

### *From Heaven Above to Earth I Come*

**Luther's Christmas sermons are replete with the exhortation: it does you no good that Christ was born in Bethlehem unless He is born anew today in you. By this Luther distinguished a merely historical faith that Christ was born in Bethlehem from a justifying faith in personal appropriation and trust. Thus the climax of this hymn comes in verse twelve, with the prayer to the Christ-child that He would today be born anew into "my" heart. This prayer expresses the important Reformation theological principle that justifying faith is personal trust, *fiducia* that receives Christ personally "for me."**

**Notes on the Text:** LBW # 51; ELW # 268; WA 35: 459-61. In an apparent effort to condense the length of this hymn, its narrative structure is compromised in ELW by a gratuitous editorial instruction making verses four through nine optional insertions. As we shall see, these verses are central to the hymn's meaning.

This Christmas hymn is Luther's own composition, dated around 1535 when Luther's own children would have been old enough to sing. The scholarly conjecture is that the hymn originated in Luther's family devotion, with the part of the angels in verses one to five being sung by the parents, individual children singing the various verses eight through fourteen, and all together singing verse seven and fifteen (LW 53: 267). Luke's depiction of the angels' proclamation of the good news to the shepherds structures the first part. Thus the parents lead the children to sing their parts to the Christ-child by concluding the introductory verses with the exhortation of the shepherds in verse six "to go and see this thing which the Lord has made known." The hymn concludes with all voices joining the angels in the praise of God.

We see here an important example of what the authority of the Bible is for Luther and how it actually works to author and authorize personal trust. What the Bible essentially is for Luther is a promissory narrative (R. Thiemann), i.e. a story which presents Jesus Christ in such a way that His promise to be with us and for us is intelligible and thus also followable. As we identify Jesus Christ by Biblical narrative we hear *His* personal promise: "I am yours and you are mine" and able to distinguish it from imposters and frauds. This is a very necessary discrimination. The world is full of false prophets and false Messiahs promising us that we can have our cake and eat it too. But the *Holy Spirit's Holy* Scripture works by presenting Jesus Christ (*was Christum treibet*), who gives life to those who spiritually die with Him and in this way makes them whole and holy. This presentation of Jesus Christ that we may die and rise with Him is the "spiritual" authority of the Bible -- in the sense that the Holy Spirit uses this specific ("canonical") narrative to bring Christ to us and us to Christ.

It is not then that the Bible is authoritative because it formally possesses divine and supernatural qualities (like being "inerrant") and as such gives needed but otherwise inaccessible information about God by means of a special miracle of inspiration. That is how Muslims think about the authority of the holy Quran. Indeed, the word Quran means "recitation," i.e. Mohammed's strict and unadulterated recording of the very words miraculously given to him so that, unlike Jewish and Christian Scripture, the words of the Quran would not be corrupted by human additions. Ironically, this dictation theory of Scriptural authority entered the Christian West through the medieval encounter with Islam and was unconsciously adopted, especially by later Protestants to back up their anti-Papal claims, as if to say: "We don't need an inerrant teaching office in the Pope since we have an inerrant Bible."

Such authoritarian thinking reflects a profound alienation from what Luther found uniquely and irreplaceably in the Bible. Thinking to honor the Bible, dictation theory makes the Bible as such the foundation of faith. It makes the true content of the Bible in the Spirit's hands at work through present

proclamation in Word and Sacrament, namely Christ as saving Lord, secondary to the formal authority of a supposed supernatural revelation. As a result, it effectively consigns the Holy Spirit to past history in originally inspiring the Bible. And in the process it makes everything in the Bible of equal authority and relevance. But Luther does not think we can either perceive or receive the gift of Christ from the Scriptures apart from the Holy Spirit, who continues to speak to us today through the historically specific human witness of the Biblical writers to give faith where and when it pleases God. Luther uses the nativity image of the manger crib of the Christ-child to illustrate: the Bible is the crib in which we find Christ. Of course, this manger is indispensable. Without it, we cannot have the historical Christ in the world but with it and through it Jesus Christ becomes present to us. Thus the Bible has the Spirit's authority, not only or even chiefly in its original inspiration but in the authority to author and authorize faith when it is used rightly as God's Law to afflict the comfortable and as God's Gospel to comfort the afflicted. The Spirit speaks through the human words and witness of the prophets and the apostles to tell of Christ and in this particular way to speak God's promises through Him to us.

The promise and this historically particular narrative of the Bible go together. The reason why is that world is full of promises, as mentioned above. Augustus Caesar on his imperial throne also makes promises: to be benefactor and peace-maker. Caesar claims to be the incarnation of God's rule on the earth who gives peace to the world. But Luke's Christmas narrative identifies another king, not like Caesar, without "velvet soft and silken stuff" but rather a newborn asleep on "hay and straw so rough." At this surprising discovery of the shepherds in Bethlehem, Luther is filled with child-like wonder at the humility of the true God who in this unexpected way causes His reign to dawn. Luther's hymn thus invites us to become little children again in love and adoration.

Paul said it first, "He who was rich for our sakes became poor," and John made it the chief principle of Christian theology, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth." The patristic theology of the early Catholic Church focused on this wonder of the condescension of God in the philanthropy of the Logos who became what we are in order that we might become what He is, as Irenaeus and Athanasius put it. Augustine loved again and again to contrast the pride of the creature who wants to be god without God with the humility of the God who will not be God without us, even us in our desperate and harmful arrogance. Luther captures all this doxological wonder of the church fathers when he has us sing with the children, "O Lord, you have created all! How did you come to be so small?" *Admirabile commercium! Fröhliche Wechsel!* An astonishing exchange!

Unlike philosophical theology which is embarrassed at the condescension of God (Juntunen), and finds in the Incarnation of the Son of God the nonsense of a contradiction rather than the paradox of love which knows no bounds, Luther's Biblical theology knows God "deep in the flesh" (Gritsch and Jenson) – or not at all.

#### **Four-Week Teaching Plan**

Week One: Read the hymn as a whole explaining the theory of the roles of parents and children in singing the verses as a family devotion. Talk about the family/home as also the church and distribute copies of Luther's Small Catechism as a resource for family devotions and the education of children in Christian faith.

Week Two: Study Luke 1. Compare and contrast the reception of Zechariah and Mary to the message of the angels. Ask how Mary is a prototype of the church, who receives the Word in faith and so bears the Son of God into the world (cf. Luther's statement in the Large Catechism that the church is the "mother that begets and bears every Christian through the Word of God" (*Book of Concord*, Kolb and Wengert,

436:42). Focus on the Magnificat (Luke 1: 46-55) and its theme of God who exalts the humble but casts down the mighty from their thrones and ask how Mary's statement of joyful expectation in God sums up the church's identification with Israel's hope in the season of Advent. Comment on the authority of Scripture to present Christ in His personal Word of promise and distinguish that from the dictation theory and the problems involved in it.

Week Three: Study Luke 2. Compare and contrast the roles of Caesar and Christ (Hinlicky) and how Luther expresses the contrast in v. 11. Focus on the angelic proclamation to the shepherds as the first declaration of the good news in Luke's gospel that Luther's picks up as the crucial turn in his hymn in v. 6. Conclude on the doxological accent, the joy and praise of the shepherds and of Mary in vs. 13-14 to reinforce the point that Luther puts Biblical narrative to verse and melody in order to sing the faith and praise of God in our hearts.

Week Four: Focus on the wonder Luther's hymn expresses at the Incarnation in vs. 5 through 11. Explain how the Incarnation challenges all theologies and philosophies that maintain as a matter of principle that the "finite cannot contain the infinite," and correspondingly how we must become against as little children to receive God "deep in the flesh." Point out the parallel between the Incarnation and the affirmations we make about Christ's real presence in Word and Sacrament.

### **Sermon Outline**

A Christmas sermon on the Gospel lesson from Luke 2 could utilize the singing of from "From Heaven Above" by breaking the hymn into parts for adults and children, congregation and soloists and choir to sing in sections as the sermon progresses through the Lucan narrative.

### **Select Bibliography for Further Study**

"Christology – God Deep in the Flesh," Chapter 7 in Eric W. Gritsch and Robert W. Jenson, *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 91-109.

Sammeli Juntunen, "Luther and Metaphysics" in *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther* ed. C. E. Braaten & R. W. Jenson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998) 129-160.

"The Magnificat," *Luther's Works*, Vol. 21:295-358.

Thiemann, Ronald. *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987).

Paul R. Hinlicky, *Preaching God's Word according to Luther's Doctrine in America Today* (Delhi, NY: ALPB Publications, 2010) 67-80.