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A CHRISTMAS HYMN BY MARTIN LUTHER

Erling Lindstrom

Luther's Christmas hymn, "From Heaven Above," is sometimes interpreted as a Christmas pageant for church or home. Bainton wrote, "The carol is designed for a children's pageant in the church. Before the altar is placed a cradle with the Babe. On either side kneel Mary and Joseph. From the choir a chorister takes the part of the angel and makes the announcement."¹ In Bainton's interpretation, the shepherds and children respond to the announcement and join the manger scene at verse six.

Whether Luther intended the hymn as a pageant or not, it readily divides into parts for different participants and can be sung by a congregation in that way. The translation prepared for the *Lutheran Book of Worship* (No. 51) includes fourteen of the fifteen verses written by Luther, a large increase over the five that was in the *Service Book and Hymnal*. Having nearly all of the original verses in the hymnal makes it easier to see where participant changes take place.

The first five verses of the hymn are sung by the angel who announces the good news of Jesus' birth. In stanza one, the angel immediately says he has something good to tell:

From heaven above to earth I come
To bring good news to every one.
Glad tidings of great joy I bring
To all the world and gladly sing.

Leupold indicates the first verse of this hymn was patterned after a folk song used in a singing game popular in Luther's time. The song used in the game began,

Good news from far abroad I bring,
Glad tidings for you all I sing.
I bring so much you'd like to know.
Much more than I shall tell you though.

After singing this verse, the traveller would tell a riddle to one of the girls. According

1. Roland Bainton, *The Martin Luther Christmas Book* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1948), p. 13.

to the game she would have to solve the riddle or give her wreath to him. At first Luther's hymn was sung to the folk tune and was published with that music in 1535; four years later it was published with the music to which we now sing it.²

The adaptation of a folk song for part of this hymn is suggestive for the range of material that can be developed into hymns. In the preface to an earlier hymn booklet, Luther had written, "I would gladly see all arts, especially music, in the service of him who has given and created them."³ This is a way of working redemptively; materials at hand are revised and used for the praise of God. Having observed this development from a popular song, there is also an important difference between the folk song and the first verse of Luther's hymn. In the game the singer is secretive about his message and doles it out sparingly:

I bring so much you'd like to know.
 Much more than I shall tell you though.

By contrast the angel in the hymn is bursting to tell his news forthwith:

Glad tidings of great joy I bring
 To all the world, and gladly sing.

The angel's news is announced in verse two:

To you this night is born a child
 Of Mary chosen virgin mild;
 This new-born child of lowly birth
 Shall be the joy of all the earth.

These words draw our thoughts to the announcement of the angel to the shepherds near Bethlehem. Like that first announcement, this one is given to a group of ordinary people but is intended for the whole world. The last part of this verse leads us to the paradox of the Christian message; the child in the manger is the Lord of all. Expressed in other words in verse four,

The blessing which the Father planned
 The Son holds in his infant hand.

The angel concludes his announcement by telling where the hearers can see the child. This again parallels the account in Luke where the angel concludes, "And this will be a sign to you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger" (Luke 2:12). In a congregation where the hymn is being sung by different participants, the news given by the angel may be assigned to the choir.

The next set of stanzas, six through thirteen, carry the response of the hearers to the angel's message. The shift in participants between verses five and six is obvious. The angel has just indicated the child can be found in a manger-bed. To this news the people immediately respond,

How glad we'll be to find it so!
 Then with the shepherds let us go
 To see what God for us has done
 In sending us his own dear Son.

The people are responding as had the shepherds who said, "Let us go over to Beth-

2. *Luther's Works*, Volume 53, American Edition (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), p. 289.

3. Oskar Thilin, *A Life of Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 91.

lehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us" (Luke 2:15). The people carry out their intention of going to the manger and the next verse finds them exclaiming over the child:

Look, look, dear friends, look over there!

What lies within that manger bare?

Who is that lovely little one?

The baby Jesus, God's dear Son.

It is interesting that Luther's hymn, which has followed the text of the second chapter of Luke closely thus far, now stops following the Lukan account and focuses on the child. Where the shepherds in Luke found "Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger" (Luke 2:16), the people in Luther's hymn find only the child. Where the shepherds returned home and made known the news, the people in Luther's hymn remain before the child and ponder the meaning of his arrival; they depart only at the end to join the heavenly chorus in song. Since Christ was the centre of everything for Luther, the long pause at the manger is what we might expect of him. In the flow of the hymn, the discovery of the child is followed directly by his being welcomed to earth. In singing this part of the response of the hearers, the trip to the manger, verse six, may be sung by the congregation; the pulpit side then exclaims over the discovery, verse seven; and the lectern side welcomes the guest, verse eight.

The manger scene now takes a reflective turn; those present wonder how the Lord of all could be a baby in a manger. This section alternates between declaring the worth of the child and the unworthiness of the earth to receive him. Verse nine opens with wonder,

O Lord you have created all!

How did you get to be so small?

In view of Jesus' role with God in creation, the earth is indeed a poor place for him. Accordingly verse ten reads like a confession:

Were earth a thousand times as fair

And set with gold and jewels rare,

Still such a cradle would not do

To rock a prince so great as you.

Verse eleven continues to contrast Jesus' lowly estate with the riches that are rightfully his. The contrast is a way of stating the good news of the gospel; Jesus came into the world not because the world was the best place for him but because the world needed him. "God so loved the world that he gave his only son." Again, "God sent his son into the world . . . that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:16-17). The congregation reflects on the Lord in the manger as it sings verses nine through eleven.

Reflection on the lowly circumstances of the Lord of all leads the hearers to invite him into their lives:

O dearest Jesus, holy child,

Prepare a bed, soft undefiled,

A holy shrine, within my heart,

That you and I need never part.

The invitation results in a new joyful state and a desire to join the angels in sing-

ing praise to the little Lord.

My heart for very joy now leaps;
 My voice no longer silence keeps;
 I too must join the angel-throng
 To sing with joy his cradle-song.

We recognize in these verses a familiar pattern of Christian experience. Offering God's Son a place in our hearts leads to joyful participation in announcing the news of his arrival. The personal invitation to Jesus and its joyful result, verses twelve and thirteen, conclude the response of the hearers to the angel's news.

The last stanza takes us back to the announcement heard by the shepherds near Bethlehem. The first half of the verse nearly quotes the angel's song in Luke; closeness to the Scripture text probably explains why these lines are in quotation marks in our worship book. After the exalted "Glory to God in highest heav'n," the hymn ends on a lighter note as if to say, "Do not get too serious now, this is a season of good news, a time to be joyful." Luther must have had a twinkle in his eye when he added a new year greeting to the last line of this hymn:

With angels sing in pious mirth:
 A glad new year to all the earth.

The Gloria and the greeting may be sung by the congregation and choir together.