

Advent 3—Living out Christmas for December 17, 2020

P: The Lord be with you.

C: **And also with you.**

Opening Hymn: “*O Sing of Christ*”- Hymn 362

P: Oh sing to the LORD a new song,

C: **for He has done marvelous things!**

P: His right hand and His holy arm

C: **have worked salvation for Him.**

P: The LORD has made known His salvation;

C: **He has revealed His righteousness in the sight of the nations.**

P: He has remembered His steadfast love and faithfulness

C: **to the house of Israel.**

P: All the ends of the earth have seen

C: **the salvation of our God.**

P: Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth;

C: **break forth into joyous song and sing praises!**

P: Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre,

C: **with the lyre and the sound of melody!**

P: With trumpets and the sound of the horn

C: **make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD!**

Hymn: “*Who Are These Who Earnest Knock*” – Hymn 63 LBW (printed)

First Lesson: 2 Corinthians 5:18-6:2

R: All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to Himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake He made Him to be sin Who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God. Working together with Him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For He says, “In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you.” Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

The Message: #63 LW – “*Who Are These Who Earnest Knock*”

As we continue to look at unfamiliar Advent and Christmas hymns, we begin today with one

that gives us a glimpse not only of its subject matter, but of the time it was written and the time it was used.

One of the challenges of hymn writing is that language changes. What sounded normal to people a century ago sounds dated and out of touch now. We see that in movies, in books, in television, and in the church.

The author of this hymn, Henry Lettermann, was born in 1932 in Pittsburgh. After attending First Evangelical Lutheran School in Sharpsburg, Pennsylvania, where his father served as principal, he attended Concordia Teachers College in River Forest, IL, and eventually became a professor of English there from 1959-1988. From 1979 to 1987 Lettermann served as a member and secretary of the Hymn Text and Music Committee of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod’s Commission on Worship. The bulk that that committee’s work was the work that produced *Lutheran Worship*, or the blue hymnal we used to use here.

Lettermann was a gifted writer, who understood the power of language. In describing the approach the team working on *Lutheran Worship* took to language, he wrote:

Though the spiritual realities have not changed, we have, and our language has, and a just embodiment of our experience of the spiritual realities is better met in materials of worship that reflect our own times and experiences. Why do new poems and novels and plays continue to be written? One does not put new wine in old bottles.

The strong feeling of the LCMS committee on worship ... was that to be effective, the language of worship must not be allowed to be separate from the language which is used every day by the worshiper. When these languages become different, separate from each other, one is promoting an unhealthy separation of religion and worship from life.

In his own writing, we see that idea born out. We also see the concerns he said. Lettermann in his writing shows that two things are important. First, he believes that hymns should be Christ-centered. In addition, he believes they should be evangelical in tone, that the Gospel predominates. The Gospel is obviously given predominance in Lettermann’s hymn texts. Few words speak of law and judgment. Instead, the focus is on what God has done for us, of God’s grace and love for us.

In the hymn we just sang, we see this several places. He makes no mention of why we see (or should see) ourselves as "all unworthy", or why we should be glad for a "Redeemer of my sin". He assumes we already acknowledge the serious nature of our sin and understand our need for a Redeemer.

We also see how he wants us to live out Christmas. The first half of each verse is a question. The first verse asks, “Who are these who earnest knock, seeking some safe haven, These in

lonely streets that walk, weak and heavy-laden?” The answer is Mary and Joseph, looking for shelter in Bethlehem. The verse concludes then, with an answer that tells us how to live out Christmas, “I will take the Christ Child in.”

The second verse is similar, wondering “Who is this that docile lies in a lowly cradle?” The answer is Christ, but we’re reminded that he has come into the world to meet his death to be the redeemer of my sin.

The third verse, too, asks “Who are these that silent stand, filled with holy wonder, proselyte and pilgrim band, Thousand without number?” The crowd gathered includes shepherds, sages, and saints, evoking a picture of the great crowd dressed in white described in the book of Revelation. It includes, too, you and I, looking at the baby in the manger yet seeing his majesty.

Unfortunately, time marches on, and some of the hymns that were in *Lutheran Worship* didn’t make our current hymnal, *Lutheran Service Book*. Two of Henry Lettermann’s texts made it into *Lutheran Service Book*, but compared to the 6 that made *Lutheran Worship*, along with 5 translations, they are fewer. Yet his texts do what they were written to do. They pointed a generation to Christ. Now, others carry on Lettermann’s work, including some of his students who were involved in *Lutheran Service Book*. and continue to teach and write and make music today. What a wonderful legacy.

Hymn: “*Where Shepherds Lately Knelt*” – **Hymn #369**

Second Lesson: Romans 5:1-8

R: Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. ²Through Him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— but God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

The Message: “*Where Shepherds Lately Knelt*”

One of the greatest collaborations between authors and composers in the LCMS in the late 20th century was between the author and composer of this hymn. Jaroslav Vajda was born in Lorain, Ohio, in 1919 to a family of Slovakian descent. He began writing poetry when he was 18, and soon after started translating Slovakian hymns into English. He attended Concordia Seminary and was called to be pastor of his first congregation. It wasn’t until he was editing a magazine for Concordia Publishing House that his writing led to hymnody. Like many writers, it was a

looming deadline, three days to fill a blank page in the magazine he was editing, that forced him to begin writing. After that first published poem, “Now the Silence,” he was encouraged to continue writing, often with the composer Carl Schalk working with him. His most famous hymn text is probably “Go, My Children, with My Blessing.”

Carl Schalk, who wrote the tune to this hymn, is famous in his own right. Born in 1929, he served on the group that prepared the 1969 Worship Supplement for Concordia Publishing House and in his participation on the Hymn Music Committee of the Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship, which produced Lutheran Book of Worship, the green hymnal, which was adapted to become the blue hymnal. He was a longtime professor at Concordia University, River Forest. He just celebrated his 91st birthday.

Writing about his inspiration for this hymn, Vajda said; “Rather than report the event again in the third person, as so many Christmas songs do, I placed myself in spirit at that poor manger bed and reviewed the implications of that visit in my life and future and in that of my fellow human beings.”

Who is Jesus, and especially, who and what is He to me? The shepherds have left; the wise men have not yet come. Yet we have heard the angels’ message to the shepherds of who Jesus is, and so we, too, come in spirit to the manger, where despite the crowd of Christmas characters, there is room and welcome there for you and for me.

We also come with doubts. The most famous quote in the Gospels that deals with that is the father of the demon possessed child who, replying to Jesus, says “Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.”

We see Jesus just as a baby, with a still small voice. But that echoes God’s response to Elijah when he had been on the run. But we know the voice of Jesus will change as he grows, to drive out demons, calm the storms, and raise the dead.

We see not just Joseph and Mary, but Isaiah as well, the prophet who died seven centuries earlier. Just as in the previous hymn, we’re reminded that in addition to those who were physically at the manger, there are those in the past who looked to their future to see the coming of Jesus, as well as those of us who look from the future back into the past to see the manger and all those gathered there.

Love comes uninvited, unforced, and unearned. Love comes like grace. Love comes to us in Jesus, and we will never be the same.

In this final line, we see how Carl Schalk helped Jaroslav Vajda in their collaboration. Vajda originally had the final line as “to live and die, and not alone for me.” Schalk suggested instead “To die, to live, and not alone for me,” and we see that in the final version. Jesus was born to

die, but he also died so that he could be raised from the dead and show us that death had been defeated.

We are all pilgrims, traveling to the manger. Even if we're not going over the river and through the woods to grandmother's house this year, we still travel to the manger. Let us go there, with the shepherds and angels, Mary and Joseph, Isaiah and the rest.

Hymn: *“O Jesus Christ, Thy Manger Is”* - **Hymn 372**

Third Lesson: Romans 10:5-11

For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them. But the righteousness based on faith says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down) “or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, “Everyone who believes in Him will not be put to shame.”

Message: *“O Jesus Christ, Thy Manger Is”*

While the first two hymns we've looked at are from the 20th century United States, our final hymn takes us back to one of the most prolific Lutheran hymn writers of all time. Paul Gerhardt was born in Germany in 1607 in a small town between Halle and Wittenberg. His schooling was interrupted by plague and the Thirty Years War, but he graduated from the University of Wittenberg in 1642, and became a tutor in Berlin. He became a pastor of a church in a small town, but would eventually return to Berlin. Many of his hymns are a result of his collaboration with the cantor at the Nicholaikirche in Berlin.

He was a prolific hymn writer. After his death, many of his hymns were set to music by J.S. Bach. 17 texts of his are in *Lutheran Service Book*,

He wrote this hymn in 1651, after the end of the Thirty Years War and the devastation it had caused in Germany including the destruction of his hometown. The hymn was originally 15 stanzas, but we only have six here; the original 1-2, 6-8, and 15.

What does it mean for us that Jesus came to earth? How do we hold onto that in times of strife? Gerhardt invites the church to stop and rest at the manger, and see there the beginning of paradise being restored.

The first verse focuses on Jesus becoming flesh, quoting the beginning of John's Gospel. We're also invited to recline and rest at the manger.

The second verse focuses on Christ's divinity. The little baby in the manger will grow up to command the wind and the waves. Despite that power and glory, though, Jesus comes in meekness and weakness, humility in becoming human.

The third verse shows us what Jesus' incarnations begins, the restoration of paradise. Jesus comes to earth, and the mere fact of God dwelling with us weakens the power of sin, death, and the devil.

The fourth verse addresses the believer to be of good cheer because of paradise restored. Christmas is a time of joy. Yes, we still face challenges, and those may challenge us. Remember, Gerhardt had faced war and plague in his life before writing this hymn, and knew the joy of Jesus in the midst of such sorrows.

The fifth verse builds on that theme, reminding us of the glory God has prepared for us, that will overshadow all sadness.

The final verse points us to what Christmas means. Jesus is the greatest gift, the truest treasure we can ever receive.

As we live out this strange Christmas, this hymn reminds us of where our thoughts should be. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Plagues and political unrest are no strangers to most of history, and the church has lived through them before. The manger isn't just a nostalgic decoration, but instead holds the promise that God is at work in the world, redeeming and saving us through that little baby. What a wonderful promise to hold onto, no matter what the world brings.

Reading from Luke : Luke 1:57-80

P: Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, but his mother answered, "No; he shall be called John." And they said to her, "None of your relatives is called by this name." And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And they all wondered. And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, "What then will this child be?" For the hand of the Lord was with him.

And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying,

"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all

who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember His holy covenant, the oath that He swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare His ways, to give knowledge of salvation to His people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel.

P: O Lord, have mercy on us.

C: Thanks be to God.

Encouragement to Live Out Advent

P: “For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—

C: the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, Who gave Himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for Himself a people that are His very own, eager to do what is good.” (Titus 2:11-14)

P: “But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit,

C: whom He poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by His grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

P: This is a trustworthy saying. And I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good.

C: These things are excellent and profitable for everyone.” (Titus 3:4-8)

P: “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.

C: Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

P: This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him.

C: This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

P: Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.” (1 John 4:7-11)

C: “Jesus said, ‘The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, “Here it is,” or “There it is,” because the kingdom of God is in your midst.’” (Luke 17: 20-2)

P: “But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord.

C: Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.” (1 Peter 3:15)

Prayers:

The Lord’s Prayer:

Blessing: (Pastor)

C: Amen.

Closing Hymn: “God Love Me Dearly” - Hymn 392