLH 311), could be sung. Then shall the cup be blessed and administered, while the remainder of these hymns are sung, or the German *Agnus Dei*” (AE 53:81-82). While it is unclear if this actually happened in practice, it was one of Luther’s many liturgical musings.

“Isaiah, Mighty Seer in Days of Old” is based on Isaiah 6:1-4, part of the appointed Old Testament reading for the Feast of the Holy Trinity. In it we hear the *Sanctus*, the heavenly hymn in which we join at each celebration of the Lord’s Supper. As Luther crafted the melody to fit the text, he was careful to ensure that the music carried the hymn’s theology. Careful attention finds that the melody hits its heights at “high on a lofty throne,” “aloft they soared,” and the repetitions of “Holy is God, the Lord of Sabaoth.” Johann Walter, who worked with Luther on composing melodies for the first Lutheran hymns, said, “Among other melodies, it is the German Sanctus which shows Luther’s perfect mastery in adapting the notes to the text.”

As you sing this treasure of Lutheran hymnody, read alongside it Isaiah’s account of beholding heaven. Hopefully Luther’s paraphrase and stately tune help you see the same thrilling sights as Isaiah: the Lord in splendor, the cherubim, and the smoke surrounding the throne.