

LIKE A TREASURE HIDDEN IN A FIELD

Theodore J. Hartwig

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in the field” (Matthew 13:44). Spoken by Jesus, this short parable describes the profound nature of the message in one of our hymns. Here, the field is our hymnal, *Christian Worship*. That the hymn may be called hidden applies to the fact that it is rarely used in our public worship services. Yet it is worthy of being counted a treasure for its profound biblical message. In our treasury of hymns, it is unsurpassed for capturing the plight in today’s world while also enunciating the essence of the imperishable Gospel of Jesus Christ. Its first stanza is reproduced here. The rest may be consulted in *Christian Worship* (Hymn 400).

O God, O Lord of heav’n and earth,
Your living finger never wrote
That life should be an aimless mote,
A deathward drift from futile birth.
Your Word meant life triumphant hurled
In splendor through your broken world;
Since life awoke and life began,
You made for us a holy plan.

Together with the rest of the hymn’s stanzas, these are winged words! Highly prominent and adding color to our speech is the metaphor. Whether consciously or subconsciously, we all employ them liberally in our conversation. “Brain” has become a metaphor for an intelligent person. “Greenhorn,” “pig,” and “the apple does not fall far from the tree” are such commonly used metaphors of or about people that they need no explanation.

In the second line of the hymn’s stanza, an unforgettable metaphor speaks of God’s “living finger.” The expression occurs in Luke 11:20, where Jesus tells his accusers that he casts out demons by the finger of God. We use the digits on our hand not to demonstrate strength but to give directions, to make signs, and to indicate pleasure or displeasure. It seems that Jesus is here telling his critics that God needs only a finger, not a fist or an arm, to achieve his mighty works.

Moreover, his finger did not design human life to be an aimless mote, that speck of dust dancing in a ray of sunshine flooding through the window. Human life was not intended to be a deathward drift from futile birth, the creed of unbelievers whose god or highest good is the here and now. By the instrument of his irresistible Word and with splendor and triumph, he hurled new life through our sin-broken world and fashioned for us a holy plan of salvation. On this expectant note the hymn’s first stanza closes.

In its next three stanzas, the hymn fills out this last line's promise. It reviews our human plight, unfolds the good news of salvation, and prays for the Holy Spirit's life-giving breath on the cloven, or fractured, church. The brilliant word images and colorful metaphors in these stanzas, like an ambrosia of delectable tastes, repay some moments of our meditation. Here is a sample: "death had royal scope and room"; "you came into our hall of death to breathe our poisoned air"; "in these gray and latter days."

This hymn, together with seven others in *Christian Worship*, was written by Martin Franzmann, who taught at our pastor training college in Watertown in the nineteen thirties and forties. It was this writer's privilege to sit at his feet for three academic years in courses on Shakespeare and classical Greek. May this study of Hymn 400 encourage its more frequent use in our worship services.

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