

Three Advent Hymn Messages for December 17, 2020

Message: “*Who Are These That 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 of 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.

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.

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.