

3 Hymn Messages for December 10, 2020

Message 1:

This Advent we focus on hymns that we seldom use that share the real meaning of Christmas. Today we look at hymns that help us to experience Christmas.

1) See amid the winter's snow,
Born for us on earth below,
See, the gentle Lamb appears,
Promised from eternal years.

Christmas is pictured as a winter event. The Bible does not give us the exact date when Jesus was born, but we know from Luke's Gospel that the shepherds were in the fields keeping watch over their flocks at night. We might think this was a year round job. But actually the time when shepherds watch their flocks at night, like shepherders today, is during lambing season. That occurs in late winter/early spring not in late December. In the land of the Bible it can get cold then at night, but not bitter cold and not with much snow. So all our popular image of Christmas and snow is not what Mary, Joseph, and Jesus experienced.

So why do we celebrate Christmas in the beginning of winter? As Christians spread to northern Europe, they were faced with the paganism that revolved around agriculture and the winter solstice. If you look at a globe you will notice that countries like England and Germany are way north—equal to Canada, not the US in latitude. Their days are real short in winter. Unlike in the Bible lands where the obstacle to good farming was the lack of water, their problem was lack of sunshine. The pagan people believed that the sun god would leave them in fall as the days got shorter. But at the winter's solstice the sun god started to come back with the promise of spring and the hope of warm weather for farming.

The way Christians dealt with this was by turning the winter's solstice from a pagan ritual to the sun god into a celebration of the Son of God, Christ Jesus. That is why we celebrate Christmas this time of year. This year especially has been a time of darkness and gloom. The real experience of Christmas is that Jesus came into a world of death, a world darkened by sin, a world in winter. The message of Christmas is all the more real in a world of winter.

2) Lo, within a stable lies
He who built the starry skies,
He who, throned in height sublime,
Sits amid the cherubim.

The real experience of Christmas is not what we feel about it, but what God did. Jesus, born in the winter of sin, is nevertheless God almighty, the One who created the universe. Christmas means that God comes to our world.

Christmas is not what we expected. In fact it was an invasion like D-Day. Jesus entered into a world of sin and hostility. But He came not to conquer with military might, but in a stable to die on the cross.

3) Sacred Infant, all divine,
What a tender love was Thine,
Thus to come from highest bliss
Down to such a world as this!

Mark Twain wrote The Prince and the Pauper about a look-alike prince and a poor boy who exchanged places. But in this story the prince did not have to do this. It was a matter of trying something new. But Jesus exchanged the highest glory for the muck of our sinful lives, not for fun, not for the “experience,” but to save us.

4) Teach, O teach us, holy Child,
By Thy face so meek and mild,
Teach us to resemble Thee
In Thy sweet humility.

Experiencing Christmas is experiencing that God almighty would come to our world to save us. But also a part of that is that He shows us the way to act towards others—to use our blessings and positions to serve humble as He did.

We see what Jesus did in humility so well expressed in Philippians 2:

Who, being in very nature^[a] God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature^[b] of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Often we forget that those words are prefaced by St. Paul with these words:

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Message 2:

(Refrain)

Hail, O ever-blessed morn!

Hail, redemption's happy dawn!

Sing through all Jerusalem: "Christ is born in Bethlehem!"

Let our gladness

Banish sadness

All throughout creation!

God, whose favor

Sent out Savior,

Praise with adoration!

He is born in a stall,

Now He lies, infant small,

In a manger,

Heav'nly stranger,

Lord of all,

In a manger,

Heav'nly stranger,

Lord of all.

Why is Jesus a stranger? St. John tells us:

The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through Him, the world did not recognize Him.

Our sin blinds us from seeing God. We see God as either distant and irrelevant or oppressing and cruel. When Satan tempted Eve in the garden he asked her if God had told them not to eat from the tree. She replied, "He told us not to eat from it or touch it." God never said anything about touching it, but like a child who feels parents' rules are unfair, we make God into something He is not.

So when God came into the world as Jesus He was not what people expected of a Savior. They looked for some king who would lead a revolution to overthrow the Romans and become the new King David. Christmas not something we made up or invented any more than Good Friday or Easter. It is the work of God, not us. Our salvation rests alone in what God does, not us.

2) Whom the sages

and the ages

Eagerly awaited,

Angels proudly

Herald loudly

In their songs elated.

Let us, too, in these days,
Thankful hearts gladly raise;
To the tender
Infant render
All our praise,
To the tender
Infant render
All our praise.
God's right hand

Jesus' birth was not something haphazard or put together at the last minute. It was God's plan from even before the beginning. He loves us so much that even before He made, knowing that we'd screw up and turn from Him, He planned to send His Son into our world to die for us.

In Jesus we also see how God has chosen to work with us. We talk about God having a "right hand" and a "left hand." The "left hand" of God is how God shows Himself in power and might. It is the God all people can see in creation and in the common sense of right and wrong people have all over the world. But God also has a right hand.

My great uncle Charlie was a carpenter. His hands were powerful as he sawed wood and hammered nails. But he also did engraving. He used those same powerful hands to chisel intricate, delicate letters into metal.

God is both powerful—left hand—and gentle—right hand. He prefers to use His right hand. In Michelangelo's famous painting of God creating Adam it is God's right hand that reaches out to give man life. Christmas is experiencing that God, the God who revealed His love in Jesus. The God who forgives. The God who wins us over by love, not power.

3) Child appealing,
Light revealing,
Jesus Christ, our pleasure;
God, yet very Son of Mary,
Heaven's gift and treasure.
Mighty king, gentle friend,
As our Lord to us bend,
With Your blessing
Us caressing,
Now descend,
With Your blessing
Us caressing,
Now descend.

The experience of Christmas is not just that Jesus came 2,000 years ago to our world. Each day, each moment we can cry to Him to descend, to come into our lives. As the hymn says, "Now descend!"

Message 3:

This hymn was written by Luther. It emphasizes the main point of Jesus coming into this world—the fancy word “Incarnation.” If you want to sound academic, use the Latin words in place of the Anglo-Saxon ones. So instead of saying, “I walked to work,” you can say, “I perambulated to work;” or say “I declared to them,” instead of, “I said to them.” So theologians say “incarnation,” while Luther simply says “in flesh.” That is the real experience of Christmas. As Pastor Dave so aptly said on December 6, “Christmas is not about an event, but about a person—Jesus Christ.” God became “flesh,” human for us.

I have told the story of the little girl who woke up with a nightmare. Her mother came into her bedroom and consoled her by saying, “God is with you.” The girl replied, “I know that, but sometimes I need God with skin on Him.”

God knows that. That is why He became “God with skin on Him.” In our world of social distancing we need more than ever that kind of God!

Now in the manger we may see
God’s Son from eternity,
The gift from God’s eternal throne
Here clothed in our poor flesh and bone.
Alleluia!

The virgin Mary’s lullaby
Calms the infant Lord Most High.
Upon her lap content is He
Who keeps the earth and sky and sea.
Alleluia!

The book of Hebrews tells us about Jesus:

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses,
but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet He did
not sin.

Mary sings a lullaby to calm her baby. The Christmas experience is that Jesus experienced what we do—all the effects that our sins has caused. By doing that He could be our substitute and bear the punishment we deserve for sin.

The Light Eternal, breaking through,
Made the world to gleam anew;
His beams have pierced the core of night,
He makes us children of the light.
Alleluia!

Jesus is the light of the world. But He came not to show the brilliance of God's perfect light, the kind that made the shepherds fear on Christmas night or the people of Israel tremble at Mt. Sinai, but a shining light that shows us the way in the darkness of our world.

The very Son of God sublime
Entered into earthly time
To lead us from this world of cares
To heaven's courts as blessed heirs.
Alleluia!

Time—it can seem like a trap to us. The pandemic has robbed time for us to be with others. We only have so much time in our lives. But experiencing Christmas means that the timeless God came into our world of time to save us from makes our time so constrictive—death.

In poverty He came to earth
Showing mercy by His birth;
He makes us rich in heav'nly ways
As we, like angels, sing His praise.
Alleluia!

This verse describes what Luther called “the Great Exchange.” St. Paul put it this way in 2 Corinthians:

You know that grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, for our sakes He became poor, so that through His poverty we might become rich.

Jesus got all our sin; we get His righteousness. That is experiencing Christmas!

All this for us our God has done
Granting love through His own Son
Therefore, all Christendom, rejoice
And sing His praise with endless voice.
Alleluia!

We can experience Christmas in joy because of what Jesus has done for us. This doesn't mean we are always cheery and happy. It means that no matter how we feel, the reality is what God has done and continues to do for us in Jesus. We hear again and again the story of how He came into our world. We can relive each day the way He entered into our lies through baptism. We can receive His proclamation of the forgiveness of our sins—and we experience Christmas.