

**BWV 38 - Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir, Cantata for the Twenty-First Sunday after Trinity**

Italics for chorale text; \*indicates lesson or gospel for the day

**1. Choral**

*Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir,  
Herr Gott, erhöre mein Rufen;  
Dein gnädig Ohr neig her zu mir  
Und meiner Bitt sie öffne!  
Denn so du willst das sehen an,  
Was Sünd und Unrecht ist getan,  
Wer kann, Herr, vor dir bleiben?*

**2. Rezitativ A**

In Jesu Gnade wird allein  
Der Trost vor uns und die Vergebung sein,  
Weil durch des Satans Trug und List  
Der Menschen ganzes Leben  
Vor Gott ein Sündengreuel ist.  
Was könnte nun  
Die Geistesfreudigkeit zu unserm Beten geben,  
Wo Jesu Geist und Wort nicht neue Wunder tun?

**3. Arie T**

Ich höre mitten in den Leiden  
Ein Trostwort, so mein Jesus spricht.  
Drum, o geängstigtes Gemüte,  
Vertraue deines Gottes Güte,  
Sein Wort besteht und fehlet nicht,  
Sein Trost wird niemals von dir scheiden!

**4. Rezitativ (mit instrumentaler Chorale) S**

Ach! Daß mein Glaube noch so schwach,  
Und daß ich mein Vertrauen  
Auf feuchtem Grunde muß erbauen!  
Wie ofte müssen neue Zeichen  
Mein Herz erweichen!  
Wie? kennst du deinen Helfer nicht,  
Der nur ein einzig Trostwort spricht,  
Und gleich erscheint,  
Eh deine Schwachheit es vermeint,  
Die Rettungsstunde!  
Vertraue nur der Allmachtshand  
und seiner Wahrheit Munde!

*Darum auf Gott will hoffen ich,  
Auf mein Verdienst nicht bauen,  
Auf ihn mein Herz soll lassen sich  
Und seiner Güte trauen,  
Die mir zusagt sein wertes Wort,  
Das ist mein Trost und treuer Hort,  
Des will ich allzeit harren.*

**5. Arie (Terzett) S A B**

Wenn meine Trübsal als mit Ketten  
Ein Unglück an dem andern hält,  
So wird mich doch mein Heil erretten,  
Daß alles plötzlich von mir fällt.  
Wie bald erscheint des Trostes Morgen  
Auf diese Nacht der Not und Sorgen!

**6. Choral**

*Ob bei uns ist der Sünden viel,  
Bei Gott ist viel mehr Gnade;  
Sein Hand zu helfen hat kein Ziel,  
Wie groß auch sei der Schade.  
Er ist allein der gute Hirt,  
Der Israel erlösen wird  
Aus seinen Sünden allen.*

**1. Chorale**

*Out of deep distress I cry out to You,  
Lord God, hear my calls;  
Incline your gracious ear to me  
and open it to my prayer!  
For if you would regard  
what sin and injustice has been done,  
who, Lord, could stand before You?*

**2. Recitativo A**

In Jesus' grace alone  
is our comfort and forgiveness,  
since through Satan's deceit and cunning  
the whole life of humanity is,  
before God, a sinful abomination.  
What then  
Could give the spirit of joy to our prayers,  
if Jesus' spirit and word did not work new wonders?

**3. Aria T**

I hear, in the midst of my sorrows,  
a word of comfort spoken by my Jesus.  
Therefore, o anguished spirit,  
trust your God's goodness,  
His word stands firm and does not fail,  
His comfort will never depart from you!

**4. Recitativo (with instrumentaler Chorale) S**

Alas! my faith is yet so weak,  
and I root my trust  
in such damp ground!  
How often must there be new signs  
In order for my heart to be moved!  
What? do you not know your Helper,  
who speaks a single word of comfort  
and at once there appears—  
and even before your weakness could imagine it—  
the hour of deliverance!  
Trust in the Almighty's hand  
and his truthful mouth!

*Therefore I will hope in God,  
and not rely on my merit,  
I shall abandon my heart to Him  
and trust in His goodness  
which His worthy Word has promised me;  
that is my comfort and precious treasure,  
for which I shall wait always.*

**5. Aria (Trio) S A B**

When my troubles like fetters  
link one misfortune to another,  
then will salvation surely come to me,  
so that it all suddenly falls from me.  
How soon the morning of comfort appears  
after this night of anguish and worry!

**6. Chorale**

*Although the sins in us are many,  
In God is even more mercy;  
His helping hand has no bounds,  
however great the harm.  
He alone is the good Shepherd,  
who will redeem Israel  
from all its sins.*

Chorale v1

*Ps 130.1-3 Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice: let thine ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications. If thou, Lord, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?*

Chorale v2 paraphrase

*Ps 130.4 But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared.  
\*Eph 6.11 Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.*

*\*Jn 4.48 Unless you see signs and wonders, you will not believe...*

Untexted Chorale v3

*Ps 130.5 I wait for the Lord, my soul doth wait, and in his word do I hope.*

Chorale v4 paraphrase

*Ps 130.6 My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning*

Chorale v5

*Ps 130. 7-8. For with the Lord there Let Israel hope in the Lord: for with the Lord there is mercy, and with him is plenteous redemption. 8 And he shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities.*

## Conductor's Notes ©2014 Ellen Frye

BWV 38 *Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dich* is a chorale cantata first performed on the 21<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Trinity, October 10, 1724. The penitence theme follows Luther's teaching that all true penitence leads to the joyful certainty of salvation.

### Theological narrative

The chorale that frames the cantata, attributed to Martin Luther, was first published in 1524. The text is Luther's paraphrase of Psalm 130. The anonymous librettist left the first and fifth verses of the chorale intact, paraphrased the second and fourth verses, and implied the third verse in the untexted accompaniment of the second recitative.

The opening chorus (#1) is a vocal motet with instruments doubling the voices. On the surface, you hear *stile antico*—lower voices leading with imitative lines based on the *cantus firmus*—but the countermelodies are pure Bach. In the *stollen*, the lower voices leap upward again and again, voices of the Faithful clamoring from the deep. In the *abgesang*, where Luther's text reads, "What sin and injustice has been done," brief chromatic descents are answered with a full octave chromatic ascent—the Faithful struggling upward. The movement as a whole rises and falls gracefully, overlapping arches of sound.

From the spare motet, Bach leads us through a brief recitative (#2) that emphasizes forgiveness through grace to an aria (#3) for two oboes, tenor and continuo. A delightful syncopated dance of hope, this aria answers the cry of the opening motet with "I hear amidst sorrows a word of comfort." In the A section, the tenor emphasizes Jesus' comfort-word (*Trostwort*) with a rising-falling *melisma*; in the B section, a long-held note depicts the "stand" of "his word stands."

In the second recitative (#4), the chorale tune in the continuo supports a soprano still crying in distress. Those in the congregation who were paying attention would have noted the contrast between the unsung chorale text and the words of the soprano: strong faith and reliance on God vs. "weak faith founded on damp ground." Halfway through the continuo's second *stollen*, the soprano turns abruptly from despair to hope and the recitative ends with an affirmation of faith.

The second aria (#4), a *terzetto* for soprano, alto, bass and continuo, is a wonderful interweaving of motifs, each with a different affect. Joy, introduced in the continuo, gives way to falling "troubles like fetters" and rising "misfortunes." Joy breaks through but is interrupted with reiterated troubles and misfortunes. At the end, the morning of comfort set against the long night of anguish brings back the joy motif.

In the closing chorale, the confidence of the Faithful is restored and the opening cry of anguish replaced with faith and salvation.

### Tonality

The *Aus tiefer* chorale is in the medieval Phrygian church mode. The tune opens with a falling fifth, an emphasis on the depths to which humankind has fallen.



Bach organizes the cantata's tonality around this falling fifth:

|                        |          |              |        |                                       |            |           |
|------------------------|----------|--------------|--------|---------------------------------------|------------|-----------|
| E Phrygian/<br>E minor | 1 Chorus | 2 Recitative |        |                                       |            | 6 Chorale |
| A minor/<br>A Phrygian |          |              | 3 Aria | 4 Recitative/<br>Chorale<br>Stollen 1 |            |           |
| D minor                |          |              |        | Stollen 2<br>Abgesang                 | 5 Terzetto |           |

The most dramatic tonal descent occurs in the second recitative where the chorale melody in the continuo begins in A Phrygian and transitions abruptly, at beginning of the second *stollen*, to D Phrygian where the movement continues to the end. While the A-to-D modulation continues the downward harmonic trend, the chorale melody itself jumps upward into the new key.

In his “Commentary on Psalm 130,” Luther emphasized the “blessing” of “contradictory and disharmonious things, for hope and despair are opposites.” He encouraged his followers to hope in despair: “hope which forms the new man, grows in the midst of fear that cuts down the old Adam” (*Luther’s Works, Volume 14*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, p 89). So while Bach moves the tonality downward movement by movement, he keeps shifting the melodic motion from descent to ascent— surely pointing to the journey of the Faithful as a combination of hope and despair leading to redemption.

The interweaving motifs of the *terzetto* deftly portray the “hope in despair” concept. Tonally the harmony descends through circles of fifths; melodically the motifs either descend or ascend. The movement ends with interchanges of the dawn of the new morning (set to an inverted joy motif) and the night of sorrow (set to the troubles motif) until finally the continuo plays the joy motif over more descending fifths.

Bringing the cantata back to E Phrygian, Bach gives the final note of the *terzetto*, D in the continuo, to the basses for their first note of the chorale, the seventh of the E major chord sung by the upper voices. The effect is an astonishing rise from the depths of sin to the promise of salvation through faith.

### Lesson for the 21<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Trinity

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| <p><i>Ephesians 6:10-17 (KJV)</i><br/> 10 Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might.<br/> 11 Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.<br/> 12 For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.<br/> 13 Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.<br/> 14 Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness;<br/> 15 And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace;<br/> 16 Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked.<br/> 17 And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.</p>  | <p>See #2 recitative: “through Satan’s deceit and cunning”</p>                                   |
| <p><i>John 4:46-54 (KJV)</i><br/> 46 So Jesus came again into Cana of Galilee, where he made the water wine. And there was a certain nobleman, whose son was sick at Capernaum.<br/> 47 When he heard that Jesus was come out of Judaea into Galilee, he went unto him, and besought him that he would come down, and heal his son: for he was at the point of death.<br/> 48 Then said Jesus unto him, Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe.<br/> 49 The nobleman saith unto him, Sir, come down ere my child die.<br/> 50 Jesus saith unto him, Go thy way; thy son liveth. And the man believed the word that Jesus had spoken unto him, and he went his way.<br/> 51 And as he was now going down, his servants met him, and told him, saying, Thy son liveth.<br/> 52 Then enquired he of them the hour when he began to amend. And they said unto him, Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him.<br/> 53 So the father knew that it was at the same hour, in the which Jesus said unto him, Thy son liveth: and himself believed, and his whole house.<br/> 54 This is again the second miracle that Jesus did, when he was come out of Judaea into Galilee.</p> | <p>See #4 recitative: “How often must there be new signs/in order for my heart to be moved?”</p> |