

ONE-YEAR LECTIONARY



THE WORD IN *Song*

Hymn of the
Day Studies for

CHRISTMAS



THE
LUTHERAN CHURCH
MISSOURI SYNOD

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Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming

Lutheran Service Book 359 | study by Paul Gregory Alms

Introduction

In many places, winter can be long and dreary and cold. One of the gloomy parts of winter is the deadness of all the trees and plants and flowers. The branches are bare, there is very little green and no sprouts, no flowers to brighten the view out our windows. Wouldn't it be wonderful if there were a flower in the middle of winter, a bright, beautiful summer bloom to give us hope that the freezing temperatures and dismal weather would not last forever?

The Bible and this hymn present the birth of Jesus as just such a flower. Only the Nativity of Our Lord dispels not the gloom of bad weather but the darkness of sin and eternal sadness. Christ is the prophesied rose that blooms and brings forgiveness and life.

- What flowers or plants suggest "Christmas" to you?
- What do you think makes these plants or flowers associated with Christ's birth?

Exploring the Scriptures

Read Is. 11:1–2. This section of Scripture is the basis for the imagery of this hymn. The people of God were exiled to Babylon. The Lord allowed Babylon to destroy Jerusalem, tear down the temple and treat the Israelites very harshly. All of this was due to the repeated sins of the people. The prophet calls Jesse (the father of King David) a "stump," like a tree that has been chopped down. This is a picture of Israel after the punishing exile. Yet God promised through His prophets a Messiah who would restore Israel.

- What does Isaiah say will happen to this stump?
- What will appear from his roots?
- How do you think this relates to Jesus and His birth?

An important part of this passage is the mention of Jesse. The line of Jesse, father of King David, is prophesied to provide the Messiah. The Promised One would be a descendant of David. Even though Israel looked defeated and punished, God would still fulfill His promise to bring a Savior from their midst.

- Read Matt. 1:1. What title here is for Jesus? How is this passage related to Is. 11:1–2?

Isaiah 11:2 mentions the divine power that this Promised One will possess. We have a contrast between the human lineage of this Messiah and the divine power He will possess.

- How does this contrast help us to understand that Jesus is both divine and human?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

This hymn has its origins in an anonymous fifteenth-century German carol that stretched on for twenty-three stanzas. The original text told the entire story of Christ's incarnation and birth, from the visit of the angel to Mary and on to the visit of the Magi. The original also put the Virgin Mary near the center of the story and the hymn. In that view, it was Mary whom the rose and the branch pointed to in Isaiah. Mary was the branch that flowered and gave birth to Jesus.

The version of the hymn in *LSB* has made substantial changes to that original version. Of course it is translated into English (from several different sources) and it has been trimmed down to just four stanzas that focus on the birth of Christ and the salvation it brings. But the biggest change

it brings is to make Christ the rose, the fruit of which Isaiah 11 speaks.

- Think of Mary's role in God's salvation plan. How important was she? Is it right to thank God and praise Him for her role? (See Luke 1:39–45.)
- Think of Jesus' role in God's plan of salvation. In what ways is Jesus more important and more central to the story?

Stanza 4 provides a clear example of how the translation in *LSB* has rightly shifted the focus of our attention and devotion away from Mary and to Jesus. In the original hymn, this stanza was a prayer addressed to Mary, asking that she would bring us to heaven.

- How has *LSB* changed this prayer in stanza 4?
- How is this change in line with our theology and what we believe about how we are saved?

Text

The text of this hymn is so effective largely because of the biblical imagery it uses to convey a saving truth. The dominant image is that of a rose blooming from a chopped-down tree or bush. From a lifeless stump comes a beautiful rose. This picture proclaims to us the wonderful news that God has become flesh. Christ is that rose. He has come, the Son of David from the line of Jesse, to be our Savior. From such humble roots God has taken flesh, a mighty Savior.

- Read Col. 2:9. What truth does Paul proclaim here?
- Read Rom. 1:1–3. What does this passage tell us about the reality of the human nature of Jesus?
- According to this passage, who is He descended from?

A second group of images concerns us and our sinful situation. These images are those of winter and night.

Making the Connection

In one way the most important word in this hymn is in stanza 1: amid. The hymn proclaims that amid the cold darkness of our sinful, sad lives, Christ is present. He was born not in the comfort of a perfect palace or sinless glory, but in the middle of the night, in the winter, in the darkness. Christ is born with sinners, for sinners like us.

- Matthew 1:23 gives a name for Jesus. How does this name relate to the message of this hymn?

In Closing

The birth of Christ is the flowering of a bloom that is eternal and is for us, a bloom of grace and mercy. Christ is the human branch, descended from David but also the divine Son of God, the Word made flesh. He brings light to our darkness and the warmth of His love to our cold lives. We praise Him forever for His coming to us, our rose of salvation.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 359.

Winter is a time of the death of nature and creation, when trees have lost their leaves and nothing seems to be alive. Night is a time of darkness and danger.

- Read through the hymn. Where is darkness and winter mentioned? How are they related to us and our sinful condition?
- How is Christ pictured as overcoming the cold of winter and the darkness of night?
- What words that contrast with the cold darkness are used to describe heaven in stanza 4?

A final image worth considering is that of fragrance. Stanza 3 uses such a thought to illustrate Christ's saving birth.

- What does the fragrance of Christ accomplish according to this stanza?
- Read 2 Cor. 2:14. How does this verse use the idea of smell or fragrance? (See also Eph. 5:2.)

- How does this message assure us of God's love for us no matter what the circumstances?

Stanza 4 is a prayer. Read over it one more time.

- How can it change our prayers to know that our Savior is one who "felt our human woe"? And who knows our weakness?
- How can our destination ("the bright courts of heaven" and the "endless day") make a difference in our journey?

Prayer

O God, You make this most holy night to shine with the brightness of the true Light. Grant that as we have known the mysteries of that Light on earth we may also come to the fullness of His joys in heaven; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Christmas Midnight).

From Heaven Above to Earth I Come

Lutheran Service Book 358 | study by Thomas E. Lock

Introduction

Few, if any, events in life are as treasured as births! What mother or father would not rejoice over the gift of a newborn son or daughter? The father is busy contacting everybody he knows (with the help of grandparents) and sharing the good news with them. He may even hand out cigars to everyone. When the heavenly Father's Son was born of the Virgin Mary, He sent forth angels to begin spreading the news of this miraculous birth.

Today's hymn describes the angelic message to lowly shepherds. The angels tell of the one birth that blesses all other births from sinful man.

- Why was Jesus' birth necessary? How does Jesus Christ's birth end up blessing other births?
- Why do angels, men, women, boys and girls rejoice at the news of Jesus Christ's birth?

Exploring the Scriptures

The Old Testament Reading, Is. 9:2–7, explains that people walk in darkness; this darkness is on account of being conceived and born in sin, plus all the sins we commit.

- According to verse 2, what has happened with the birth of Christ?

The Christmas Midnight Holy Gospel (Luke 2:1–14 [15–20]) proclaims the birth of Jesus. This hymn concentrates on the final eleven verses (10–20).

- Jesus was born in Bethlehem (which means “House of Bread”) in a manger, a feeding trough. How is the name of the city and His resting place related? Why would God have His Son born in a place related to eating? To which sacrament of Christ does this point?
- Throughout the Bible angelic appearances cause fear.

What words often are first out of their mouths (see v. 10)? *Angel* is a word that means “messenger.” What message does the first angel bring to the night-enshrouded shepherds?

- What song did the angels sing at Jesus' birth? Where do we sing this angelic song in the Divine Service? What did Christ's birth bring for heaven and earth?
- The shepherds immediately raced to the stable in Bethlehem to see the Savior. What did they do after seeing Jesus, Mary and Joseph? How did the hearers respond?
- How did Mary respond to the events of her Son's birth? What things do you treasure?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Martin Luther (1483–1546) was the Augustinian friar and priest whom God used to shine the light of the Gospel upon a Church which thought that salvation came by works (including monetary indulgences).

Luther published many theological writings, lectures and sermons. He also wrote hymns for the Church to sing. One of his beloved hymns (published in 1535) is “From Heaven Above to Earth I Come.”

- How did Luther's experiences in the church prepare him to tell the Good News of Christ Jesus' birth? How can you tell this Good News to those who do not yet believe in Christ as their Savior?
- What other hymns by Luther are included in *LSB* (see p. 1000)?

Few know that this hymn was not originally written for use in the Church's service. It was written for Luther's family celebration at home. The family kept the feast day both at church and in their home. There are varying accounts related to the first usage of this hymn in the Luther household. It appears that a man or boy, dressed as an angel, sang the first five stanzas, the angel's message. Then, all the others sang stanza 6.

Differing family members sang stanzas 7–13. Everybody except the “angel” sang stanza 14. Heaven and earth combined as the “angel” joined all the others in singing the final stanza.

- How important was Christ's birth to the worship life of the Luther family? How is the importance of Jesus' birth shown in your family's worship life?

- The Luther family also had a tradition of having a Christmas pageant in their home. How do you celebrate Christ's birth in your home?

Text

The first section of the hymn (sts. 1–5) paraphrases the angelic message. The words of the angel are sung by those selected (part of the congregation, the choir, or a soloist) as coming from his mouth (note the quotation marks). Stanza 3 tells how this newborn Son is also true God. This Son of God “hears your sad and bitter cry.”

Read Ex. 3:7–10, which is part of the LORD's calling of Moses.

- The people of Israel were enslaved in Egypt. To whom are all people enslaved until they become Christians?
- The same LORD who delivered the Israelites from slavery was then born to deliver all mankind from Satanic, sinful slavery. What would Jesus do to bring about your rescue?
- Jesus is described as doing something else (often wrongly attributed only to the Father) in stanza 5. What great thing had the infant Christ already done?

Stanzas 6 and 7 speak of the shepherds' joy and eagerness to see this newborn Savior. The shepherds left their sheep under the Lord's care in order to go see their Lord.

- Have you let the cares of this world dampen your joy in Christ's salvation for you?
- How do these stanzas relate to the joy Christians have at receiving the Lord's Supper?

Stanzas 8–12 have a single theme: The Lord who created all and rightly should have all glory, honor and riches was a baby who had nothing but humility and poverty. He had humbled Himself to save sinners from death and hell. He humbled Himself in fulfillment of the Scripture that the Seed of the woman would bruise the serpent's head while the serpent bruised His heel (Gen. 3:15). He came to bless all mankind, all nations, for He is Abraham's promised Seed (Gen. 22:18; Gal. 3:8–9, 15–18), who came to die in order to forgive every sin.

- How would Christ's ultimate humiliation be revealed later in His life?
- How has the Lord blessed you? What have you received because of His conception, birth, suffering, death, resurrection and ascension?

Stanzas 13 and 14 are in first person singular (my, I), but now they are each singer's response.

Read 1 Cor. 3:16–17. The temple was the dwelling place of the LORD.

- How is the Christian described? Who dwells within the Christian? Who has done the work to prepare your heart to be a residing place for Christ?

Read Titus 2:11–14, the Epistle for the day.

- What emotion should all Christians have because of what Christ has done?
- How can Christians not sing for joy (“Make a joyful noise” [Ps. 100:1]) with the angels: “Glory to God in highest heav'n, / Who unto us His Son has giv'n” (st. 15)?

Making the Connection

We are drawn to consider Christ's birth for our forgiveness, life and salvation.

- How do the following lines about His birth also apply to the Lord's Supper: “Come here, my friends, lift up your eyes, / And see what in the manger lies” (st. 7)?

In Closing

Jesus Christ was born into this life that sinners would receive forgiveness by His death. His death as both fully man and fully God grants forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. Those who believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior receive these promised blessings. Thus Christians can look with exceedingly great joy upon the births of their sons and daughters who will soon be baptized into Christ, taught His Word and led to the altar to receive His blessed body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. This is a treasure worth sharing with all!

- Christ has made a great exchange with us: He took upon Himself all the sinfulness and poverty of man in order to grant man forgiveness and every blessing. What lines in stanzas 8–12 best express this blessed exchange?

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 358, “From Heaven Above to Earth I Come.”

Prayer

O God, You make this most holy night to shine with the brightness of the true Light. Grant that as we have known the mysteries of that Light on earth we may also come to the fullness of His joys in heaven; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Christmas Midnight).

Come, Your Hearts and Voices Raising

Lutheran Service Book 375 | study by Thomas E. Lock

Introduction

Lutherans confess Jesus Christ in the Second Article of the Creed. Luther's Explanation to the Second Article begins: "I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord" (*LSB*, 322). What does it mean that we confess Jesus as Lord? Martin Luther explained that "the little word *Lord* means simply the same as *redeemer*. It means

the One who has brought us from Satan to God, from death to life, from sin to righteousness, and who preserves us in the same" (LC II 31).

- How did Jesus Christ become the Lord *for* mankind?
- How did His birth begin the process of becoming *your* Lord? To what event of redemption did Jesus' birth point?

Exploring the Scriptures

The angel Gabriel told Mary that she would bear the Son of God (Luke 1:26–38). When she questioned how she, a virgin, would be able to do this she was told that "nothing will be impossible with God" (v. 37). Luke 2:1–20 gives the account of that virgin birth of Jesus.

- Read Gen. 3:15 (NKJV). Seed is always associated with the male of a species. What does the term "her Seed" then imply? What was this "Seed of the woman" to do? How?
- Isaiah records the Lord's promise to Ahaz (Is. 7:14) that a virgin would conceive and bear a Son who would be called Immanuel, that is, "God with us." How did Jesus become Immanuel? How is He still with us?

At the fall into sin, man was placed into bondage to sin, death and the devil. The only way man could be rescued

was by the death of a sinless man. This also was impossible for man, but was made possible when God became also man with the birth of Jesus. Jesus was the one who offered Himself as a sacrifice on the cross to rescue man. The birth of Christ pointed ahead to His cross for you.

- Read Luke 2:8–14. What did the angel say to the shepherds about the birth of Jesus? What did the heavenly host sing about this birth?
- Read Luke 2:15–20. What did the shepherds find when they went to Bethlehem? What did they do while they returned to their flocks?
- Both the heavenly host and the shepherds glorified God for what He had done. Why? Why do all Christians rejoice at the birth of Jesus Christ?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Paul Gerhardt, the author of this hymn, has been called "A Theologian Tested in Satan's Sieve." He grew up and came to maturity during the Thirty Years' War. He was a pastor who was deposed from his call as a deacon (assistant pastor) of the Church of St. Nicholas in Berlin. He was deposed because he would not agree with the edict of Elector Friedrich Wilhelm that forbade the attack of the doctrine or confession of any other minister — which edict nullified the Lutheran Confessions. Gerhardt rightly refused to abide by this edict because it would stop him from pointing out the errors of the Reformed ministers and churches who confessed (among other errors) that the Sacraments are mere signs in which God accomplishes nothing (see Acts 5:29).

This hymn was published in the interim between Gerhardt's being deposed and his reinstatement as

arch-deacon of Lübben. Four of his five children had already died. His wife would soon die. He was a man well acquainted with grief, but he wrote some of the most joyous hymns for Christians to sing. All of these hymns confessed Christ crucified to rescue sinners.

- How could a person suffering so much in his or her life still have joy? What was the basis of Gerhardt's joy?
- Many people experience "holiday blues," sadness and loneliness during the festive holidays. What is the only true remedy for these blues?

Text

Psalm 98:1–4 implores the saints to break forth into joyful song to the Lord. What is the cause of this joy? This joyfulness is expressed in the first two stanzas of our hymn for today. Christ has descended to save us from "the wily foe."

- What was our need that Jesus came to help?
- Read Eph. 3:17–19. Why would Christ come down to save sinners?

Stanzas 3 and 4 sing of the rescue of man. Titus 2:11–14 also speaks of this salvation. From whom are we rescued? This salvation was prophesied of old.

Balaam, a prophet of Moab, was nevertheless used by God to speak true prophecies to Balak.

- Read Num. 24:17. Whose coming was prophesied? What would He do? How is this person and His works portrayed in stanzas 3 and 4? Who is the one who is ultimately defeated?
 - Christ rescued us from Satan. From what other bondage are you rescued?
- Stanza 5 sings of the “joy beyond expressing” that comes from the Christian’s grasping of the already mentioned blessings of Christ’s birth. What are those blessings?
- Read Titus 3:4–7. In this reading Christ’s birth is also linked to which Sacrament? What do people receive from Christ in this washing?

Making the Connection

Our hymn links Christ’s birth to His birth in us through Holy Baptism.

- What reasons do you have to give thanks for Christ’s birth in time and in you? What gifts were you given in His birth and in your Baptism?

Martin Luther wrote, “We must write the words ‘unto you’ with letters of fire into our hearts and welcome the Saviour’s birth most gladly” (Klug, 1:117). Christ’s birth is also linked to the Lord’s Supper, as can be seen by the similar words used by Luther regarding the Sacrament of the

- Read 1 Peter 1:7–8. What gift of God is required before we can have hope and joy?
- Martin Luther preached on Christmas Day 1524: “Whoever, therefore, desires to overcome and be safe from the devil’s poison and evil must rivet his attention on these wonderfully comforting words of the angel, ‘unto you is born a Saviour.’ When this conviction reigns in our heart the victory is already won” (Eugene F. A. Klug, ed., *Sermons of Martin Luther*, 1:111). What other word can be used to describe this conviction that reigns in the heart of Christians?

The final stanza is a prayer to the Christ Child. What do Christians ask for from this Child? What do Christians singing this hymn confess about Christ?

- Read Ps. 80:1–3, 7. To what is God compared? What is the request of the psalmist and those who pray this psalm?
- Read Rev. 7:17. What will Christ, the Lamb, do? How are His actions in this verse linked to the portion read from Psalm 80 and the final stanza of our hymn?

Altar, “the words ‘for you’ require all hearts to believe” (SC). In this Sacrament the baptized Christian is fed Christ’s true body and blood, given and shed for the forgiveness of sins, and also given strength for battle against “the wily foe.”

- Which words in Luther’s quotations are most important to you? Why?
- How does this trust that Christ was born in time and in you lead you to rejoice? Do you think you will be able to rejoice in times of trouble or persecution on account of your faith in Christ? Why or why not?

In Closing

Christians have many reasons to rejoice at the birth of their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Primarily, they rejoice because God took on flesh so that they — you — would be saved from the very real captors of sin, death and the devil. Therefore, rejoice and confess that His love “for you” has set you free.

- Sing or read aloud together “Come, Your Hearts and Voices Raising,” *LSB* 375.

Prayer

Close with the Collect of Christmas Dawn, noting that the reference to Mary’s purity is about her chastity:

Most merciful God, You gave Your eternal Word to become incarnate of the pure Virgin. Grant Your people grace to put away fleshly lusts, that they may be ready for Your visitation; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

We Praise You, Jesus, at Your Birth

Lutheran Service Book 382 | study by Steven P. Mueller

Introduction

Generations before us began their Christmas celebrations later than we typically do. It was not Christmas, but Advent, until Christmas Eve came — and then the celebration lasted for the twelve days.

In our day, Christmas celebrations don't begin on Christmas Eve; they virtually end there. Those who come to worship are most likely to come on Christmas Eve. Sadly, for many people, Christmas Day does not even involve going to church.

But those who focus on the reason for this celebration find something different starting on Christmas Day.

With fewer parties and gatherings, things become more relaxed. There is more time for peace and quiet, and more time to reflect. Who is this baby? What do these things mean for us today?

- How, specifically, is Christmas Day and the days that follow it a spiritual event for you and your family?
- How can we encourage people to reflect on the ongoing message of our Savior's incarnation?

Exploring the Scriptures

St. Luke's account of the birth of Christ is one of the best-known sections of Scripture. Read Luke 2:7–20

- How did the shepherds first react to the appearance of the angels? Was this an appropriate response? Why?
- Why do you think the angels appeared to the shepherds and not to other members of society that night? What message did the angels bring the shepherds? How are their words packed with meaning?

- Why did the shepherds go to Bethlehem? Did the angels tell them to do this? What two things did the shepherds do after they saw Jesus?
- What was the song of the angels (v. 14)? When do we sing this song today? How is this a good use of their words?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

In the late Middle Ages, just before the Reformation, the experience of ordinary Christians was quite different from today. They knew that they were supposed to go to worship and that holy things happened there, but most of the service was sung or spoken in Latin, not in the language of the people. While many of the words were the same as we use in the liturgy today, many worshipers could not understand them.

At that time, there were just three German songs that were allowed to be sung by the people in worship. At Easter they could sing “Christ Is Arisen” (*LSB* 459). At Pentecost they were allowed to sing a verse that later expanded into “To God the Holy Spirit Let Us Pray” (768). And at Christmas they sang a verse that eventually became the first stanza of this hymn. This verse was sung right before the reading of the Christmas Gospel. Martin Luther used this popular religious song and the other six stanzas. It was likely sung for the first time in 1523. “We Praise You, Jesus, at Your Birth” thus became the first Christmas song

of the Reformation, and began the Protestant heritage of Christmas songs and carols.

- Luther based his hymn on a popular song, but one with religious content. How can we use Christmas carols to help talk to others about Jesus? How can music help make bridges with others as we reach out with the Gospel?
- In his hymns, his reform of the liturgy and most of all in his Bible translation, Luther demonstrated the importance of keeping the Christian message in the language of the people. Is this work still needed in the world today? Is it still needed in our community? How can we help this work to be accomplished?

Text

This hymn simply retells the Christmas story and draws us in to help see the significance of what is happening and how it connects to our lives. Read Luke 1:31–35.

- One of the miracles of Christmas is the virgin conception and birth. What is the significance of this miracle? How is this stated in the first and third stanzas of the hymn?

This hymn highlights a number of contrasts related to the incarnation. Read stanza 3 of the hymn to see one of these contrasts.

- Read 1 John 1:1–2. Whom was Mary holding? Whom or what was Jesus holding? (See also Col. 1:16–17.)

Another contrast in this hymn involves the relationship of Jesus Christ to time. The “Light Eternal” (st. 4) enters “earthly time” (st. 5). God who has existed from all eternity was also a newborn baby. The Creator becomes part of His creation.

- What do these things tell us about Christ’s two natures: His full deity and full humanity? Is the human mind fully capable of understanding the incarnation? (See 1 Tim. 3:16.) Are we capable of believing it? What makes the difference?

Making the Connection

As human beings, we tend to look for and be impressed by big, spectacular things. While God can work in such ways, He often surprises us by coming in humility and in ways that do not overwhelm those who perceive them. When the angels appeared to the shepherds, they were frightened by the heavenly glory. But when God appeared in human flesh, the shepherds were able to see Him and worship without fear.

- How do we see God coming in humility and weakness in the life and ministry of Christ? Why was this important to the success of His work?
- God still comes to us in simple ways through ordinary means. How do we see this when we join together in worship?
- Does God work in similar ways in our day-to-day lives? How might we see God working in our lives through other people? How does He serve them through us?

In Closing

Responding to the angels’ message, the shepherds went to Bethlehem. There they saw Jesus and returned to their flocks. But they were changed. They glorified and praised God. They told others what they had seen and heard. Through their words, others heard of the Christ and marveled. Let the same things be said of us, that we who have seen the Savior respond by praising God and telling others. The song of the angels becomes our words of praise as we rejoice in God’s gift of a Savior who has been born to us: Christ the Lord.

- Sing or speak together *LSB* 382, “We Praise You, Jesus, at Your Birth.”

Prayer

Almighty God, grant that the birth of Your only-begotten Son in the flesh may set us free from the bondage of sin; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Christmas Day).

The Son of God Goes Forth to War

Lutheran Service Book 661 | study by Paul Gregory Alms

Introduction

Warfare is messy, hard, ugly and bloody. We do not often associate such things with the Christian life or with following Jesus who is our “Prince of Peace.” So we might be surprised how often such language occurs in Scripture to describe what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Christian history has also often looked to the image of armies and battles and enemies to proclaim the truth that we, as baptized Christians, are a part of the great struggle against sin and death and Satan. God in Christ wins the victory and gives us mercy, forgiveness and salvation in Christ.

Today’s hymn shows us Christ as a warrior who invites us to follow in His saving wake. It also bids us to follow St. Stephen and the apostles, martyrs and saints who have gone before us. They are our fellow soldiers, who through faith in Christ have attained that glorious heaven promised to God’s children.

- In what way do you think the Christian life is like warfare?
- How do we as Christians “follow” those who have gone before us?

Exploring the Scriptures

The Book of Revelation tells us of St. John’s vision of Jesus riding out to war with a bloody robe and a sword, surrounded by the armies of heaven. Read Rev. 19:11–16.

- List the ways Jesus is described in this passage and the actions He is taking. How would you describe the kind of portrait John is showing us?
- Why do you think Jesus is said to be clothed in a robe dipped in blood? Whose blood is it? What does this tell us of what kind of warfare and what kind of victory Jesus brings?

Read Luke 9:23–24, and notice in what ways Jesus tells us to follow Him.

- In what ways are we to follow Jesus?
- What does it mean to save our life by losing it?

Stanza 2 of our hymn is based on the story of St. Stephen and his death. Read Acts 7:54–60 to find out how St. Stephen was martyred.

- What did Stephen see as he was about to die? How is this vision a comfort to us Christians as we face our own death?
- List the ways the death of St. Stephen is similar to the death of Jesus.
- What do these similarities tell us about the Christian life and how we are to live (and die) as Christians?
- How do we as Christians “follow” those who have gone before us?

Read Rev. 7:13–14.

- What color of robes are these Christians wearing? How are they cleansed? How does this relate to the robe Jesus wore in Revelation 19?
- What is the great tribulation these saints have come out of?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Reginald Heber (1783–1826) was a prolific nineteenth-century Anglican hymn writer who wrote hymns for every Sunday in the church year as well as for many major festivals. Four of his hymns appear in *LSB*, including the very well known “Holy, Holy, Holy” (507). “The Son of God Goes Forth to War” was written for St. Stephen’s Day.

The aspects of this hymn that have drawn the most interest over the years are its call for Christians to imitate

their forebears in the faith, and the use of military imagery for the Christian life. The warfare language has long been controversial, and has led some to shy away from using the hymn.

- How do you feel about using words like *army*, *war* and *battle* to talk about being a Christian? Does it make you feel uneasy? Why or why not? Can you think of any other hymns that use the same kind of language?

- What parts of the Bible or Bible stories can you think of that use images and pictures of battle or warfare?

Text

This hymn repeatedly challenges the one who sings it to consider how it is we best follow Jesus and those saints who have gone before us. Stanza 1 first presents to us a picture of Jesus from Revelation 19 with a blood-red banner going forth to gain a crown, and asks who follows in His train.

- How does stanza 1 go on to answer that question?
- How is patiently bearing one's cross a form of battle and ultimately victory?

Stanza 2 focuses on Stephen's martyrdom.

- What was Stephen's eagle eye able to see beyond the grave?
- What actions in his dying moments are an example for us to imitate and to follow? Whom was Stephen himself imitating?

Making the Connection

Being a Christians is not easy. We face many difficulties and many challenges, both physical and spiritual. The Bible and this hymn give us a picture of the Christian life as a sort of parade, a procession marching toward heaven.

- Who is at the head of the procession?

In Closing

Our Christian warfare can be just like the real thing: messy, hard and ugly. But we do not fight alone.

Indeed, we do not fight in our own strength at all. The Son of God has fought for us, and all who follow Him are saved by Him and carried along by His cross even as they bear their own crosses following Him.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 661.

Christian tradition assigns martyr deaths to most of the twelve apostles (St. John lived to an old age in exile). The stories that come down to us say that they preached Jesus and died for it. They faced great suffering and pain and death.

- What attitude does the hymn writer say the apostles displayed toward "cross and flame" (st. 3)?
- Do you think you could have such an attitude?
- If so, where would such bravery come from?

The final stanza of the hymn ends with a prayer.

- How is such a prayer a good way to end a hymn that calls for us to imitate such great heroic Christians who have gone before us?
- Where do all our good works come from?
- How do we make it to heaven to join the "noble army" of saints?

- Does it change how we think about our troubles to know that Christ is victorious over all and goes before us? In what way?
- How does it help to know that many, many others have walked in the same path, bearing the same crosses as we do?

Prayer

Heavenly Father, in the midst of our sufferings for the sake of Christ grant us grace to follow the example of the first martyr, Stephen, that we also may look to the One who suffered and was crucified on our behalf and pray for those who do us wrong; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for St. Stephen, Martyr).

O Word of God Incarnate

Lutheran Service Book 523 | study by Bernard J. Schey

Introduction

Just north of downtown San Antonio, Texas, stands a college known as the University of the Incarnate Word. This school might just as well be called the University of Christ Jesus or the University of Immanuel (God with us) since “Incarnate Word” is another one of many names given in Holy Scripture for our Savior. The hymn is chosen for this day of St. John, Apostle and Evangelist, since he wrote beautifully in his Gospel of the fact that Jesus became flesh (incarnate) for our sake in the body of His mother, the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Exploring the Scriptures

To understand the use of “Word” in this hymn, read John 1, realizing that John’s readers knew that “Word” meant far more than the individual sounds we make regularly with our throats, mouths and lips.

- When God said, “Let there be light,” in Gen. 1:3, who was speaking? Was it Father, Son or Holy Spirit? Or all three?
- Why does John in the very first words of his Gospel make such a point of saying “the Word” was there at the creation?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Our author, William Walsham How (1823–1897), served as priest and bishop in England, laboring diligently in the Lord’s vineyard chosen for him. Yet he seemed to lack any personal ambition for glory or fame. In 1897 he was made Bishop of Bedford, a place that included some East London slums. He quickly endeared himself to the people there because he lived among them instead of in an outlying estate. They even called him “the omnibus bishop” because he rode in public transportation instead of a personal carriage.

- What does it mean for every person who has ever lived that Jesus moved to *our* “neighborhood?”
- St. John tells us in his Gospel (1:14) that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” The word “dwelt” used here means “to pitch a tent.” Does “tenting” with others imply equality?

In 1851 How became rector of Whittington, a farming village near the Welsh border, where he wrote all of his entire life’s output of 56 hymns.

- Read the first chapter of St. John’s Gospel. He uses “Word” three times in just the first verse. Does he refer to Christ Jesus each time?
- In John 1:14–17, St. John writes of the incarnation of the Word, that is, the eternal Word taking on human flesh as a man. In what way is this a glorious event in world history?

Today’s Gospel reading comes from the latter part of St. John, and in 21:24 he asserts that all he has written stands as a true testimony of what Jesus said and did.

- Why did John assert several times that he was an eyewitness reporting truthfully?

Several other names for our Lord Jesus come up in our hymn: Wisdom, Truth, Light, Master and Savior.

- How many other names can you find for Jesus?

- The Church of Jesus is manifested in all sizes of congregations. How do we know whether or not the Church is present in a group of people who call themselves believers in Christ?

Text

Another Bible passage that Bishop How no doubt had in mind for this hymn was Ps. 119:105, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” The use of “word” here, then, is also used to refer to the written Word of God. Note how the two references are featured in the first stanza: The first two lines refer clearly to Christ the Word, and the second two lines refer to the written Word of God.

- Is it easy to tell if “Word” refers to Christ Jesus or to the written Word of God?

The Word of God is a Means of Grace, a vehicle of forgiveness, for the Holy Spirit. He inspired that written Word to be put down (2 Tim. 3:16–17; 2 Peter 1:19–21), and by it He builds up the Church of Jesus (Eph. 2:19–21). Stanza

2 is devoted to praise of the Lord for this growth through the Word of God. Note the nautical imagery in this stanza (“chart and compass” and “life’s voyage” and “mists and rocks and quicksands”).

- How does a ship’s voyage remind us of life in Christ? See Genesis 6–9; Ps. 107:23–32; Luke 8:22–25; 1 Tim. 1:18–20.

Finally, stanza 3 shows another change of imagery wherein the Church is depicted as a “lamp of burnished gold.” Read about the lamps of Solomon’s temple in 1 Kings 7:48–50 and the ones in Rev. 1:12–20.

- What are these lamps according to St. John? Why is your congregation such a lamp?
- Why do we use candles in worship? See John 8:12.

Making the Connection

Holy Scripture convicts us of the intimate bond between Christ, the incarnate Word, the written Word of God and the Church. Jesus died for the life of His people, and we know the Church is His Body. See 1 Corinthians 12.

- Remember that the Holy Spirit caused the Holy Scriptures to be written (2 Tim. 3:16–17) and that He also brought about the incarnation of Jesus (Luke 1:35). How has the Holy Spirit instructed you through the Word of God?

- How do the Holy Scriptures serve as the only guide for faith and life? See 2 Tim. 3:16, where St. Paul describes how they can be used for our growth in Christ.

- Our congregations don’t always look or act like lamps of burnished gold, but never forget that the Word of Christ is more powerful than our weakness! See John 18:6.

In Closing

In the Book of Revelation, one of the final visions is of the new and perfect city of Jerusalem (Rev. 21). Adorned with precious stones, it is made of pure gold (v. 18). Bishop How looked forward to seeing this in person when he wrote this hymn, even as we do now. The written Word of God teaches us about the incarnate Word of God in Jesus, and in communion with the Body of Christ, we joyfully look forward to seeing the Lord face to face in heaven.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 523, “O Word of God Incarnate.”

Prayer

Merciful Lord, cast the bright beams of Your light upon Your Church that we, being instructed in the doctrine of Your blessed apostle and evangelist John, may come to the light of everlasting life; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for St. John, Apostle and Evangelist).

Sweet Flowerets of the Martyr Band

Found in *Lutheran Service Builder 969* | study by Marion Lars Hendrickson

1. Sweet flow'rets of the martyr band,
Plucked by the tyrant's ruthless hand
Upon the threshold of the morn,
Like rosebuds by a tempest torn;
2. First victims for the incarnate Lord,
A tender flock to feel the sword;
Beside the altar's ruddy ray,
With palm and crown, you seemed to play.
3. Ah, what availed King Herod's wrath?
He could not stop the Savior's path.
Alone, while others murdered lay,
In safety Christ is borne away.
4. O Lord, the virgin-born, we sing
Eternal praise to You, our King,
Whom with the Father we adore
And Holy Spirit evermore.

Introduction

When children suffer, their suffering almost defies the ability of words to express it. The violation of childhood innocence cries out for the avenging wrath of God. Yet the Christian knows that the cries of the innocent and the wrath of God's just judgment meet at the cross of the innocent Christ, who suffers and dies for the just and the unjust alike. Jesus is the Holy Innocent.

- Does naming the murdered children of Bethlehem "Holy Innocents" deny the doctrine of original sin? Why or why not?

Exploring the Scriptures

The Old Testament Reading for Holy Innocents portrays Rachel weeping from her grave over the bitter captivity of her children, Israel. Read Jer. 31:15.

- Was Israel innocent in suffering God's judgment of sending them into Babylonian captivity? Were they all guilty?
- Jeremiah 31 also includes the promise of the new covenant. Read verses 31–34. What hope do these words give to Israel while suffering captivity in Babylon?

The Gospel Reading records King Herod's vengeful act of slaughter following the secret departure of the Magi from Bethlehem to their homeland. Read Matt. 2:13–18.

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Marcus Aurelius Clemens Prudentius (348–c. 413), the author of today's hymn, was born after the Roman emperor Constantine had become Christian. He was appointed to a court office by the emperor Theodosius I, who had made

- Martin Luther spoke of two kinds of righteousness — the "alien" righteousness that belongs to Christ but becomes ours by grace through faith in Him, and the "proper" righteousness that belongs to us as a result of our own actions, inspired by faith in Christ. How does this distinction of the two kinds of righteousness aid in a discussion of "innocent suffering"?

- Here in the fourth day of Christmas festivity we hear how Jesus escapes death while the young boys of Bethlehem die. How is this different from the outcome of Good Friday? What comparison can be made between the sorrow that shatters Christmas joy, and the joy that brightens the darkness of Good Friday?
- In verses 14–15 the Holy Family goes down to Egypt. What was the final plague in Moses' day that set the Israelites free from Egyptian captivity (Ex. 12:29)? How does this foreshadow Jesus' sacrifice for us?

Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire in the late fourth century AD. Thus Prudentius himself lived after the time of the persecutions.

Tertullian (c. 160–c. 220), who had lived in the time of Roman persecution of Christians, had said, "The blood of

the martyrs is the seed of the Church.” So how could later generations of the faithful get a sense of that formative era when they themselves did not live with persecutions? Prudentius’ many hymns in honor of the saints and martyrs provided one possibility.

Henry Williams Baker (1821–1877), who translated into English Prudentius’ hymn, “Sweet Flowerets of the Martyr Band,” likewise desired to spotlight the martyrs of the Early Church. Although Baker too worked in a time and place of relative safety (mid-nineteenth-century England), he experienced intense conflict within the Church of England due to his support of the reforms advocated by the Oxford Movement.

- Do you think this hymn is easier to sing in a time of peace and prosperity for the Church, or in a time when martyrdom is likely? Why?
- If the hymn is easier to sing in a time of peace, what sorts of hymn texts could be sung to best serve in a time of conflict and martyrdom? Name two or three.

Text

The Victorian poetry in stanza 1 contrasts the innocence of the martyred children with the brutality of King Herod.

Making the Connection

In Holy Baptism a person becomes Christ’s own possession. The old order has passed away and all things become new. In Holy Baptism a person dies together with his old world, and out of the gift of grace in Holy Baptism, the “new man” arises to live with Christ before God.

- In what ways are the children martyrs “more than conquerors” (Rom. 8:37)?

In Closing

“Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord” (Ps. 127:3), and they ought to be acknowledged as such. Through children God allows us human beings to share in His act of creation. Yet in God’s blessed gift of children He also adds to their parents the burden of the care and nurture of these children. By both the burden and the blessing, God reminds parents and children that together they live and move and have their being in Him.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 969, “Sweet Flowerets of the Martyr Band.”

- How does the imagery of “sweet flowerets” and “rosebuds” express the youthful innocence of the murdered baby boys?

- Is the “tempest” that tears these flowers limited only to Herod’s vengeful storm?

Stanza 2 alludes to the 144,000 in the Book of Revelation. Read Rev. 14:1–4. In the hymn text the poet sees the children playing among that multitude around the throne of God, who hold palm branches in their hands. See also Rev. 7:9.

- How is the stanza, like the Book of Revelation itself, a word of encouragement and hope to us in this present life, especially in the face of the suffering of children?

Stanza 3 asks the larger question of what exactly was accomplished by Herod’s foul crime.

- How is the safe escape of the infant Christ a word of hope to us that evil does not have the last word?
- In what ways does Jesus’ escape foreshadow Easter?

The hymn closes with a doxology to God in stanza 4.

- For what do we praise God in this hymn?

- In the midst of death, how does the victory remain with life?

- What comfort can the observance of Holy Innocents’ Day bring to parents who have lost a child in death?

- What is the Good News here for a mother who repents of aborting her child?

Prayer

Almighty God, the martyred innocents of Bethlehem showed forth Your praise not by speaking but by dying. Put to death in us all that is in conflict with Your will that our lives may bear witness to the faith we profess with our lips; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for the Holy Innocents, Martyrs).

When Aimless Violence Takes Those We Love

Lutheran Service Book 764 | study by Paul J. Cain

Introduction

Pearl Harbor. 9/11. These events are etched in history as well as the hearts and minds of those who lived through them or suffered the consequences of those attacks.

The Holy Gospel for the Holy Innocents, Martyrs, Matt. 2:13–18, speaks of a very specific act of violence in and around Bethlehem, aimed at our Lord Himself. Read this text and then answer:

- Who was the real target of Herod's attack?
- Who were the "Holy Innocents?"
- Of what other modern situations does this text remind you?

Exploring the Scriptures

Read 2 Cor. 1:3–11.

- What is the initial message of verses 3–5? How can we still bless God in the midst of afflictions? How do we comfort others?
- Why were Paul and the other apostles and pastors afflicted? How is short-term suffering beneficial for the long term?
- In what ways do we/can we support those suffering from persecution for being Christian or preaching Christ?

Read 1 Peter 2:21–24; 4:12–19.

- When we suffer we can identify more with Christ's sufferings. Why is it helpful to know that we are not alone in our suffering?
- How is Christ our example in enduring suffering?
- How is Christ completely unique in His suffering for us and our salvation?
- How is the suffering described in 1 Peter 4:12–14, 16 different from the suffering described in verse 15?
- Why are we given to rejoice when falsely accused or during another kind of trial or time of testing?

- How does the 1 Peter 4 text ground our temporal struggles in an eternal "big picture?"

Read Ps. 9:9–10, or the whole psalm if there is time.

- Why is it important that the Lord is dependable, unchangeable and trustworthy in times of trouble?

Now consider the appointed Psalm of the day, Ps. 54:1–7.

- Psalms are not always happy songs, but reflect a variety of human emotions. How could this help during a time of sorrow and loss?
- What can we do when we sometimes "don't have the words," when we are in emotional pain or when we don't know what to say to other hurting people?
- Where do we find hope, vindication, salvation and forgiveness?

Read the appointed Second Reading for Holy Innocents, Rev. 14:1–5.

- How does the joy of the redeemed contrast with our sometime sorrow in this "valley of the shadow?"

Exploring the Hymn

Background

This hymn on loss was occasioned by real-life loss. Joy F. Patterson (b. 1931) was struggling with her father's decline and death due to Alzheimer's disease as well as her own vision concerns due to macular degeneration.

She had recently received correspondence from two other hymn writers who were struggling with violence and shootings in their communities. "[Carl] Daw sent me [Patterson] a commentary on a hymn when God says, 'No,' and we have to struggle with what the answer is."

A version of the hymn was adapted for an Oklahoma City memorial service following the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in 1995.

- If God answers the prayer of His Christians, and He does, what does the author mean by "when God says, 'No'"?
- How is the physical suffering of disease different from emotional pain? War? Terrorism? A mine collapse? How are these consequences of living in a fallen world similar?

- After contemplating your own mortality, does the Lutheran theology of the cross make more biblical and practical sense to you?

Text

Focusing on both random violence, one of the many ills plaguing modern society and other times of loss, this hymn seeks to point the grieving individual to the steadfast mercy and all-sufficient grace of God.

Found in *LSB*'s section "Hope and Comfort," Patterson's hymn comforts the mourning and troubled with the presence of the Son of God. The hymn draws the singer in by evoking hard memories of "aimless violence," "random death," and "wrenching loss" affecting us, our loved ones, and especially young people, echoing, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Heb. 13:5).

The robbing of "sight and strength and mind" (st. 2) will evoke thoughts of blindness, Lou Gehrig's disease and dementia, as well as Jesus weeping before raising Lazarus and His compassion for the mute, deaf and blind in His earthly ministry.

- Why is it comforting that Jesus is true man in addition to being true God?
- How could familiar prayers, hymns and liturgical texts and songs be helpful in pastoral care to those with Alzheimer's disease or dementia?

Faith sustained during times of trial is the theme of stanza 3, reminding us of Jesus strengthening bruised reeds and igniting merely smoldering wicks. Weak or strong, faith is still faith, holding on to Christ for dear life and into eternal life.

Jesus Christ, our great High Priest, is able to sympathize with us in our weakness because He "knew agony and loss" (st. 4). He abides with us to the end of the age.

- When we suffer, why is it so comforting that Jesus is able to sympathize with us?
- Compare God's testing of our faith to the devil's temptation in times of "agony and loss."

Patterson wrote a four-stanza hymn on Jan. 22, 1992. A letter from the Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod encouraged Patterson to write a fifth, final stanza as a prayer to the Lord for help in time of need.

The new concluding stanza (5) is a prayer for strengthened faith. It is a lament-filled request to God for "help," "To trust Your grace," "To rest our souls," and to "find our hope within Your mercy sure."

- Why is this a more theologically satisfying conclusion to the hymn?
- What would singers have missed without stanza 5?

Making the Connection

Martin Luther contrasted the theologian of the cross with the theologian of glory, finding hope, comfort and solace in who Jesus is and what He has done for us instead of the hidden things of God.

- How is the theology of the cross more biblical than a theology of glory?
- How is the theology of the cross more realistic and practical than a theology of glory?

In Closing

This hymn for times of loss could well have been inspired by the historic problem of the high infant/childhood mortality rate, a medieval plague outbreak, or the "plague" of cancer or juvenile diabetes. A car accident today has much in common with the overturning of a Conestoga wagon on the Oregon Trail, as the sinking of a ship on an Atlantic crossing is comparable to an airline crash.

While inspired by the problems God's people face in the modern world, this hymn will remain relevant for centuries to come because of its generic, universal language, ready to be filled with specific challenges of disease and violence of each new day.

- Read or sing together *LSB* 764, "When Aimless Violence Takes Those We Love."

Prayer

Almighty God, the martyred innocents of Bethlehem showed forth Your praise not by speaking but by dying. Put to death in us all that is in conflict with Your will that our lives may bear witness to the faith we profess with our lips; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for the Holy Innocents, Martyrs).

Let All Together Praise Our God

Lutheran Service Book 389 | study by Steven P. Mueller

Introduction

The world's celebration of Christmas seems to start earlier and earlier each year. Each year we hear messages about the true meaning of Christmas. Some of these get it right, but many speak only of human actions: giving, sharing or loving. Strangely, as soon as Christmas Day is over, the celebration ends. Attention turns to other things and Christmas is largely forgotten.

But in the Christian Church, the celebration continues. We celebrate the coming of our Savior at Bethlehem and His presence in our lives today. Jesus wasn't simply a cute

baby; He is God eternal who has come to save us. That is the truth that this hymn proclaims.

- Do you find it tempting to follow the world's example and "put Christmas away" as soon as the day is over? What advantages are there in prolonging our celebration through the 12 days of Christmas (from Christmas to Epiphany)?
- How can we respond to misleading messages about the "true meaning of Christmas"?

Exploring the Scriptures

This hymn reflects on what it meant for almighty God to become a human being. St. Paul considers the same theme in a text that many people think was one of the earliest Christian hymns. Read the hymn in Phil. 2:5–11.

- How do we know the "mind" or "attitude" of Christ according to these verses? What did He do for us?
- Jesus is God and is equal to His Father according to His divine nature (John 10:30) and therefore deserves honor, glory and worship. How did He demonstrate humility? Why?

- Philippians says that every knee will bow at the name of Jesus and every tongue will confess Him as Lord. When does or will that happen? Will every person see this as good news?

Paul writes similar words in 2 Cor. 8:9.

- What does this verse say about our Savior? What is meant here by poverty and riches?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

At the time of the Reformation, a mining town in Bohemia called Joachimsthal strongly supported Lutheranism. Over time they became known for their support of the arts. In particular, many hymns came from this area. A teacher named Nicolaus Herman (1480–1561) taught at the Latin school there. In time, he also became kantor of the local Lutheran parish and was well known for his musical ability. Herman developed a close relationship with his pastor, Johann Mathesius. Pastor Mathesius knew Luther well from his days as a student at Wittenberg. Herman often transformed ideas from Mathesius' sermons into hymns. He did this not so much for the congregation as for children in his school, believing that such hymns would nurture their faith.

Due to poor health, Herman retired early, but during the last 14 years of his life he wrote many hymns, including "Let All Together Praise Our God." This hymn was part of a larger collection of hymns that were based on the Gospel Readings for each day of the Church Year. Herman

published these, noting that the children and their fathers were his intended audience. Despite this intended use, several of Herman's hymns are still used in corporate worship today. Herman was a talented and accomplished musician, but he firmly believed that he was called to be a servant of the Word. His music was devoted to that purpose.

Text

While speaking of the incarnation, this hymn refers to Christ hiding His all-creating light (st. 3). Some Christians mistakenly think that only God the Father was involved in creation. Read Col. 1:16–17 and Heb. 1:2.

- What do these verses teach about who created and sustains the world?
- God our Creator chooses to leave His throne, become an infant small and lie in a manger (st. 2). Why does He do this? Do you think that some people struggle with the idea of God becoming a human being, and even an infant? Why?

- Stanza 3 says that Christ hides His light and cloaks the “splendor of His might.” Did He still have His divine power and glory? (See Matt. 17:2.)

Lutherans speak of the work of Christ in terms of His humiliation and exaltation. The humiliation consists of the time from His conception until His burial. During this time, Christ did not always or fully use the power, glory and divine prerogatives that were His by virtue of His deity. During the exaltation, which began with His descent into hell, He uses these however He sees fit.

- Why was this humiliation necessary for our salvation?

Stanza 6 calls Jesus the key and the door to paradise. Read Gen. 3:24.

- What kept human beings from Paradise? Why?
- Read John 10:7–9. What does Jesus call Himself? Does anything or anyone else deserve such a title? What does this mean?
- Read Is. 22:22 and Rev. 3:7. In what way is Jesus a key? Is there any doubt that this will change?

Making the Connection

St. John writes, “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called the children of God; and so we are” (1 John 3:1). In Jesus, we truly see love, for “while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). That was God’s eternal plan. Christ took on our human flesh from the time of His virgin conception. But it was at His birth that other human beings first set eyes on the incarnate God, our Savior. He has done this and so much more for us, providing

us with this “great exchange.” He takes our sin and gives us His righteousness.

- How does this truth enable us to face life’s challenges?
- Philippians 2:5 says that we should have the same mind among ourselves as is in Christ Jesus. He led a life of humble service, not seeking His own needs but ours. How does this affect the way we think of ourselves and others?

In Closing

While our society speaks of what it considers the “true meaning of Christmas” for a few days a year, we know something more. This infant is God Eternal, come in the flesh to bear our sins to a cross and open paradise to His people. Though we can never truly understand the mystery of the incarnation, in faith we believe. In thanksgiving we receive the gifts that He has won for us. How else can we respond but to praise the Triune God now and forever?

- Sing or read together *LSB* 389, “Let All Together Praise Our God.”

Prayer

O God, our Maker and Redeemer, You wonderfully created us and in the incarnation of Your Son yet more wondrously restored our human nature. Grant that we may ever be alive in Him who made Himself to be like us; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for the First Sunday after Christmas).

Across the Sky the Shades of Night

Lutheran Service Book 899 | study by Gregory Just Wismar

Introduction

“Across the Sky the Shades of Night” is one of five hymns in the “New Year” section of *Lutheran Service Book*. A New Year’s Eve service that “sees out” the old year and “sees in” the new is a long and honored custom in some parishes. Having a text such as *LSB* 899, called “this solid hymn” in the *Handbook to the Lutheran Hymnal* ([CPH, 1958], 90), supports the inclusion of such an annual service and invites

its use in congregations that do not have a New Year’s Eve worship tradition.

- Why can worship as the old year closes and the new year begins be especially meaningful?
- How might a hymn text such as that of *LSB* 899 supply fitting themes for a New Year’s Eve service?

Exploring the Scriptures

Many people find themselves in settings other than church on New Year’s Eve. Technically, New Year’s Eve is not a historical festival of the Church, unless it is understood to be in conjunction with the Circumcision and Name of Jesus, the liturgical celebration on January 1. Yet, for God’s people, there never really is a specific reason needed for worship. All times are good times — especially that time when one calendar year ends and a new one begins. The Book of Psalms reflects that sense of belonging “at all times” in God’s house that is the privilege of His people. Read Ps. 48:9–10 and Ps. 134.

- Where is the special location that the steadfast love of God is remembered?
- What time of day is mentioned as being a time for the people of God to be at worship in the holy place?

The psalmist relates that God’s people turn to Him for ongoing support, comfort and love. Read Ps. 121:1–4 and Ps. 68:19–20.

- What sense of comfort comes from knowing that the Lord “will neither slumber nor sleep” (121:4)?
- God is a God of salvation. What is included in the salvation that our God grants us?

New Year’s Eve is a time to think not only of the passage of time but also of the ongoing sequence of changing generations. Read what the psalmist says about that progression of humanity from era to era in Ps. 100:4–5; 102:25–28; 136:1–3.

- For how long does the faithfulness of the Lord endure?
- How does the psalmist express the truth that God is everlasting?
- What does the psalm writer call for from God’s people in response to His never-ending love?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

The hymn “Across the Sky the Shades of Night” was written in the nineteenth century, an era when there was a greater sense of the sacred nature of the turn of the year in the general society — and perhaps in the Church as well. It is interesting to note that in *The Lutheran Hymnal* of 1941 there were four hymns devoted to the observance of New Year’s Eve. By the time of *Lutheran Worship* in 1982, that number had been reduced to just one “New Year’s Eve” hymn; by the time of *Lutheran Service Book* even that one hymn was challenged regarding its inclusion.

In medieval times the celebration of New Year’s Eve centered around the Church. In some areas it was called “Watch Night” — a time when people would “wait and

watch” as the old year closed and the new one began. It was considered to be a special blessing to be in church at the stroke of midnight. Rev. James Hamilton (1819–1896), an English clergyman, captured the sense of that devotional experience of New Year’s Eve in his text, which originally had six stanzas. Think of times when Jesus directed His people to “Watch.” Read Mark 13:32–37 and Matt. 25:1–13.

- Why is New Year’s Eve an especially appropriate time to be watching for the return of the Lord?
- Why might deciding to live with a greater sense of watchfulness for the Lord’s coming be a good New Year’s resolution to make?

The text of the hymn “Across the Sky the Shades of Night” has historically been paired with the melody attributed to German Lutheran composer Nicolaus Decius (c. 1485–after 1546). He had written the melody to go with the words of his grand hymn of praise “All Glory Be to God on High” (*LSB* 947). Read the words of that Reformation-era hymn by Decius and then the New Year’s Eve text by Hamilton, which comes from the Victorian era.

- How does knowing the original words to the melody that supports the text of *LSB* 899 enhance an appreciation of the later hymn?
- What thoughts do the two hymn texts have in common? How do they differ?

Text

The first stanza of *LSB* 899 speaks of decking the altar of the Lord with light. In some European towns and villages, each New Year’s Eve service was preceded by a candlelight parade that ended at the church. The theme of light is often

associated with the Lord and the Lord’s house. Read 2 Chron. 4:7 and Ps. 27:1.

- How can the image of light, prominent in the Christmas and Epiphany seasons, be a fitting feature for a Christian’s New Year’s Eve observance?

In stanzas 2 and 3 the mercies of the Lord are recalled and His blessing is invoked. Read the words of the apostle John in 1 John 1:5–9.

- What mercies of God are spoken of in this passage? What mercies we have experienced might be added to the list?

In some congregations the names of the faithful who have died in the past twelve months are read as part of the New Year’s Eve service. Stanza 4 reminds us of the ongoing lives of the blessed dead; stanza 5 reminds us of the end of our earthly lives. Read 1 Thess. 4:13 and Rev. 7:14–17.

- What hope-filled themes are found in a church celebration of New Year’s Eve?

Making the Connection

There are people in the British Isles who believe there are places on earth that are closer to heaven than other places. They are called the “thin places.” In its special way, New Year’s Eve is a “thin place” on the annual calendar. It is a time for remembering the mercies of God that have occurred in our lives in the past twelve months while also anticipating that blessed time when time is no more. Jesus spoke to the repentant thief from the cross about being “in Paradise” that day (Luke 23:43). Revelation shares a preview of God’s heavenly rewards planned for the faithful (Rev. 2:7).

- How might New Year’s Eve be considered an especially holy time for us as God’s people?
- What unique and singular perspective on time do we possess as believers in Christ?
- How does our Baptism assure us that each day brings the start of a new day/new year/new time for us as the forgiven people of God in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:17–21)?

In Closing

Although the text of “Across the Sky the Shades of Night” specifically mentions New Year’s Eve, its themes are appropriate for each and every day. New Year’s Eve is an artificial time construct that actually has been observed at different points on the calendar. At one time March 1 was the first day of the year; at another time Christmas Day and New Year’s Day were the same day. As you sing the hymn, think of its themes in the wider sense. Recalling the mercies of God and asking His blessing on the times still to come is appropriate for each and every day of our lives!

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 899.

Prayer

Eternal God, we commit to Your mercy and forgiveness the year now ending and commend to Your blessing and love the times yet to come. In the new year, abide among us with Your Holy Spirit that we may always trust in the saving name of our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for New Year’s Eve).

Jesus! Name of Wondrous Love

Lutheran Service Book 900 | study by Bruce E. Keseman

Introduction

So, all you parents of boys, do you celebrate your sons' birthdays? Yes? That is good. As you know, we celebrate the birth of Mary's son every December 25. Did you also know that one week later we celebrate the circumcision of Jesus? So, parents, do you have an annual celebration of your son's circumcision? Do you sing that old favorite, "Happy Circumcision Day to You," while he blows out the candles on his Circumcision Day cake and opens his Circumcision Day gifts? You're kidding — you don't do that for your son? Why not?

For centuries, the Church has set aside January 1 to remember the Circumcision and Name of Jesus.

- What is the typical reaction of people when they hear that the Church celebrates Jesus' circumcision? Why?
- Why did your parents pick the name that they chose for you? Why did you pick the names you chose for your children?
- Do you know anyone who really fits his or her name? What is it that makes that person's name so fitting?

Exploring the Scriptures

Read Gen. 17:1–14 to help you understand Luke 2:21. As a sign of His covenant, God tells His people to circumcise their sons when those sons are eight days old. (By the way, they counted the day of birth as the first day.) So Mary and Joseph made sure Jesus was circumcised when He was eight days old. If Jesus were born on December 25, that would mean He was circumcised January 1.

- What does it mean for you that Jesus placed Himself under God's Law? See Gal. 4:4.

At His circumcision, Jesus also received His name. My parents could have named me Herman, Fritz, Joe — just about anything except Maher-shalal-hash-baz — and my life would not have been much different. For us, names are just labels. But in ancient times, your name told who you were and what you were all about. That's one reason why God often changed the names of His people when He changed their relationship with Him.

- Eve's name means "living," since she is the mother of all the living (Gen. 3:20). What does Abraham's name mean (Gen. 17:5)? How about Maher-shalal-hash-baz (Is. 8:3)?
- Can you think of other people in the Bible with descriptive names? Matt. 16:13–19 and, my favorite,

1 Sam. 25:25, are two examples. Why are their names fitting?

God's personal name is YHWH (Ex. 3:1–17). To help us honor but not misuse God's name, most English translations write "LORD" (with small capital letters) anytime God's name YHWH appears in the Hebrew text. Look at Gen. 17:1 or today's Old Testament Reading, Num. 6:22–27, to see examples where "YHWH" is translated as "LORD." The name "Jesus" — "Yeshua" in Hebrew — means "YHWH saves," or "the LORD saves." The name fits Him perfectly: it tells who Jesus is and what He came to do.

- How does it affect your life to know that Mary's eight-day-old son is actually the LORD, YHWH? Would it matter that He is God, if He weren't also the one who saves? Why or why not?
- Jesus is just as human as any of us. Do you think that people could tell that little Jesus was different from other children in Nazareth? Why or why not?
- Why does it matter to you that Jesus is 100 percent YHWH and also 100 percent human? (Consider that only God can save and only a human can be our substitute.)

Exploring the Hymn

Background

As you might imagine, there haven't been a plethora of hymns written for the Circumcision and Name of Jesus. So in the mid-1800s, William W. How (1823–1897), an Anglican bishop, scholar and hymnist, penned "Jesus! Name of Wondrous Love." He was a humble bishop, living

among the people in a poverty-stricken part of London, declining appointments to more lucrative bishoprics and riding in buses rather than carriages.

How wrote more than fifty hymns, including five in *LSB* (523, 677, 781, 816 [st. 3] and 900). His hymns have a reputation not so much for poetic beauty as for expressing

powerful but sometimes unexpected theological truths in everyday language.

- Do you think “Jesus! Wondrous Name of Love” fits the reputation of How’s hymns? Why or why not?
- What is your favorite hymn by William How? What makes it special to you?
- Have you met Christians who remind you of Bishop How? What makes them admirable?

Text

Read stanza 1 of *LSB* 900 and Phil. 2:9–11.

- When will every knee bow to Jesus? Why?
- Why might the hymn call “Jesus” a name of love?

Read stanzas 2–3, along with Luke 1:26–33 and Matt. 1:18–21.

- What words in the hymn reflect the Bible passages?
- Why does stanza 3 call us “fallen”?
- What promises are given to Mary and Joseph about Jesus? How do those promises show that He will fulfill the meaning of His name (YHWH saves)?

Making the Connection

Look at the Second Commandment and its explanation (*LSB*, 321).

- What are some sinful ways that we might use God’s name? What are some ways Jesus wants you to use His name of wondrous love?

The Second Commandment shows that none of us obeys God’s commands. Still, if we want to be in heaven instead of hell, we must have a perfect record of commandment-keeping. That is why Jesus’ circumcision is so important. “In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead” (Col. 2:11–12).

In Closing

The circumcision and naming of Jesus don’t seem like a reason for celebration, but we’ve learned that His circumcision is essential to our salvation, and His name is a constant reminder of our salvation!

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 900, “Jesus! Name of Wondrous Love.”

Read stanza 4 of the hymn and recall Luke 2:21.

- How does the hymnist describe Jesus’ circumcision?
- At what might the hymnist be hinting when he uses the word “cup”? See Luke 22:39–42. John 18:10–11 describes what happened later that night.

Read stanzas 5 and 6 along with Acts 4:5–12. Some people claim that it is hateful and disrespectful to tell unbelievers that Jesus is the only way to heaven. But if you are with someone in a burning building and there is only one way out — and you know that way out — is it hateful or disrespectful to tell the other person he is headed the wrong direction? We know the only way out of this world that is being destroyed, so we tell!

- Why is Jesus the only way to be saved? Is there anyone else who has died and risen for sinners?
- At the end of his life, Martin Luther said, “We are all beggars.” How might the closing line of the hymn help us understand Luther’s words?

- Read Gal. 3:27. What are you wearing over your filthy life that causes God to consider you as sinless as Jesus?
- What could you do to remind yourself each day that you are baptized and so wear Jesus?
- How might the little bit of blood that Jesus shed at His circumcision be a hint of the saving work He would do for you on the cross?

Jesus’ name tells us who He is — YHWH — and what He does — saves. When we were sinfully slipping toward hell with no chance of stopping our slide, Jesus came to our rescue in a livestock trough and then on a cross. In short, YHWH saved us.

- From what — and for what — did Jesus save you?
- How will that be evident in your daily life?

Prayer

Lord God, You made Your beloved Son, our Savior, subject to the Law and caused Him to shed His blood on our behalf. Grant us the true circumcision of the Spirit that our hearts may be made pure from all sins; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Circumcision and Name of Jesus).

Now Greet the Swiftly Changing Year

Lutheran Service Book 896 | study by Shawn L. Kumm

Introduction

As the words of Robert Burns' "Auld Lang Syne" drift into the night, weary eyes and perhaps less-than-clear minds long to see into a new year, wondering what lies ahead. Promises will be fresh. Resolutions of many kinds will be written down or seriously uttered, some to be kept, some to be broken. Fear may lurk behind a curtain of uncertainty. After the confetti is swept up and the Times Square crystal ball is put back into place, a clean calendar opens up to the writing down of great possibilities.

Exploring the Scriptures

From the beginning of time, from the moment God created light and called the time from evening to morning "day" (Gen. 1:1–5), both God and man have been marking time as if time is very important. The length of days of the pre-flood biblical people catches one off guard — Methuselah saw 969 new years go by before his eyes closed in death (Gen. 5:27).

Important things happened at the beginning of a new year.

- Read Gen. 8:13–22. List the important events that happened on the first day of the first month of that new year. Which event is deemed the most important?
- The children of Israel are in the wilderness. In the chapters preceding this reading, Moses is instructed in the smallest details how the tabernacle — the holy tent of the Lord — should be made, should look and should be used. Read Ex. 40:1–3. What now enters the tabernacle? Note the date Moses records for this event.
- The circumcision of a newborn boy occurred eight days after his birth. See Gen. 17:9–14 for the institution of

Built into the fiber of humanity is the desire to start over, to have a fresh beginning, to turn over the twelfth month of the year and look hopefully at the first day of the first month of a new year. Every culture and religion has a special day when a new year starts. Yet something — someone — is missing in the New Year celebrations of all religions except one.

circumcision. The circumcision of Jesus falls on the first day of the first month of our secular calendar. Read Luke 2:21. What is the purpose of Jesus' circumcision? At what point does the sacrificial blood of Jesus stop flowing?

New Year's Day in our culture looks festive and relaxing. The day is offered to most people as a day off from work. Eight days after the celebration of Christ's birth, the Western Christian Church pauses to remember something more important than champagne and football. The Circumcision and Name of Jesus starts off the year just right for the child of God.

- What does a new year look like according to Psalm 65? Keeping in mind the gracious, sustaining hand of God, compare Psalm 65 with the First Article of the Apostles' Creed (*LSB*, 322) and the Fourth and Fifth Petitions of the Lord's Prayer (*LSB*, 324), all with explanations. According to Psalm 65, which comes first, food or forgiveness? Why might that be?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

A bowl of white lentil soup waits on the table to be joined by tender fried fish, while a bowl of white lentils sits next to potato salad. A bit of sauerkraut rounds out the main meal. Sitting patiently in the kitchen is the much desired *žemlovka*. Mouths water at the aroma of the cinnamon-spiced, apple-filled pastry waiting to be served on St. Sylvester's Day.

Later, with chairs pushed away from the table, the family gathers around the piano for the singing of hymns. In place of the traditional loud blowing, clanging noises of the wooden *řehlačka* (ratchet), the Lutheran Vajda (Vie-dah) family opts for a final hymn from their father-pastor's home

country. "Now Greet the Swiftly Changing Year" sings out just the right tone to ring in the beginning of a fresh year with words of Christ's protective care and guidance.

Perhaps this describes a typical 1920s New Year's Eve for the then-young and later prolific hymn writer, Jaroslav Vajda. The author of more than 225 hymn texts and translations that appear in more than 60 Christian hymnals and printed collections on five continents, Dr. Vajda also served as pastor, teacher, writer and worship consultant. With few hymns available to be sung for the new year, Vajda set about translating a family favorite, a Slovak hymn from the seventeenth century. First appearing in the LCMS

Worship Supplement (CPH, 1969), the hymn has undergone several revisions.

Text

Jaroslav Vajda places into our mouths joyous, biblically rich words that gladden our hearts at the end of one year and the beginning of another.

- Stanza 1: How do joy and penitence go hand in hand? Read Luke 5:29–32 and Heb. 12:1–2. Who and what are at the center of all penitence and joy? What is the work of the Law and of the Gospel in penitence and joy?
- Stanza 2: Read Luke 2:21. How does remembering the circumcision of our Lord Jesus, which comes eight days after Christmas and falls on Jan. 1, cause us to rejoice? The rite of circumcision is fulfilled by Jesus, but read Acts 7:51. According to Stephen’s caustic sermon, of what are all of us to be aware?
- Stanza 3: Continuing from Luke 2:21, Vajda takes us to the “Name of names.” Read Matt. 1:21; Luke 1:31; Psalm 138:2; and Phil. 2:9. How is sin’s war ended by the name our Savior bears?
- Stanza 4: Read Mal. 3:10 and Ps. 31:19. God loves to give — and give and give and give some more. Based on previous years, how do you know the Holy Trinity will keep His promise to give you “a whole year’s needs”?
- Stanza 5: Read Ps. 73:3. All may not seem fair in this life. The wicked gain in prosperity and the righteous do not. But in what are God’s people prosperous? See Ps. 128:5 and Mary’s song of praise, the “Magnificat,” in Luke 1:46–55. What does it mean to wish someone a “prosperous new year”?
- Stanza 6: Vajda returns our memories to the song the angels sang to shepherds, a song that we still sing to this very day, primarily in our liturgies. Read Luke 2:8–14. How does the refrain of this hymn reflect the words of Luke 2:20?
- Stanza 7: Read Ps. 17:6; Ps. 86:1; and Ps. 102:2. What is the psalmist’s repeated plea? Recall the liturgy for Holy Baptism on pages 268–71 of *LSB*. With what is the person traced? Does this expire in the Christian’s life? Go throughout the year marked by Jesus, your Savior!

Making the Connection

“Rejoice! Rejoice! With thanks embrace / Another year of grace.” As your year proceeds, recall each day the grace of Christ Jesus that has brought you this far and will see you through to heaven.

- Read 1 Peter 3:18–22. How does Noah’s “new year” become your “new year?”

In Closing

No matter what month of the year or day of the week today is in your life, now is another new day of grace under the watchful, loving eye of your Lord. You are carved in His nail-scarred hands and He holds you through the trying times and joyous moments alike. You are baptized in the stream of eternity, in the everlasting, ever-living name of Jesus. Rejoice! Rejoice! With thanks embrace another year of God’s grace.

- Read together or responsively Psalm 65.
- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 896.

Prayer

Lord God, You made Your beloved Son, our Savior, subject to the Law and caused Him to shed His blood on our behalf. Grant us the true circumcision of the Spirit that our hearts may be made pure from all sins; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for the Circumcision and Name of Jesus).

Prayer

Eternal God, we commit to Your mercy and forgiveness the year now ending and commend to Your blessing and love the times yet to come. In the new year, abide among us with Your Holy Spirit that we may always trust in the saving name of our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for New Year’s Eve).

From East to West

Lutheran Service Book 385 | study by Larry A. Peters

Introduction

Christmas is a season of paradoxes: A virgin bears a son ... the Lord of creation finds no room in the inn ... God delivers His Son and the world sleeps ... angels announce it to shepherds ... the King born to sit on David's throne is welcomed by Magi ... the King of kings is born to be the servant of all. This Christmas hymn picks up many of these paradoxes and puts them into our mouths to sing. Though we want to reconcile these seeming contradictions so that things are nice, neat and tidy, the Church is called simply to confess them and own them by faith.

Exploring the Scriptures

The Readings appointed for Christmas 2 and the Visitation are very different. Christmas 2 begins with Joseph, son of Jacob, bringing his family to Egypt for a surprise reunion (Gen. 46:1–7). The suffering of Joseph had a godly end—faith that trusts God's gracious will is vindicated (1 Pet. 4:12–19). Matt. 2:13–23 records another Joseph, the carpenter of Nazareth, being warned and taking Mary and Jesus to a safe refuge in Egypt while a crazed and fearful Herod orders a murderous rampage. In contrast to this, the Visitation begins with Israel's dead stump and the shoot God sends forth in His Son (Is. 11:1–5). It moves to the call to trust the Lord and remain patient in tribulation (Rom. 12:9–16). In the Gospel, Luke records the details of Blessed Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth (herself surprised to be pregnant with John the Forerunner). It culminates in Mary's song, the Magnificat (Luke 1:39–56).

- What do we find in common in both pericopes?
- How did God turn Joseph's suffering into good?
- How did God protect His Son and the Gospel from His enemies?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Little is known about Coelius Sedulius (c. 450), the author of this hymn. He probably lived in Rome. A convert to Christianity, he most probably remained a layman (though some suggest he was ordained). Though his writings were well known and popular, only two of his hymns survive. This hymn text is part of an acrostic poem of twenty-eight stanzas arranged according to the Latin alphabet. We have an eighth-century edition of the full text. The poem gave

The Hymn of the Day for both the Second Sunday after Christmas and the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin to Elizabeth is an old one. As we sing it, we add our voices to the myriad of those who came before us, who met the mystery of the incarnation with joyful faith.

- How do we fulfill the promise of these words today?
- Look out at the Church assembled on Christmas Eve and see there the assembly of nations at the manger. Where do we fit into the words?

- How does Mary's song tie the two events together?
- How did God vindicate those who trusted in Him?

Mary placed herself under God's merciful care when reason and emotion would have led her to panic and fear. We too face suffering and upset, things that defy reason or explanation, and inspire doubt and anxiety.

- Can we trust God in all things?
- Will God really work all things for our good?
- Is this what we meet in Bethlehem? Is this exactly the example of God working good from what the world would write off as something to be avoided?
- Joseph and Mary trusted in the Lord when everything else said to fear. They were moved by this trust to joy in God's promise. How do we meet life's challenges with the same holy joy in the Lord?

birth to two hymns: *LSB* 399, "The Star Proclaims the King Is Here" and *LSB* 385, "From East to West."

The hymn was well known, appointed in the prayer book of priests (breviary) for Christmas. *LSB* 385 is the second version, by translator John Ellerton (1826–1893). The translation is more thematic than literal.

- How does it feel singing a hymn that was sung for more than 1500 years prior to your singing it today?

Text

“From lands that see the sun arise / To earth’s remotest boundaries” became “From east to west, from shore to shore ...” when the Latin became an English text. Like the call of the psalmist, this hymn summons the singer to awaken to God’s merciful purpose hidden in everything that happens and to respond with the joyful praise of those who trust He knows what He is doing.

- How is Christ’s birth an event for the whole world and not merely for those who believe in it?
- “The holy child whom Mary bore” (st. 1) is not the Savior of the few but the Redeemer of the whole world. How does the appearance of the Magi emphasize this from the very beginning of the Gospel’s story?
- Note the paradox of Christ the King, who is born of a lowly virgin and laid in a manger (Luke 1:35; 2:7). What does this say about our Lord? His ministry? The promise of salvation?

The heart of the Christmas message is the great mystery of the incarnation. God takes flesh, wears a diaper and nurses at Mary’s breast. This is a scandal to many, a conundrum to some and a stumbling block to others. Note the way the hymn avoids explaining and instead confesses this great mystery.

- Can one confess Christ without explaining the unexplainable mystery of the incarnation?
- How do we confess this in the creeds?

Making the Connection

This hymn confronts us with the fact that Christmas is not just for Christians. We say it in the Nicene Creed: “who for us men and for our salvation He came down from heaven ... (LSB, 191). It is one thing to say it but another to meet it in the diverse faces of those who gather as the children of God. The cross is the means through which the many are made one and redemption is made for all people.

- Can you get to the cross without the manger? Can you get the manger without the cross?

In Closing

So we meet the paradox. God comes in flesh through the Blessed Virgin Mary. He is come for all or He comes for none. The Virgin sees this glory and calls us to stand before the manger, recognizing God in flesh and blood, rejoicing in the grace given to us there, and trusting in Him for our salvation. Here is the shepherd the Father sent to save His people, and from east to west we come.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 385.

- Notice stanza 2; instead of explaining the how, why is confessed: “His fallen creatures all to save.”
- How do we own this mystery?

God cannot be contained in temples or buildings built with hands, but He has chosen to live in our flesh and bone — born like us in every way except sin. Mary is the “chosen vessel” (st. 3) of Christ’s humanity — He takes His flesh from her.

- Compare Luke 1:47–50 with stanza 3. How are they parallel? What is Mary’s greatness (Luke 1:49)?
- Early Christian heresies tried to downplay Mary’s role. Orthodox Christianity has refuted this, insisting that Mary is *Theotokos*, God-Bearer, Mother of God. How does this confess the biblical truth? Is this for Mary’s benefit or does this protect the truth of the Son of God and His incarnation?
- What kind of honor to Mary detracts from Jesus and dishonors her own words? What kind of honor rightly honors both Mary and Jesus?

Note the unlikely visitors to the manger: shepherds. This is no accident. Christ was born to fulfill God’s promise to shepherd His people (Ezek. 34). “He will tend His flock like a shepherd” (Is. 40:11).

- How important are shepherds to this story?
- What comfort comes from knowing Christ was born to shepherd God’s people and lead us home to Him?

- Is there a Savior who is not born of the Virgin by the Holy Spirit? Is there a Savior incarnate for only the few? Does Christmas ultimately lead to Calvary?
- To call Mary blessed is to believe in Jesus her Son. In what way is Mary, who first believed in Christ, the mother of all believers?

Prayer

Almighty God, You chose the virgin Mary to be the mother of Your Son and made known through her Your gracious regard for the poor and lowly and despised. Grant that we may receive Your Word in humility and faith, and so be made one with Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for the Visitation).