

“Kill Me, Jesus!” Notes on a Hymn and the Woman who Wrote It



Workshop of Lucas Cranach the younger: Christ blessing the Children, w. Caspar Cruciger in black, next to Elisabeth and second wife Apollonia Günterode in background.

Co-missioners,

This week's offering comes from our editor.

Peace and Joy,
The Crossings Community

“Kill Me, Jesus!” Notes on a Hymn and the Woman who Wrote It by Jerome Burce

I met Elisabeth Cruciger last week. I want you to meet her too. I think she merits our high regard as the first woman theologian of the Lutheran movement.

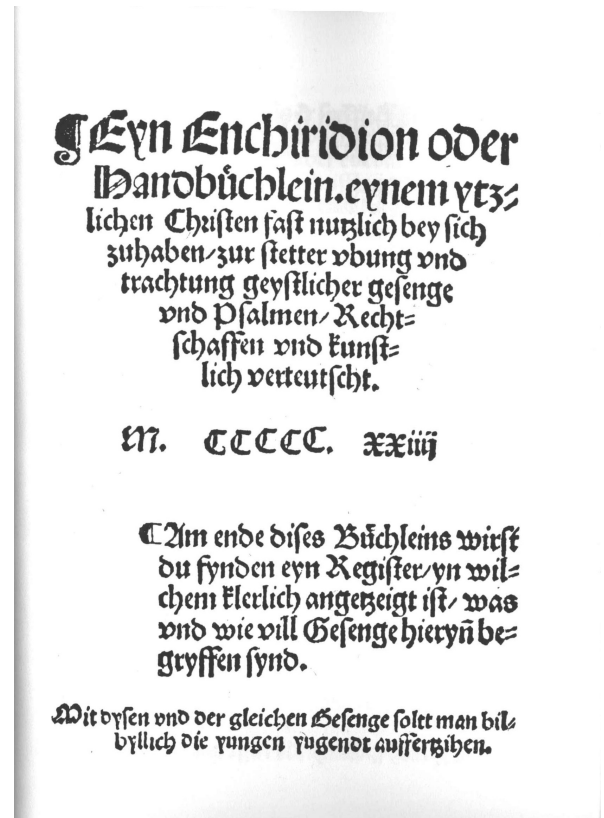
My encounter with Ms. Cruciger was altogether accidental. Late one evening I was listening to one of Bach’s cantatas with an eye on the text as the music unfolded. When we got to the inevitable closing chorale, here’s what I read and heard:

Ertöt uns durch dein Güte / Erweck uns durch dein Gnad. Or, in equally blunt English, “Kill us through your goodness / Wake us through your grace.”

My eyes popped. In seventy years of English-speaking Lutheran experience, I can’t recall anyone anywhere praying a prayer so honest and direct—so true, one might say, to the ways of the God we have and need in Christ Jesus. Until last week, I hadn’t prayed this way myself. From now on I will. The God of the Gospel invites nothing less than a prayer this bold.

I promptly searched—how could I not?—for the prayer’s source. This led me quickly to Ms. Cruciger, whose name is also given as Creutziger, or even Kreutziger. English references like to spell her first name with a “z.” [Wikipedia tells us](#) that her maiden name was Elisabeth von Meseritz. She was born in 1500 to an aristocratic family in Eastern Pomerania—these days part of Poland—and was packed off to a cloister while still a child. She was all of seventeen or eighteen when Luther posted his 95 Theses. Not long after, Johann Bugenhagen popped up in her vicinity as an apostle of the Reformation. She caught the bug.

At age twenty-two she somehow left her cloister and headed for Wittenberg, where she joined the Bugenhagen household. (The website hymnary.org has an alternative account whereby her whole family skedaddled from Poland and brought her with them.)



Title page of the Loersfeld edition of the Erfurt Enchiridion, 1524

1522 was a heady time to be arriving in Wittenberg. At the beginning of March, Luther had quit his confinement at the Wartburg Castle, thrown off his Junker Georg disguise, and strode openly into town to what one guesses was the astonishment of all. He promptly preached his famous Invocavit sermons (*Luther's Works* 51:67-100) as a crucial first step toward reinvigorating the Reformation. The task of reshaping church life to reflect the distinction between Law and Gospel was now underway in earnest.

Two years later this Law-and-Gospel distinction surfaced in what could loosely be called the [first Lutheran hymnal](#). Printed in Wittenberg, it amounted to a twelve-page pamphlet entitled “Some Christian Songs.” It contained all of eight hymns, four by Luther, three by Paul Speratus, and one by a person unnamed. That same year, 1524, a second hymnal appeared from a printshop in Erfurt. Hence (in part) its name: the [Erfurt Enchiridion](#). This one reprinted the eight Wittenberg hymns and added eighteen more, fourteen by Luther, one each by Justus Jonas and Erhard Hegenwald, another by our friend Anonymous, and one by—you guessed it—Elisabeth Cruciger. Such had become her name that very year when she married one of Luther’s star pupils, Casper Cruciger.

In that Erfurt lineup of twenty-six hymns, Cruciger’s is positioned at number ten, sandwiched between two of Luther’s on one side and three more of Luther’s on the other side. This is quite the company to be keeping when you’re a mere twenty-four years old, and a woman, and the setting you’re stuck in is early sixteenth century Germany. As it happens, Cruciger belongs in this company. This is obvious when you read her hymn. Kudos to Luther *et al.* for spotting her talent and letting it shine. Later Lutherans of an older male persuasion would not have done this, I think. Shame on them. Shame, perhaps, on some of us.

Cruciger’s hymn is entitled “*Herr Christ, der einig Gotts Sohn*”—“Lord Christ, the only Son of God.” It comprises five stanzas of seven lines each. The prayer that stunned me launches the last of these stanzas. That’s where she flashes her theological and poetic chops at their most brilliant, tugging us into Luther’s new and sudden insight about the twice-created creatures that born-and-baptized Christians happen to be. What’s more, she does this in fewer words than Luther himself was capable of, or so one guesses.

Here is the whole stanza in unsatisfactory English prose:

“Kill us through your goodness; wake us through your grace. Sicken the old creature, that the new one might live well on this earth, our minds, desires, and thoughts fixed wholly on you.”

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Five hundred years have gone by since these lines were penned. Lutherans these days don't think this deeply, at least not as a rule. Still less do we dare to trust God with the fierce outrageous confidence that Cruciger exhibits. Too many of us—most all of us, perhaps—are still mired in what Gerhard Forde once lampooned as “ladder theology.” God is up. We are down. Between us stands a ladder that we're to climb to get to God's level. Even those of us who still recall bits of the Small Catechism we once memorized are prone to this nonsense. We get to the part about the implications of baptism for daily living, how “the old person in us is to be drowned and die through daily sorrow for sin and through repentance,” and this we take to be *our* job, Rung Number One on today's “to do” list. Like that's going to happen.

Cruciger's prayer is the only alternative here. We start the day by begging God to push our heads under the water and hold them there for a while even as Christ barks the strong word that brings us shuffling like Lazarus into a semblance of Easter life all over again. God kills, God makes alive, as Hannah once sang. It takes a God *that* good, *that* gracious—a God so incessantly active—to pull off the life we *get* to have and enjoy in Christ Jesus. This life is *bound* to unfold in us as the day's hours fly by. Why? Because the only One who is able to make it happen has promised to do just that. He'll do it for me. He'll do it for the Jesus-trusting folks I'll encounter during the day.

Blessed is the person who looks for signs of Easter life bubbling away in the ones that he or she is rubbing shoulders with. Imagine the improvement in church life were all of us busy doing just that and thanking God for the signs of liveliness we spot beneath each other's tawdry exteriors.

Comes the rub in all this. The old creature gasps on despite its daily drowning. Being as it is, it wants nothing to do with a God whose goodness will kill it. If it's a pious old creature, then it promptly aligns with others of its ilk to construct a god more to its liking, a deity stripped of genuine goodness and draped instead in a feeble niceness that operates from a comfortable distance. Oddly, it expects less of this god than it does of the doctors it seeks out when it comes down with cancer. This god is forbidden by definition to kill the poison of sin and rebellion that lurks within. (How mean would that be?) Its job at best is to inspire us all to try harder and do better until we somehow heal ourselves.

Such is the feckless religiosity of a dying church. As its exiting children keep saying these days, "Who needs it?"

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More's the pity, then, that we're unable in English-speaking churches to give our children a monthly dose of Cruciger in our hymn selections. Not that her hymn is altogether absent in English. A partial translation by Catherine Winkworth, "O Thou of God the Father," showed up in a hymnal published for Ohio Synod Lutherans in 1880. A second translation, "The Only Son from Heaven," appeared in one or two Lutheran hymnals of the early 20th century, resurfaced in the Missouri Synod's *Worship Supplement* of 1969, and thereafter was included in *Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978), *Lutheran Worship* (1982), *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (2006), and *Lutheran Service Book* (also 2006). Arthur T.

Russell, a 19th century Church of England divine, is responsible for this translation. It too is partial, presenting a close approximation of Cruciger's first three stanzas, omitting the last two, and tacking on a doxology that someone else may have written. Winkworth's version limited itself to stanzas one, three and four. One can't help but guess—yes, with an old-creaturely measure of Lutheran snark—that Cruciger's stanza five was simply too much for weak English stomachs.



Johann_Sebastian_Bach, by Elias Gottlob Haussmann – Public Domain.

Again, more's the pity. We would all profit these days from a regular dose of "full Cruciger." How better to handle the question that pops incessantly in our church meetings: "What is God doing?" Answer: "Killing us. Making us alive. *That's* what God is up to, day in and day out, whether we want it or not. Alleluia!"

German-speaking Lutherans have it better than we do. Cruciger's entire hymn continues to appear in hymnbooks they use. And then there's Bach. He anchored a whole cantata (BWV 96) on the hymn.

The chorus launches it with stanza one and wraps it up with stanza five. Bach had already used the fifth stanza to conclude an earlier cantata (BWV 22). That's where I encountered it. This one is based on Luke's account of Jesus' third passion prediction (Lk. 18: 31, 34). It opens with a marvelous rendering of Luke's text that features the choir sputtering "what? what?" as they deliver the line about the disciples not knowing *what* Jesus said. (Yes. That's us.) Comes a reflection on Jesus' passion and extended prayers for the faith that faces it, embraces it, and allows our crucified Lord to do his work in us. And with that we get to Cruciger. Again, *Ertöt uns durch dein Güte / Erweck uns durch dein Gnad / Etc.* As the choir sing this in chorale form, its lines are interwoven by an orchestral accompaniment that radiates joy. "God has promised. God will do it!" So preaches Bach through the music he writes.

To crib from later preachers: "Can I hear an 'Amen'?" God tug this from us all.

Cruciger's life was brief. She died at age thirty-five. Her daughter would later marry one of Luther's sons. I'm somehow not surprised. Whether she published anything besides this hymn, I do not know. Perhaps I'll find out, though it's enough already now to thank God for the bracing jolt she gave me last week. You'll do the same, I pray.

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use
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