



THE WORD IN

Song

Hymn of the Day Studies for

ADVENT



THE
LUTHERAN CHURCH
MISSOURI SYNOD

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The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod
St. Louis, MO 63122-7295
lcms.org/worship

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Savior of the Nations, Come

Lutheran Service Book 332 | study by Steven P. Mueller

Introduction

Even before Thanksgiving is over, the world around us starts turning its attention to the Christmas celebration. Many people grow concerned that the holidays are coming quickly. Merchants are hoping that many shoppers come to their stores and that they are in a buying mood. Secular Christmas carols proclaim that Santa Claus is coming to town. We prepare our homes for relatives or friends who may be coming. Many people find that all of these preparations make them feel the effects of stress. Many people cry out, “I’m just not ready!”

But today is the beginning of Advent — the first Sunday of a new Church Year. We turn our attention to a different coming: the coming of Jesus.

- How do you prepare when you know that someone you care about is coming to visit?
- How can we prepare, both individually and together, for the coming of Jesus?

Exploring the Scriptures

John’s Gospel begins by talking about the coming of Jesus and what this means. We will read this passage on Christmas Day. Anticipating that celebration, read John 1:1–14, 18.

- What title does John give Jesus? What does he say about Jesus that reveals His divine identity? What things do we receive from Jesus that we can find nowhere else?
- Verse 14 speaks of Christ becoming human. The Greek word for “dwelt among us” comes from the word for “tent” or “tabernacle.” What would this have implied to John’s readers (see Ex. 40:34–35 and Rev. 21:3)?
- How is Jesus the light? What does that mean?
- What two reactions to Jesus does John describe? Do we still see these reactions today?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

In the fourth century, a lawyer named Ambrose was appointed Roman consul of Liguria and Aemilia. He moved to Milan, Italy, to take up this appointment, little knowing how his life would soon change. Not long after Ambrose’s arrival, the bishop of Milan died. Since this bishop had sadly allied himself with a group of heretics, there was great concern about who the next bishop should be. While a great crowd was debating what should be done, someone shouted out that Ambrose should be bishop. Though at the time he was a layman and a catechumen, Ambrose was elected as bishop of Milan and compelled to accept the position. He was consecrated bishop just a week after he was baptized.

This zealous man did much for Christianity. He introduced the Eastern Church’s custom of hymn singing into the Western Church and is known as the father of Latin hymnody. He also was very influential in battling Arianism, a heresy that claimed that Jesus was not fully God and not equal with the Father. This was the teaching that had beguiled his predecessor. Because of this concern, and his pastoral heart, Ambrose was very interested in the instruction of the laity. He combined his love of music and theology to craft songs that proclaimed Christian truths simply. His

hymn “Savior of the Nations, Come” tells the story of the incarnation of the Son of God, who is truly and fully God.

Nearly 12 centuries later, Martin Luther, like Ambrose, was concerned for the layperson’s understanding. He also joined Ambrose in thinking that music was a powerful tool for education. Luther said that he gave music the “highest place, next to theology” because he saw just what a beautiful and powerful thing it was. Luther probably translated this hymn into German for Advent 1523. His translation appears in the two earliest Lutheran hymnals of 1524.

To this day, Christians from a variety of backgrounds continue to sing this powerful Advent hymn that tells the story of the incarnation in a very straightforward way while reinforcing biblical teaching.

- How can music be a powerful tool to help people understand biblical teaching?
- What are your favorite Advent hymns? Do these help prepare us to meet our Savior?

Text

This hymn refers to Jesus as the “Virgin’s Son” and the “Woman’s offspring.” He was not conceived in the normal human manner but rather by the Spirit of our God (st. 2).

- Read Is. 7:14. How was the birth of Immanuel a sign? Read Luke 1:31, 34. When was this sign truly fulfilled? How do Mary's words indicate the truly miraculous nature of this event?

"Immanuel" means "God with us." This hymn picks up the very focused language of the Nicene Creed, calling Jesus "God of God" and also identifying Him as "fully man." The Creed calls Jesus "God of God" partly to combat the Arian heresy that Ambrose was also fighting against.

- Read 1 John 5:20. Why was it important to maintain that Jesus is truly God? Read Heb. 2:14–18. Why was it necessary that our Savior be truly human?

Stanzas 3 and 4 of this hymn describe Jesus in kingly terms. A king's presence transforms the place where he is. So God was on His throne in Mary's womb (st. 3), and she was God's "pure and kingly hall" (st. 4). Read Luke 1:42–44. When did the incarnation of Jesus begin? Why is this important? What does this suggest about the beginning of human life?

- Stanza 7 describes Christ as the light shining in the darkness. Read Matt. 4:16 and Luke 2:32. Who is that light for? What effect does it have in the world?

Making the Connection

Jesus, the Son of God, was born in Bethlehem and is called the king of the Jews. But God's eternal plan included more than the Jews. It was for all peoples. Read Is. 49:6 and Acts 26:23.

- What does Isaiah say is "too light a thing"? Why?
- How is Jesus the Savior of the nations? How will these nations hear of His work?

In Closing

We prepare for many things in this season, but the most important thing is to prepare to meet Jesus, our Savior and King. He is the Savior of the nations — and He is our Savior. By faith we now live in His light and rejoice in His gifts.

- Sing or read together *LSB* 332, "Savior of the Nations, Come."

Prayer

Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come, that by Your protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Your mighty deliverance; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for the First Sunday in Advent).

Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending

Lutheran Service Book 336 | study by Kim L. Scharff

Introduction

Every now and then we hear of someone who claims to know when our Lord Jesus Christ is going to return. Though Jesus Himself says that the day and hour of His return is known only to the Father (Matt. 24:36), still there are those who, from time to time, insist that they know the unknowable. Of course, they are inevitably proven wrong.

An interest on the part of the Christian in the return of Christ is, however, a healthy thing. Jesus encourages us to

give attention to the “signs of the times,” that is, to pay heed to the things going on around us in our world, for they are indicators and reminders that He will return “to judge the living and the dead” (Apostles’ Creed).

- Would you like to know the precise day and hour of Jesus’ return? Why, or why not? Would knowing that day and time be beneficial for your faith, or might it actually be harmful?

Exploring the Scriptures

The Readings for Advent 2 are all focused, more or less, on the return of Christ at the end of the age, and help us better appreciate the text of our hymn. Read Mal. 4:1–6.

- How does the prophet describe the judgment that will come?
- What hope, however, does he hold out, in verse 2, for those who fear the Lord?

In the Epistle Reading, St. Paul speaks of a particular use of Holy Scripture, which, at that point in time, would have been the Old Testament. Read Rom. 15:4–7.

- According to the apostle, how are we now to use the Holy Scriptures? What is the nature of this encouragement, especially as we await the return of Christ?

- Note Paul’s emphasis on the harmony that is God’s gift to His waiting people. How does the remainder of the Epistle Reading, Rom. 15:8–13, illustrate that harmony? What role is played by the creeds of the Church in building and illustrating that harmony, and why is that important as we await the Lord’s return?

In the Gospel Reading, Jesus clearly describes the days that precede His return. Read Luke 21:25–36.

- There is both warning and promise in this reading from Luke. Describe each. Where do you see examples, especially of the warnings and dangers, in our world today?
- What is the clear hope given to Christians in these words?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

The text of this hymn, as it finally reaches us in *LSB*, has a somewhat complex history. The author, Charles Wesley (1707–1788), began with a hymn text by John Cennick (1718–1755), but then all but rewrote Cennick’s hymn. After Wesley’s publication of his text in 1758, Martin Madan (1726–1790), a London hospital founder and chaplain, further edited Wesley’s text, restoring some of Cennick’s original work. However, the text, as we have it in *LSB*, is largely that of Wesley, with a few important alterations.

Wesley was a prolific author of hymn texts, producing over 6,000 of them. The majority of those texts are no longer heard, but some have become among the most popular hymn texts ever written, being used in hymnals of many Christian traditions. Wesley’s best hymns are rich in theology and warm in evangelical character.

- *LSB* contains several Wesley texts. Take a quick look at a few of them: 338, 380, 457 and 469. Ask the following questions about each: (1) How is the Gospel explicitly portrayed? and (2) How is Christian hope illustrated?

Text

In keeping with the theme of Advent 2 in the One-Year Lectionary, the entire focus of the hymn is on the return of Christ at the end of the age.

- While the Advent season, as well as the close of the Church Year, is the time when the return of Christ is in focus, why is this theme important to us each day of our lives?
- In the Lord’s Prayer we pray, “Thy kingdom come.” In the Large Catechism, Luther says about the Second Petition, “From this you see that we do not pray here for a crust of bread or a temporal, perishable good. Instead, we pray for

an eternal inestimable treasure and everything that God Himself possesses” (LC III 55). What do you think God has in store for us on that day when Jesus returns?

Stanzas 1 and 2 draw on references, fittingly, from the Book of Revelation. Read Rev. 1:7 and 11:15.

- Is Christ’s return going to be isolated to a particular place or group of people? How is the answer to this question a confirmation of what the hymn states in stanza 2? While this fact may fill the heart of the unbeliever with terror, what do these words say to you as a Christian, especially in light of Rev. 11:15?
- Read 1 Peter 3:18. What comfort does this verse give you? What is your hope when Christ when returns?

Stanza 3 describes what our Savior endured that we might be His redeemed, beloved children, who look forward, with great anticipation, to His return.

- What are the “tokens of His passion?” The disciple Thomas often gets a “bad rap” for wanting to see and

touch the Savior’s holy wounds. But what will we see upon our Savior’s return? What is the significance of the fact that, even in eternity, Jesus will still bear “those glorious scars”?

Stanza 4 tells us that, when Jesus returns, we will worship like we have never worshiped before! Again, allusions to Revelation are prominent in the hymn text. Read Rev. 5:6–14 and 7:9–12.

- Describe the worship of heaven that is revealed to St. John. Do you notice any elements of the church’s liturgy with which you are familiar? Note the prominence of “Amen.” Recall Luther’s explanation of the “Amen” in the Small Catechism. Why is “Amen” so fitting in describing the worship that will take place on the day of our Savior’s glorious return?
- Read St. Paul’s perspective on that great day in Phil. 2:9–11. As we prepare for Jesus’ return in glory, what do the apostle’s words in verses 9 and 10 teach us about what the Church’s worship on earth now is to be like?

Making the Connection

With all the trouble our world faces at present, this hymn speaks of that day when all trouble will cease, and the glorious, eternal reign of Christ will begin. And so, the message of this hymn really transcends its use in the season of Advent.

- How might this hymn serve, especially, the mission effort of the Church, its reach into the world of unbelief? What

other times during the Church Year, or events in the Christian life, would this hymn well serve?

- In a world that offers little real peace, how does this hymn help give us the peaceful confidence that the Collect for Peace in the Office of Vespers (*LSB*, 233) describes?

In Closing

Contrary to those who wish to look into the mind of the Lord and find the day and hour of Christ’s return, Christians have no such need. We have the sure and certain promise of God that, when the appointed day and hour arrives, our Lord Jesus Christ will return. He will return visibly, and He will return to redeem His faithful children, once and for all, from this world of sin and sorrow. This great hymn of the Church, “Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending,” helps us both to confess and to be ready for that day!

- Sing or read together *LSB* 336, “Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending.”

Prayer

Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Your only-begotten Son, that by His coming we may be enabled to serve You with pure minds; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Advent 2).

Hark! A Thrilling Voice Is Sounding

Lutheran Service Book 345 | study by Steven P. Mueller

Introduction

“Hear ye, hear ye!” the town crier yelled, drawing attention to himself. He then began to proclaim the news that he was commissioned to bring.

“Extra! Extra! Read all about it!” yelled the person selling newspapers on the street, calling customers to buy a copy.

“Act now!” “You may already be a winner.” “Click here for details.” Such bids from the media of our day seek our attention and action.

Though the methods change, many different voices call out for our attention. They all ask us to listen to them and follow their counsel. But in the midst of all the voices we

hear comes a different voice with a more significant message: “Prepare a way for the Lord!”

The hymn we study today brings together many of the themes of Advent, including the message of that herald John the Baptist.

- There are many voices we hear, some of which we should listen to. What voices threaten to distract us from God’s call? How can our attention be focused so that we hear what God wants us to hear?
- How are the themes of Advent different from what we hear in our society’s “holiday” celebrations?

Exploring the Scriptures

One of the themes addressed by this hymn is the contrast between light and darkness. Read Eph. 5:8–14.

- What does this passage mean by darkness? What are the “unfruitful works of darkness” (v. 11)? What place do darkness and its works have in our lives?

- What does it mean to be “children of light”? What is the source of our light? What effects does this have in our lives?
- Read part of the Benedictus, the song of Zechariah, in Luke 1:76–79. While praising God for the gift of a son, what does Zechariah say about the Light which John will proclaim?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Following customs developed in the early Christian Church, many generations of Christians adopted a detailed pattern of worship each day. A system of seven services was developed. These services were used at various times of the day and night. Many thought that this pattern was reflected in the psalms. For example, Ps. 119:164 says, “Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous rules.” Though not everyone would participate in all of these services, they were diligently followed in monasteries. The Lutheran Confessions rejected the “babbling of the seven canonical hours of prayer” that turned worship into a work (LC preface 3) and cautioned that such a system was a human invention and it was not sinful to omit such services (AC XXVIII 41). Still, Luther urged that Christians be involved in daily worship and devotions, and Lutherans have continued to use several of these offices, including Matins, Vespers and Compline.

In the Middle Ages, as the community gathered for one of the morning offices known as Prime, an Advent custom emerged. On the First Sunday in Advent — the first day of the new Church Year — they would sing “Hark! A Thrilling

Voice Is Sounding.” From then until Christmas Eve, at each service of Prime, they would sing this hymn because it summarized the themes of Advent and called the singers to prepare themselves for their Savior.

Though we do not know the author of this old hymn, it continues to call people to hear the Advent message. Today, many Christians hear this hymn as one of the songs often sung in the famous Service of Lessons and Carols that is broadcast worldwide from King’s College Chapel in Cambridge, England, every Christmas Eve. It remains a powerful witness to the message of Advent.

- While the chief service of the congregation is the Divine Service, why is daily worship important? How can we make worship part of our daily lives?
- What value do you see in helping people see the themes and purpose of the seasons of the Church Year? What can our congregation do to bring greater awareness?

Text

This hymn opens by talking about a “thrilling voice.” Read Is. 40:3–5 and Luke 3:2b–9.

- What is the thrilling voice? What message does it bring? How would the words of Isaiah's prophecy have heightened excitement when people saw and heard John?
- John the Baptist came to prepare the way for the Messiah. How did he prepare people for the Messiah's first arrival? Does he prepare us to be ready to receive Christ as He comes to us today? Does he help prepare us for the Savior's second coming?
- This hymn describes our natural spiritual state as "works of darkness," "earthbound," and spiritual "sloth." If we were reliant on ourselves, would the coming of the Son of God be good news? How does Jesus take care of us in this situation (see John 1:29)?

Making the Connection

The world's "holiday" celebrations, even those called Christmas, can distract from Advent's preparations for us to truly receive the gift of our Savior. The message of Advent, and of this hymn, does not always line up with the experiences of other aspects of our lives.

In Closing

The Baptist calls us to prepare ourselves by acknowledging our sin and lifting our eyes to see the Savior. This is the greatest thing we can do in Advent — or any day of the year. We remember who we are, we look to our Savior. And because of His work, we receive His mercy, love and heavenly pardon.

- Sing or read together *LSB* 345, "Hark! A Thrilling Voice Is Sounding."

- How does this hymn describe our spiritual state without Christ in stanzas 1 and 2? Do these things still characterize us today?

Advent reflects on all of Christ's comings: His birth in Bethlehem long ago, His coming to us today through His Word and Sacraments, and His coming at the end of time. Read Matt. 25:31–34, 41 and Luke 21:25–28.

- What two responses will there be to His glorious return? What makes the difference?
- This hymn concludes with a powerful doxology. How is this an appropriate response to Christ's comings?

- How can we keep Advent as a time of real preparation, with our focus on things that truly matter?
- Crowds of people went out into the wilderness to hear John's message, repent and be baptized. Where do we go to hear his message? What is our response?

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, we implore You to hear our prayers and to lighten the darkness of our hearts by Your gracious visitation; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect of the Day, Third Sunday in Advent).

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

Lutheran Service Book 357 | study by Kim L. Scharff

Introduction

The question is often asked, “Did the faithful in Old Testament times really understand the prophecies of the Messiah?” As we examine those prophecies many centuries later, it is hard for us to see how they could have understood. We find those ancient words difficult to comprehend. We need to remember, however, that the language used by the prophets was not as foreign to them as it seems to us. And of even more importance, the same Holy Spirit was at work then as now. We comprehend the Scriptures only because the Spirit enables us to hear them and receive them in faith. The very same was true of the faithful of those earlier days.

Exploring the Scriptures

LSB identifies the core texts for this hymn as Is. 7:10–14; 11:1–5, 10–11; and Matt. 1:23. Isaiah 7:14 and Matt. 1:23 are intimately connected. Read both.

- What is the purpose of a sign? Why could the sign in Is. 7:14 be received only by faith? How does Matthew tell us the sign is fulfilled? What great truth about Jesus is taught by the words “God with us?”

Exploring the Hymn

Background

The hymn “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” grew out of a series of antiphons sung from Dec. 17 to 23, one each day, at Vespers, prior to and following the Magnificat. These antiphons, which came to be known as the “O” Antiphons, date back to at least the ninth century. At a later date, probably the twelfth century, they were collected into Latin verse by an unknown author. It was in 1851 that the English divine and poet, John Mason Neale (1818–1866), translated the Latin verse, drawn from a 1710 German collection of psalms and hymns, into the English we now know as this hymn.

Neale’s short life of 48 years, due to chronic poor health, was a life of accomplishment. It was said that he was one of the great Latin and Greek scholars of his time. Through this expertise, he provided translations of numerous Latin and Greek hymn texts used in the Church even to our day.

- In the Creed we confess “the communion of saints,” which means, among other things, that there is a communion, or unity, we share with Christians of all times and places.

Today’s hymn, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” is rich in the imagery used by the prophets of old to speak of the Anointed One to come, the promised Savior who is Jesus Christ.

- Do you ever find yourself confused by the language the Bible uses? Recall Luther’s explanation to the Third Article of the Creed. How does he describe the work of the Holy Spirit? In particular, what do you think he means by “enlightened me with His gifts” (*LSB*, 323)? How does that apply to comprehending the meaning of biblical texts?

Read Is. 11:1–5, 10–11. This is one of Isaiah’s many prophecies of the Christ.

- As you read verses 1–5, what picture is the prophet drawing of the coming Messiah? What words describing the character of the Messiah strike you as significant? In verses 10–11, the concept of a sign is raised once again. To what great blessing does this sign point? What work of the Messiah is described in verse 11?

How does a hymn like “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” reinforce that great truth? What comfort do you find in this?

Text

Since the antiphons are the basis for the hymn verses, we will focus our attention on the antiphons themselves.

- **December 17: “O Wisdom ...”**

What does Solomon say in Prov. 1:2–7 about the value of wisdom? Read 1 Cor. 1:18–31. What is the great wisdom (v. 23)? How does that wisdom seem to the world? What comes with having the wisdom that is Christ (v. 30)?

- **December 18: “O Adonai ...”**

Read Ex. 3:1–15. What does the Lord call Himself (v. 14)? What does that name tell us about Him? What, therefore, is Jesus claiming in John’s Gospel when He frequently identifies Himself as “I AM” (John 10:11; 11:25; 8:12; etc.)?

■ **December 19: “O Root of Jesse ...”**

Read Jer. 33:15–16. What name does Jeremiah give to Jesse’s descendant? What will He do? Read Rom. 15:12. Do Judah and Jerusalem refer only to the children of Israel? Who is the true Israel (Rom. 9:6–8, 22–24)?

■ **December 20: “O Key of David ...”**

Read and compare Is. 22:22 and Rev. 3:7. What do keys do? Why would David have keys? Now, read Matt. 16:13–19. What has been entrusted to the Church? What great privilege and responsibility has Christ given to His Church?

■ **December 21: “O Dayspring ...”**

Read Is. 60:1–2. What does the Messiah bring with Him when He comes? What was, and is now, the condition of the world to which He comes? Read Luke 1:78–79. What do you think of when you see the word “sunrise?” What

other great events, besides the coming of Christ, might be described as “sunrise?”

■ **December 22: “O King of the nations ...”**

Read Is. 32:1–3. There were many kings in the line of David who preceded Christ. Why do Isaiah’s words ultimately describe only Christ? Read Matt. 21:1–9. “Hosanna” means “Save us now!” What were the people confessing at Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem? Why is “Hosanna” an appropriate word to sing in the Liturgy of Holy Communion?

■ **December 23: “O Emmanuel ...”**

Read Ex. 13:17–22. How was the Lord “with” His people in the Exodus? What do you think was the significance of “cloud” and “fire?” In what ways does our Lord stay with us now (Luke 24:28–35; John 8:31–32)? What ransom did our Lord pay (Matt. 20:28)?

Making the Connection

The richness of this hymn, in its witness to Christ, is something that will be more evident each time you sing it. There is truly much in this hymn that feeds and sustains your faith in Christ.

■ This hymn is appointed for use on the Fourth Sunday in Advent. Why is that so appropriate? How does this hymn prepare you for the return of Christ at the end of the age?

■ Which of the “O” Antiphons, and their hymn verses, have the most meaning for you, or bring the most comfort to you, at this point in your life? Explain why.

In Closing

The Season of Advent, with its themes of waiting and anticipation, is, perhaps, the one season of the Church Year that is most closely related to our daily lives. We are, even now, waiting for the Lord’s return. Each time we gather for worship, each time we receive the Holy Sacrament of the Altar, we are proclaiming Christ until He returns (1 Cor. 11:26). This wonderful hymn will be a welcome companion as we live out our days, anticipating the return of Emmanuel, that He might be with us, and we with Him, forever.

■ Sing or speak together *LSB* 357, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.”

Prayer

Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come and help us by Your might, that the sins which weigh us down may be quickly lifted by Your grace and mercy; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Advent 4).