

REFORMATION SUNDAY: OCTOBER 25

“Lord God, Help in this Trouble”

A CHRISTIAN SONG WRITTEN BY HULDREICH ZWINGLI
WHEN HE WAS ATTACKED BY THE PESTILENCE

Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) was the newly appointed People’s Priest, or *Leutpriestertum*, at Zurich’s Groosmünster church. While visiting the Swiss town of Bad Pfäfers in September 1519 he learned of a new wave of plague devastating Zurich and immediately returned home. Zwingli ministered to the city’s afflicted and himself fell ill. His brother, Andreas, would perish from the disease, along with an estimated quarter to half of all Zurich’s citizens.

Zwingli’s song shows him falling sick, battling the disease, and convalescing. The words speak to his acceptance of divine providence (“Do what Thou wilt; me nothing lacks. Thy vessel am I; to make or break altogether”) and promise a future of faithful acts (“my lips must thy praise and teaching bespeak more than ever before, however it may go”). As a Reformation leader Zwingli went on to oppose longstanding church practices that contradicted his understanding of the Bible, including the veneration of saints and statues, priestly celibacy, and the sale of indulgences.

Although he didn’t write the Plague Song to be performed during worship services, the text can be found in many sixteenth and seventeenth century Protestant hymnals. Zwingli’s words remind us 500 years later that a commitment to others and even personal tribulation can lead to a renewed state of grace.



General Assembly 224 set aside this year’s Reformation Sunday as a day for the “whole church to commit to continuous discernment of how to meet the social justice, economic, and spiritual challenges of the pandemic.” The Presbyterian Historical Society joins this effort by sharing Zwingli’s Plague Song in English on page 2 of this insert or at www.history.pcusa.org/rs

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VI

A CHRISTIAN SONG WRITTEN BY HULDREICH ZWINGLI
WHEN HE WAS ATTACKED BY THE PESTILENCE

(End of 1519)

[Ein christenlich gsang, gestelt durch H. Z., als er mit pestilentz angriffen ward. In Schuler and Schulthess ed., ii., 2, 270-2. In modern literary German, translated, pp. 272-4. In Egli and Finsler ed., i., 67-9. Translation reprinted from my life of Zwingli, pp. 132-4.

This is the most successful of Zwingli's preserved poetry. It was the memorial of his serious illness from the plague which in 1519 carried off nearly half of the population of Zurich. Though unadapted to singing it has been given a tune and is found in many hymn-books of the 15th and 16th centuries, published in Zurich.]

I.—At the Beginning of the Illness.

Help, Lord God, help	So let it be!
In this trouble!	Do what Thou wilt;
I think Death is at the door.	Me nothing lacks. ²
Stand before ¹ me, Christ;	Thy vessel am I;
For Thou hast overcome him!	To make or break altogether.
To Thee I cry:	For, if Thou takest away
If it is Thy will,	My spirit
Take out the dart,	From this earth,
Which wounds me	Thou dost it, that it ³ may not
Nor lets me have an hour's	grow worse,
Rest or repose!	Nor spot
Will'st Thou however	The pious lives and ways of
That Death take me	others.
In the midst of my days,	

¹ In the sense of “protect.”

² The words may also mean equally well, “nothing shall be too much, for me.”

³ “It,” *i.e.*, my spirit.

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II.—In the Midst of his Illness.

Console me, Lord God, console me!	My tongue is dumb, It cannot speak a word.
The illness increases, Pain and fear seize My soul and body.	My senses are all blighted. Therefore is it time That Thou my fight Conductest hereafter;
Come to me then, With Thy grace, O my only consolation!	Since I am not So strong, that I Can bravely Make resistance To the Devil's wiles and treacherous hand.
It ¹ will surely save Everyone, who His heart's desire And hopes sets	Still will my spirit Constantly abide by Thee, how- ever he rages.
On Thee, and who besides Despises all gain and loss. Now all is up.	

III.—During Convalescence.

Sound, Lord God, sound! I think I am Already coming back. ²	Sometime endure, Perhaps with greater anguish Than would now have Happened, ³ Lord! Since I came So near; ⁴ So will I still The spite and boasting Of this world Bear joyfully for the sake of the reward
Yes, if it please Thee, That no spark of sin Rule me longer on earth. Then my lips must Thy praise and teaching Bespeak more Than ever before, However it may go, In simplicity and with no danger.	By Thy help, Without which nothing can be perfect.
Although I must The punishment of death	

¹ “It,” *i.e.*, Thy grace.

² *I.e.*, to health, to myself.

³ *I.e.*, if I had died this time.

⁴ *I.e.*, to death's door.

General Assembly 224 set aside this year's Reformation Sunday as a day for the “whole church to commit to continuous discernment of how to meet the social justice, economic, and spiritual challenges of the pandemic.” PHS joins this effort by sharing an English translation of Zwingli's Plague Song, from *The Latin Works and the Correspondence of Huldreich Zwingli...vol. 1, 1912.*

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