

The 500th Anniversary of
Martin Luther's
"We Praise You, Jesus, at Your Birth"

*An Advent and Christmas devotional
series with CHI Director
Rev. Dr. Daniel N. Harmelink*



Introduction

December 25, 2023 marks the 500th anniversary of the publication of Martin Luther's Christmas hymn "We Praise You, Jesus, at Your Birth." A translation and expansion of a medieval Latin Christmas chant, this hymn (also known by the TLH title "All Praise to Thee Eternal God") has remained popular in Lutheran churches during the Advent and Christmas seasons.

Join Concordia Historical Institute's Executive Director Rev. Dr. Daniel N. Harmelink as we journey through this wonderful hymn to meditate on the coming of the Christ Child. These devotions run from December 21, 2023 through January 7, 2024, the first Sunday in Epiphany.

We hope you will find these devotionals both educational and edifying, as you deepen your faith during this wonderful season and learn about Martin Luther's rich Christmas hymn.

God's richest blessings in Christ,

Your friends at Concordia Historical Institute

DAY ONE: Advent and Christmas, Fear and Trembling

For both Martin Luther and Lutheran Christians today, historical events that blur accepted norms between the created world and the heavenly evoke fear and wonder. These “portents”—amazing or marvelous events that are thought to announce something important and noteworthy—were in ages past referred to as “monstrosities.” Today, the word “monstrous” conveys only a scary, evil, or judgmental meaning. For example, a quick Google search of “monstrosities” will bring up an unending list of references to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.

But in the medieval and early modern ages, “monstrous” carried a meaning closer to “amazing” or “wonderful” (or today’s overworked term “awesome”). “Monstrous” things and events were nothing more than heavenly reminders of things and events beyond description by fallen human man, for example, the struggle of the Evangelist John in describing heavenly things in the book of Revelation.

This season we will be wished an “awesome Christmas” (whatever that means). More traditionally, the vocabulary of season’s greetings for Christians was along the lines of “May God grant you a blessed Advent” or “May you have a blessed Christmas.” Even these phrases may unintentionally convey a too-tame understanding of the salvific significance of the Nativity. These days, the prayer for a “wonderful” Advent and Christmas may evoke similar connotations.

What is more and more absent in our fallen, influenced-by-the-unbelief-of-this-world Advent and Christmas season is any measure of appropriate fear and wonder. One of the best indicators is the rapid disregard for the mystery of human life, something that should elicit in us great fear and wonder. How much more should the birth of the very Son of God in human flesh call forth in us wonder and amazement?

These days, wishing someone a “monstrous” Advent and Christmas season full of fear and wonder is not recommended—nevertheless, the hope that we would be blessed with an Advent and Christmas season full of wonder and awe may be just what is needed in a time of year that, for so many, has morphed into a mundane one.

To aid in such a hope, this year we will consider the Birth of Our Lord through Martin Luther’s renowned Christmas hymn, first sung in Wittenberg, Germany in 1523. We know the hymn under various English titles, such as “All Praise to Thee, Eternal God” (*TLH* 80) or “We Praise You, Jesus, at Your Birth” (*LSB* 382). In these seven stanzas, the awakened “monstrosity”—the wonder and astonishment—of Christ’s redeeming birth is trumpeted for all to ponder.

In this holy season, our unbelieving world sees Christmas as a day that we conjure up in order to experience feelings that range from nostalgia to unrealized wishes for goodwill or reconciliation. But the prophets and apostles and Martin Luther understood the Nativity as a wonder that wholly comes to us—and not the other way around. In His birth, Jesus begins His journey to secure the salvation of an entire fallen race through His innocent suffering and death. And in faith, with the Scriptures and the Catechism as our guide, we pray:

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure. (Philippians 2:12–13 ESV)

DAY TWO: The Backstory of a Christmas Hymn

There are fanciful paintings and lithographs of Martin Luther's childhood days in the home of Frau Cotta in Eisleben. At the age of 13 or 14, young Martin moved from Mansfeld to Eisleben and stayed there for three years. He attended school and literally sang for his supper as a *Partekenhengst* outside of the homes of Eisleben residents. Martin and his voice were noticed by Ursula Cotta who had pity on the student and took him into her house. The Cottas were pious patrons of the Franciscans and St. Elizabeth. It could have been in this setting that Martin Luther became acquainted with the little Latin verse "O Jesus Christ, all praise to Thee," and sung it—either in church or before the front doors of Eisleben houses. This verse had been around for at least 450 years before Luther learned this standard piece of Christmas sacred music.

We are also reminded that among the good gifts the Lord gave to Martin Luther not the least was the ability to write poems, ballads, and hymns. It is noteworthy that among the volumes of the American Edition of Luther's Works, 37 hymns of Luther are included in the volume titled "Liturgy and Hymns." Note that it was in 1523—five hundred years ago this year—that Luther's first hymns were printed on broadsheets and distributed *en masse*. (A new book about Luther's mastery and use of poetry is scheduled to be published next year.)

At the time of Luther, the eleventh-century "*Grates nunc omnes*" was often sung as the people's response to a liturgical sentence sung by the choir on Christmas Day during the distribution of the Lord's Supper. German translations of what became the first verse of "O Jesus Christ, all praise to Thee," had been around for over 150 years, but Luther added six more verses and the repeated "Kyrieleis!," and had it sung in Wittenberg on Christmas Day in 1523.

The hymn is marked by the repeating final line of each stanza, "Kyrieleis!" This is a shortened form of "Kyrie eleison!" or "Lord, have mercy." Luther's inclusion of this liturgical phrase coincides with the hymn's call for fear and wonder at the Savior's birth. Since the time of prophets, believers in the Messiah-to-come have cried out, "Kyrie eleison" or "Lord, have mercy." We see this most clearly in the great penitential psalm of King David, Psalm 51. The entire psalm begins with the words, "Have mercy on me, O God."

"Kyrieleis!" is the response of faith when suddenly confronted with the inbreaking of the redeeming kingdom of God. "Have mercy on me, Son of David!" was the penitential cry of those who sought undeserved deliverance from Jesus (Matthew 17:15; Luke 17:13; 18:38–39). With Luther's 1523 Christmas hymn, we sing of the wonder-filled miracle of the Savior's birth—an event that spotlights the Lord's greatness in the sending of His only-begotten as remedy for our helpless condition.

"Kyrie eleison!" is not only the proper Christian response when we are brought to unimaginable violence, tragedy, and suffering. "Kyrie eleison!" is also the proper response when brought before the life-giving Word of God—the life-giving Word of Christ as it comes through prophets and apostles, through the water of the baptismal font, and the bread and wine of the altar.

In these weeks of Advent, it is fitting that as the Lord prepares us for Christmas morn, fearful anticipation is found in our hearts, and "Kyrieleis!" is found on our lips. We pray:

Lord, have mercy and come. By the birth, death, and resurrection of your Son, deliver your poor, nothing-to-give-you-but-our-sins people, that in faith we might sing your Alleluias in this life and in eternity. Amen.

DAY THREE: The Sure and Certain Coming of Christ in Human Flesh

Attacks on the certainty of Christ's Incarnation directly affect the certainty of Christ securing our redemption and the redemption of the entire world. Martin Luther knew this and wrote and preached about this. The Incarnation of Christ is revealed in the Old and New Testaments and reflected in the Ecumenical Creeds and the Lutheran Confessions. We are reminded this year that the Incarnation was found to be under attack in the late 1960s and early 1970s among college and seminary professors in the Missouri Synod, who argued that a waffling belief in the virgin birth could be maintained as long as it didn't affect the Gospel.

But without a hearty, "Amen, amen, so shall it be so!" to the Incarnation, is there any Good News to defend and believe in? Tragically, the centrality of the substitutionary nature of the Gospel was also downplayed by those who wavered on the centrality of the doctrine of the Incarnation of Christ. Jesus Christ did not simply "identify" with us but (as the inspired author of Hebrews tells us) became like us in all respects, except without sin. (Hebrews 2:17-18) And this was necessary if the Second Person of the Trinity was to be our sinless stand-in before the holy will and law of God.

Without the doctrine of the Incarnation, we have a Jesus who shows up in human likeness to simply be a guide or guru, to give some sage advice or some nice words of encouragement. If the clear teaching of the Bible concerning Christ's Incarnation is not upheld, we are left with a Jesus who is merely a cosmic cheerleader. And if Christ is only a mentor sent from heaven, we are the most to be pitied and still left helpless and hopeless in our great sin.

This first stanza of "We Praise You, Jesus, at Your Birth" (*LSB* 382) is not just for simple children to sing. The Incarnation is not just for cartoon characters to recite from the old King James during Christmas pageants. All Christendom on earth is prompted by the very hosts of heaven to join in and sing on bended knee of the saving mystery that is beyond our reason and understanding: the Incarnation and birth of Christ who fully embraced our humanity that He would fully embrace and make satisfaction for the enormity of humanity's sin. We pray:

O Jesus Christ, all praise to Thee, Who art pleased a man to be; The virgin's womb Thou dost not scorn, And angels shout to see Thee born. Kyrieleis!

DAY FOUR: Trumpeting the Person and Work of the God-man Christ Jesus

Our Christian life should consist of constantly saying back to the Lord what He has announced to us. He announces through His inspired prophets and apostles that we are poor, miserable sinners—and so we confess that we are poor, miserable sinners. Now He announces, just as He did with the lowly shepherds of Bethlehem, that despite our rebellion and self-centeredness, we are not to fear, for to us a Savior has been born, Christ the Lord (Luke 2:10–12).

Unlike Adam and Eve, who were caught in unbelief and the sin of twisting and adding to the revealed Word of God, the shepherds took the Word of God as the Word of God, and were faithful in their responses to it, as we see in Luke 2:15b–18:

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.

The overwhelming announcement of the “monstrous” (or wonderful—see the first day’s devotion) scandal of the Incarnation comes to the shepherds, and they quake with fear and wonder. But the shepherds do not run and hide in a cave or begin to debate among themselves about the irrational nature of the angels’ message. Faith, created in their hearts by the Word of God, enables them to say, “Let us go.” This is the proper response of saving faith in Jesus (See John 1:46).

During the Advent and Christmas seasons, we join with the angels and the shepherds as we sing the first stanza of “O Jesus Christ, All Praise to Thee”:

*O Jesus Christ, all praise to Thee,
Who art pleased a man to be;
The virgin’s womb Thou dost not scorn,
And angels shout to see Thee born. Kyrieleis!*

The almighty Lord of heaven and earth is not just showing off. He did not manifest His authority and power through the Incarnation of His Son simply to prove that all things in this created world begin and end with His almighty Word. “Monstrous” things and events are displays of God’s power. But the wonder or “monstrosity” of the Incarnation is also the even greater scandal that the fallen and unbelieving world will never accept: God deigns to become one of us in order to be the substitutionary sacrifice for what we have done and cannot undo. So, the heavenly hosts trumpet the two-fold announcement: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom His favor rests” (Luke 2:13–14).

Luther gives all glory to God for the mystery of Christ’s Incarnation as He picks up this ancient stanza celebrating the unfathomable love Christ had for His pitiful creation. Heaven and earth come together for the deliverance of sinful humanity. Heaven’s Christ becomes man as heaven’s host proclaim Him as Mary’s Son. Marvelous and amazing. Fearful and wonderful. This is the song that will be fully throated on the Last Day and for all eternity:

O Jesus Christ, all praise to Thee, Who art pleased a man to be; The virgin’s womb Thou dost not scorn, And angels shout to see Thee born. Kyrieleis!

DAY FIVE: Faith Sings Both the Kyrie and the Gloria

Merry Christmas! In this Christmas season, we can rightfully riff on Saint Paul's inspired words (1 Corinthians 15:17b): if Christ had not been born, our faith is futile, and we are still in our sins. In his Christmas Postil, published in 1521, concerning the angels' announcement of Jesus' birth, Martin Luther wrote:

Christ has again brought back the glory of God, in that He has taught us how all we have or can do is nothing but wrath and displeasure before God, so that we may not be boastful and self-satisfied but rather be filled with fear and shame so that in this manner our glory and self-satisfaction may be crushed—and we are given the ability to be glad that it has been crushed—in order that we may be found and preserved in Christ [alone]. (Lenker. *Church Postils* 1:156)

“All glory to God!” This was the theology of Martin Luther and the theology of C. F. W. Walther, the first president of the Missouri Synod. And this is the theology behind the first stanza of “We Praise You, Jesus, at Your Birth” (LSB 382):

*O Jesus Christ, all praise to Thee,
Who art pleased a man to be;
The virgin's womb Thou dost not scorn,
And angels shout to see Thee born. Kyrieleis!*

This first stanza reminds us of the unbreakable link between the Kyrie and the Gloria. (TLH p. 17; LSB 152–154; 168–170; 186–187; etc.) We sing the Kyrie, not as part of the “Confession and Absolution” section of the service, but as a first prayer as forgiven-in-Christ-but-still-in-this-world Christians. “Lord, have mercy!” confesses our total dependency upon the mercy of God—our constant reliance on His grace and lovingkindness. “Lord, be gracious to me!” as the Lord prepares us for an eternity in heaven where we will sing an eternal Gloria “with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven.”

Advent is a Lord-have-mercy kind of season, especially as we look back to Jesus' birth two thousand years ago and also look forward to Jesus' second coming at the end of this age. We join with all who were gathered around the manger that first Christmas night and we join with all who wait in anticipation of the second Advent. Each stanza of Luther's Christmas hymn is completed by the cry of faith, announcing that the time of Christ's appearance has come. “Lord, have mercy!” “Kyrieleis!” We pray:

O Jesus Christ, all praise to Thee, Who art pleased a man to be; The virgin's womb Thou dost not scorn, And angels shout to see Thee born. Kyrieleis!

DAY SIX: Our Faith and Hope in the Incarnation and Birth of Christ

The Christmas hymn we know as “We Praise You, Jesus, at Your Birth” (*LSB* 382) (or “All Praise to Thee, Eternal God” [*TLH* 80]) had its beginnings almost 500 years before Martin Luther, but it was the Reformer of Wittenberg who unpacked it by adding an additional six verses. A similar situation surrounds the hymn “Lord Jesus Christ, with Us Abide,” (*LSB* 585) with the first stanza composed by Philipp Melancthon and then later expanded by Nicolaus Selnecker who contributed an additional five stanzas.

Luther’s second stanza develops the direction of the first, detailing the circumstances and significance of Jesus’ birth in a lowly Bethlehem stable. Luther always places a great emphasis on the Christmas event, clearly seeing that Christ’s taking upon Himself our very nature is one of the most comforting announcements in the entire Bible. Luther writes:

It is an unspeakably great glory and honor for mankind to have been raised so high by Him, not merely to heaven among the holy angels and archangels, who are certainly great and excellent princes and lords, but to the level of direct equality with God Himself. How could the High Majesty become humbler than by honoring this sorry flesh and blood and exalting it through His divine honor and authority? He descends to the level of our nature and becomes a member of the human race! It is an honor that no angel in heaven shares. (*WA* 41:98)

This is the theme of the second stanza. “Assumes our mortal flesh and blood”—in order to raise all mankind to immortality. Christ’s perfect life of obedience and trust under the divine Law begins at His conception and is made manifest at His birth. During Advent and Christmas, we sing what the prophets and apostles announced: Christ laid aside His heavenly glory but in doing so He never ceases to be God. This is the divine mystery revealed by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—and reflected in the three Ecumenical Creeds, especially the Athanasian Creed where we confess:

Therefore, it is the right faith that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is at the same time both God and man. He is God, begotten from the substance of the Father before all ages; and He is man, born from the substance of His mother in this age: perfect God and perfect man, composed of a rational soul and human flesh; equal to the Father with respect to His divinity, less than the Father with respect to His humanity. (28–31)

“The everlasting fount of good” becomes man and—to our wonder and amazement—rules all creation from the feeding trough of beasts of burden. “It is an unspeakably great glory and honor for mankind to have been raised so high” by means of Christ’s Incarnation and birth. This is the Christian faith, and this is our Christian hope and comfort. We pray:

Th’eternal Father’s only Son Takes a manger for His throne; The everlasting fount of good, Assumes our mortal flesh and blood. Kyrieleis!

DAY SEVEN: The Throne of Christ

Luther places our eyes upon the Christ Child in the manger in the second stanza of his 1523 Christmas hymn. Luther sees the ultimate reality to which Christmas leads: Jesus rules His creation from the wood and nails of the manger in anticipation and pledge the salvation He would go on to secure from the wood and nails of the Cross. This is the announcement of Christmas that brings with it fear and trembling—and, for those who will put their trust in this way of redemption, eternal comfort. Luther writes:

What can be said that is more marvelous than this, that the Son of God assumes the flesh of man and is born of a virgin? What is more astounding than this, that the Son of God, battling with death and the devil, allows Himself to be overcome, offers His life to His enemies, and overcomes while being overcome? And the miracle supreme is this, that the man Christ, who died on the cross, rises from death and from the sealed grave on the third day, ascends to heaven, and sits at the right hand of God with His flesh. What can possibly be said—no, even conceived—that is equal to these miracles? (SL 14:1160)

We do well to follow Luther and other hymn-writers who sing the one awe-inspiring song of salvation: the hymn of Christ at Bethlehem *and* Christ at Calvary. We pray:

Th'eternal Father's only Son Takes a manger for His throne; The everlasting fount of good, Assumes our mortal flesh and blood. Kyrieleis!

DAY EIGHT: Not Mere Example but Sinless Substitute

When the very Son of God took upon Himself human flesh and blood, He did so in order to take upon Himself something more amazing and wonderful and jaw-dropping. Christ does not come to be born as a mere example—merely showing us how we are to earn our way to heaven by good works—but as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. This is the central doctrine confessed by all who have saving faith in the Messiah. Luther writes:

Why does Christ suffer? He is a fine, good, fruitful Tree and has not deserved so stern a sentence; but He suffers it for our sake. He is now undertaking this journey in order to carry out His office as Priest, and He intends not only to pray for sinners but also to sacrifice His body and life on the altar of the cross so that God will be appeased through this sacrifice and poor sinners will be freed from the wrath of God and be heirs of eternal life. That is why it hurts the Lord to see that we weep at the sight of His suffering. He wants us to be glad, praise God, thank His grace, extol, glorify, and confess Him; for through this journey, we come into the possession of the grace of God. By it, we have been freed from sins and death and have become God's dear children. (WA 52:799)

We do not weep at the deplorable conditions of His birth, the unjust flight into Egypt, the disdain many had of Jesus' upbringing in lowly Nazareth. Jesus' journey is as the Lord's High Priest, and as the Scriptures bear witness, Jesus' eyes were always on His crucifixion. This is the great exchange Martin Luther's hymns and writings underscore again and again. Christ's perfect life and righteousness in exchange for our many sins and transgressions of the Law. It is a marvelous, miraculous, beyond-our-comprehension kind of exchange. Again, Luther:

The real reason why a man is saved is that Christ and the believing heart are so united that what each possesses becomes the common property of both. But what does each possess? Christ has a pure, innocent, holy birth.

Man has an impure, sinful, cursed birth, as David says [Psalm 51:1]: "Behold, I was shaped in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me." There is no remedy for this sinful birth except through the pure birth of Christ. ... See, in this way, Christ takes from us unto Himself our birth and sinks it into His birth and gives us His birth, so that we become pure and new in it, as though it were our own. Every Christian may rejoice and glory in this birth of Christ as though he, too, like Christ, had been bodily born of Mary. Whoever does not believe this, or doubts it, is no Christian. (WA 10 I, 1, 71f)

The Scriptural witness of this blessed exchange is one of the greatest rediscoveries of the Lutheran Reformation and puts the Advent and Christmas seasons in a completely different light. Christ did not come to simply encourage and cajole us into being less Grinch-like. The "monstrous"—read: "amazing" or "wonderful"—story of salvation revealed by the prophets and apostles is one of redemption by substitution and exchange. Christ is born into your sorrowful birth, and you are born in Baptism and faith into His perfect, obedient life. This is the only man whom our heavenly Father speaks over with the words: This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased. Listen to Him. (Deuteronomy 18:15; Matthew 3:17; Mark 9:7). We pray:

Th'eternal Father's only Son Takes a manger for His throne; The everlasting fount of good, Assumes our mortal flesh and blood. Kyrieleis!

DAY NINE: Believing the Unbelievable

St. Thomas, following his old nature, announced to the other disciples that he wouldn't believe in a resurrected Christ unless he could scientifically figure it all out. A week later, Christ came and overcame the disciple's silliness as he preached believing faith into Thomas' ears. Our old nature and the old, fallen world make the same silly announcement when it comes to the Incarnation and birth of Christ. How is that reasonable? How can this be scientifically proven? How can my human reason figure out the mystery of the Christmas season? The third stanza of "We Praise You, Jesus, at Your Birth" (LSB 382) continues this thought:

*He whom the world cannot enclose
Doth in Mary's lap repose;
To be a little Child He deigns
Who all things by Himself sustains. Kyrieleis!*

Christ Jesus, the very Son of God Himself, is wrapped in swaddling clothes and kept warm in the lap of His mother Mary. He wills to be an infant child. This is a great wonder and incomprehensible statement. The world's religions deride it as foolish and nothing more than a fairy tale. Our twisted and fallen human reason dismisses "God deigning to become man" as fanciful fluff. But God-created and sustained faith not only will accept the unexpected and un-reasonable of the New Testament Evangelists' written witness as trustworthy and true—but also say "Amen" to the even greater reality that He who created and now sustains the created world through His almighty Word comes to redeem His spinning-out-of-control-with-sin world. Martin Luther had plenty to say about accepting this two-fold mystery by faith in the clear Word of God:

Listen, then, to what the Holy Spirit tells you through St. John: The Word became man and suffered, not the Father, etc. How that is affected you are to believe, not to know, and to understand, until the solution appears on the blessed Day of our redemption. (W 49:248f)

All this reminds us of the fact that only a child-like faith can grasp the mystery of Advent and Christmas and take it to heart. True faith in the clear and simple Word of God saves. No one will earn the glories of heaven by reformulating the announcement of the angels over the hills of Bethlehem into a scientific equation. We must simply let the Word of Christ be the Word of Christ. What has been revealed is enough for us to believe and be saved.

Let the world dismiss and make fun of what we as faithful Christians sing in our Advent hymns and Christmas carols. Yes, the birth of Christ is beyond human reason. Yet because it is announced in the inspired Word of God, I will believe it and stake my life on its eternal truth. Jesus invited St. Thomas to simply believe (and confess based on that belief) and leave the figuring it out to God. For, "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" (Romans 10:9). We pray:

He whom the world cannot enclose Doth in Mary's lap repose; To be a little Child He deigns Who all things by Himself sustains. Kyrieleis!

DAY TEN: Our Greatest Treasure is Our Greatest Comfort

The third stanza of Martin Luther's 1523 Christmas hymn "All Praise to Thee, Eternal God" contrasts the vastness of the Lord Christ's domain with the limitless grace and mercy He showed in becoming an infant child—as we confess in the Creed—"for us and for our salvation."

Luther's Christmas hymn is a great reminder of why the hymns the Christian Church on earth sings are of great importance. They not only stir our emotions during the days of Advent and the season of Christmas, but they teach and confess our saving faith back into our own ears and the ears of our neighbor.

*He whom the world cannot enclose
Doth in Mary's lap repose;
To be a little Child He deigns
Who all things by Himself sustains. Kyrieleis!*

Luther writes:

The greatest treasure and the highest comfort we Christians have is the fact that the Word, the true, natural Son of God, has become a man who in every respect has flesh and blood as any other man has, and who has become man for our sake that we may be raised to the great glory of having our flesh and blood, our entire body, with all its parts and members, sit in heaven above, like God; that we may boldly defy the devil and whatever assails us. For now, we are certain that our bodies belong in heaven and are heirs of the kingdom of heaven. (WA 46:631)

Yes, our greatest treasure is also our greatest comfort. The undeserved gift of the little Christ Child is, with the God-given gift of faith, also our great hope and comfort as we struggle with the effects of sin within us and all around us. Through Christ's holy life, His innocent suffering and death, His glorious resurrection and ascension we follow where He leads—even into the glories of heaven. In eternity, the Son of God and Mary's Son sits exalted at the right hand of the Father. "Lord, have mercy upon us!" We pray:

He whom the world cannot enclose Doth in Mary's lap repose; To be a little Child He deigns Who all things by Himself sustains. Kyrieleis!

DAY ELEVEN: Our Darkness Has Not Overcome Heaven's Great Redeeming Light

We see the inbreaking of divine Light in the fourth stanza of Luther's 1523 Christmas hymn "All Praise to Thee, Eternal God" (*TLH* 80) or "We Praise You, Jesus, at Your Birth" (*LSB* 382). The first couplet contrasts the light of heaven revealed at the birth of the Christ Child with the double darkness of the fallen, created world as well as that of the first Christmas night in Bethlehem. The second half of the stanza links the coming of the Light of Christ into the darkness of those living in Bethlehem two thousand years ago with the coming of Christ into the night of our own darkness.

This fourth stanza underscores the communal darkness of the entire human race after the fall of our first parents. The "our" in this verse can be understood on numerous levels: the darkness of our family, the darkness of our generation, the darkness of these last days, and ultimately the darkness of our entire dark and dying human race. Saint John the Evangelist opens his inspired Gospel account with the themes of Word, Life, and Light, which Luther interprets thus:

The first proposition and the first statement, that He says: "I am the Light of the world," must be the greatest heresy. Here people say: What do you think of this expression, *Ego sum lux mundi totius* [I am the Light of the entire world]? What else is this but saying, "Where I am not present, darkness reigns; where I go out, no one sees anything?" What, then, do Moses and all the other teachers and doctors do, seeing that He says, "I am the One?" If He had at least expressed it more moderately and modestly and had cast it in a more reasonable form—such as: I am the Light of this country, this kingdom, house, people, or of this temple—we would let it pass. But it is pitching the sermon very high to burst into boasting in this way, to take the entire world at a bite, and to speak so depreciatingly and contemptuously of all the world as to say that without Him it is nothing but darkness. It is the language of presumption thus to stop all mouths, to silence everybody, to call all wise folk fools and to say, "You know nothing whatever, you see nothing, you are sticking in darkness; and if I do not give light, there is no light." (WA 33, 511f)

As the proto-Gospel is announced to Adam and Eve and all of their fallen children who will follow, so the words from St. John's inspired pen are for all of fallen humanity. Christ is the Light of the World, the light no darkness—in heaven or on earth—can overcome.

For generations and generations lighted candles have been fixed upon the boughs of both Advent wreaths and Christmas trees as reminders of Christ and the coming of His great redeeming light to—as the Advent hymn says—those who sit in darkness. This imagery is personalized with the giving of a lighted candle to those who are baptized into Christ's death and resurrection at the font with the words,

Receive this burning light to show that you have received Christ who is the Light of the world. Live always in the light of Christ, and be ever watchful for His coming, that you may meet Him with joy and enter with Him into the marriage feast of the Lamb in His kingdom, which shall have no end. (*LSB* 271)

We pray:

Th' eternal Light to us descends, Brightness to the earth it lends, And purely shines upon our night, To make us children of the light. Kyrieleis!

DAY TWELVE: Unadulterated Light

Blessings on your New Year! Regardless of the change to the calendar, it is still the Christmas season—and so still appropriate to sing (and meditate upon) Christmas hymns, like the classic "Silent Night," known to some Lutherans by the original German "Stille Nacht."

*Silent night! Holy night!
Son of God, love's pure light
Radiant beams from Thy holy face
With the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord, at Thy birth!
Jesus, Lord, at Thy birth!*

In our day and age, we constantly hear and experience things being spoiled, tainted, or defiled. Our food goes rotten and water is found to be tainted with lead and other toxic chemicals. And even more tragically, the human race finds itself defiled on account of its own thoughts, words, and actions. No wonder why our Lord talks about "this corrupt generation." Outside of Christ and His purifying light, our sinful nature spoils even the best of intentions. We join with Saint Paul and in despair confess:

For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Romans 7:15–25 ESV)

But in His Nativity, Christ comes as the pure, redeeming Light—the Light that delivers us from our sinful nature and its good-for-nothing fruits. We pray:

Th' eternal Light to us descends, Brightness to the earth it lends, And purely shines upon our night, To make us children of the light. Kyrieleis!

DAY THIRTEEN: Christ Carries the Great Burden of Our Sin that We Might be Brought to Our Heavenly Home

The coming of the heavenly Son of God into the world of human misery is the theme of the fifth stanza of Martin Luther's 1523 Christmas hymn "All Praise to Thee, Eternal God" (TLH 80) or "We Praise You, Jesus, at Your Birth" (LSB 382). While the word "guest" in this stanza may remind us of the table prayer common to many Lutherans, the gifts given by our Guest sung in this stanza are not daily bread for our table but His unique action as the Suffering Servant—his substitutionary suffering and death that carries us out of this world's misery and into the courts of heaven.

*The only Son, true God confessed,
To His world now comes as Guest;
And though this vale of tears our guide,
Doth in His heav'n our home provide. Kyrieleis!*

Throughout His earthly ministry, Jesus taught His disciples that the time was short before His death, resurrection, and ascension. In this connection, Jesus also reveals His work of preparing a place for the disciples in His heaven. In composing this stanza, Martin Luther may have had in mind the words of John 1:14: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."

This "dwelling" or "tabernacle-ing" among us by the very Son of God is His merciful and gracious response to humanity's helpless and hopeless condition. He comes to "tent" among us in our spiritual wilderness so that He may build for us a permanent and lasting home in heaven. "Lord, have mercy!" We pray:

The only Son, true God confessed, To His world now comes as Guest; And though this vale of tears our guide, Doth in His heav'n our home provide. Kyrieleis!

DAY FOURTEEN: The Sin-Bearer

Christ is revealed as the sin-bearer for the world's iniquities—even at His birth. This is the theme of the sixth stanza of Martin Luther's 1523 Christmas hymn "All Praise to Thee, Eternal God" (*TLH* 80) or "We Praise You, Jesus, at Your Birth" (*LSB* 382). While every nativity set includes a few sheep and at least one shepherd, true saving faith sees the baby in the manger as the precious Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world through His substitutionary life and sacrificial death. The birth of Jesus is a scandal and a stumbling stone for the unbelieving world. How could the King of heaven be born in such deplorable conditions? Doesn't the wretched circumstances of His birth automatically negate any possibility that this Jesus is the only-begotten Son of the Most High? Our old, will-never-believe nature reflects the same kind of question posited by skeptics at the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry, "Can anything good come from a stable in little, insignificant Bethlehem?"

*In poorest guise to us He came,
Bears Himself our sin and shame,
That, as His heirs in heav'n above,
We may with angels share His love. Kyrieleis!*

This is the most direct Gospel in the entire hymn. It is unfortunate that this sixth stanza (along with the second stanza) was not included in the version published in *The Lutheran Hymnal* in 1941. While the reason could have been a lack of space on the page for all seven stanzas, the absence of this critical stanza is puzzling. However, this stanza is included in the version published in the *Lutheran Service Book*. It directly links the miserable conditions surrounding Jesus' birth with the goal and mission of Jesus' coming in human flesh.

As in the second stanza, the Great Exchange is in view. This exchange means poverty and suffering for Christ but riches and eternal life for all who put their trust in the Son of God and Mary's Son. In this stanza, Luther is not making the case for understanding Christ's poverty as a mere facade. Christ actually shares in our sin and the devastating effects of sin. He freely, willingly takes upon Himself the poverty of our spiritual condition that He might make satisfaction for all of it.

It is worth noting that in this Christmas hymn, Luther is underscoring the poor condition of fallen humanity before God (*coram Deo*). Any twisted reading here to argue Christ is manifesting a "preferential option" for the economically poor or powerless is unjustified. A fair reading of the words and actions during Jesus' earthly shows He reached out to all economic classes—both the powerful and the powerless. For example, the belief that the fisherman Jesus called to follow Him were poor, powerless fisherman is completely unwarranted. The family fishing business of James and John was a respected and profitable one. No—the poverty this hymn proclaims is the more problematic poverty we suffer as a result of our sinfulness. This is what the Christ Child takes upon Himself.

Countless Advent and Christmas hymns echo the theme of Jesus taking upon Himself the poverty of our sin, that it might be exchanged for His holy and righteous life. We pray:

In poorest guise to us He came, Bears Himself our sin and shame, That, as His heirs in heav'n above, We may with angels share His love. Kyrieleis!

DAY FIFTEEN: God's Love Came Down at Christmas

During the Christmas season we sing the ancient hymn “Of the Father’s Love Begotten” (LSB 384). The Lord’s sacrificial love for His pitiful creation is brought to the fore in the sixth stanza of Martin Luther’s 1523 Christmas hymn “All Praise to Thee, Eternal God” (TLH 80) or “We Praise You, Jesus, at Your Birth” (LSB 382).

*In poorest guise to us He came,
Bears Himself our sin and shame,
That, as His heirs in heav’n above,
We may with angels share His love. Kyrieleis!*

Our gracious, merciful, loving Father in heaven did not spare even His only-beloved Son in order to deliver and rescue us from the sin that condemned us before God’s holy and righteous will and law. We confess with the Apostle: “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” (1 John 4:10)

Through the given-in-love gift of Christ and His work on the Cross, our heavenly Father no longer looks with judgment upon our sins. They are atoned for through the sending of Christ at Bethlehem. While commenting on John 18:4–5, Luther writes:

Christ does not die for the attainment of a personal benefit, for He does not die for us in order thereby to gain a great profit and benefit from us for Himself. Nor does He die in order to satisfy the claims of justice, for He is not obliged or bound to die either for us or for Himself. But He dies for the sake of our sins, that He may help us. The great, unending love He bears for us moves Him to die in our stead. (WA 28:228)

Because of His great love for us, Christ was born and Christ died for the sake of our sins. This is our song both to heaven and to our neighbor-in-need. Christ’s love redeems us, and Christ’s love compels us to be a blessing for those the Lord has placed before us. Rejoice and sing, for the Lord’s self-sacrificing love has secured our release. We pray:

In poorest guise to us He came, Bears Himself our sin and shame, That, as His heirs in heav’n above, We may with angels share His love. Kyrieleis!

DAY SIXTEEN: Our Redemption is Lovingly Secured

The loving work of the Son of God in becoming Mary's Son is a revelation that "surpasses all human understanding." It is beyond us in this life and even in the life to come. The seventh and final stanza of Luther's 1523 Christmas hymn begins with a reflection on this all-consuming act of love:

*His love to show, surpassing thought!
God's Son this great work has wrought;*

Luther elsewhere writes:

This is, in truth, what the world is; it is a stable full of wicked, shameful people who misuse all creatures of God in the most disgraceful manner, who blaspheme God and inflict everything evil on Him. These shameful people God loves. This is love supreme. He must really be a good God, and His love must be a great, incomprehensible fire, much greater than the fire which Moses saw in the bush, nay, much greater than the fire of hell. Since this is God's disposition toward the world, who would now despair? This its love is too sublime. I cannot do justice to it. I cannot enlarge upon it nor treat it as exhaustively as its reality and truth deserve. (WA 36:180f)

Even the prophets and apostles struggle in expressing in human words the enormity of God's grace and mercy and lovingkindness revealed in the sending of His one-and-only to be born in a stable and crucified upon a cross. This is the incomprehensible nature of God's love toward us. Again, Luther commenting on 1 John 4:9:

What can there be but forgiveness of sins if God loves the world while it is still sticking in all its sins, abominations, and blasphemies? If He can so love the world, His enemy and blasphemer, and give it so much—yes, even Himself—how then can He be angry with you (when you seek and desire grace) or not want to forgive your sin?...

O Lord God, how utterly the world fails to take these remarkable, great matters to heart! Should we not all be glad at heart that we have lived to see the day in which these truths are heard? Should we not love and praise this God and not only serve Him in gratitude but also gladly suffer everything? Should we not even laugh if we must die because of His Word and obedience? And should we not let this maggot sack be put to death by fire, sword, and every torture? But we may thank the shameful, wretched unbelief and the great blindness and darkness in our hearts, which are so rigid and dead that we hear those truths and yet do not believe them. (WA 21:486)

Beginning with Christ's Incarnation and birth, the enormity of our sins is eclipsed by the enormity of God's love for the lost human race. As the Small Catechism teaches us in the explanation to the First Article of the Creed, "All this He does only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me. For all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him." We pray:

His love to show, surpassing thought! God's Son this great work has wrought; Then let us all unite to raise Our song of glad, unceasing praise. Kyrieleis!

DAY SEVENTEEN: The Great Work of Christ

The final stanza of Luther's 1523 Christmas hymn talks about our "unceasing praise" for "this great work" the Son of God "has wrought." But specifically, what is "this great work" and how does it inform a proper understanding of the Advent season and the days of Christmas? Luther writes in one of his Advent sermons:

We see here how Christ, as it were, takes our birth from us and absorbs it in His birth, and grants us His, that in it we might become pure and holy, as if it were our own, so that every Christian may rejoice and glory in Christ's birth as much as if He had Himself been born of Mary as was Christ. (Erlangen 10:133ff)

Christ takes our birth; Christ takes our lamentable and sorry life; Christ takes what we and our sins deserve and makes them all His own. The Son of God and Mary's Son comes to be our stand-in, and the angels and all creation bow the knee in amazement and wonder.

And the response of faith is, as the stanza says, unending thanksgiving and praise—even after the Advent wreath, the Christmas tree and all the trimmings are put away for another year. For another Church Year, the fruits of Christ's birth, life, death, and resurrection continue. We pray:

His love to show, surpassing thought! God's Son this great work has wrought; Then let us all unite to raise Our song of glad, unceasing praise. Kyrieleis!

DAY EIGHTEEN: Christ Continues to Manifest His Saving Glory as Heaven and Earth Continue Its Song of Praise

Martin Luther's 1523 Christmas hymn was sung in Wittenberg and then later published and shared with many other congregations. Its stanzas reflect the great importance the Reformer placed on the birth of Christ. We do well to follow His example. As Advent gives way to Christmas and as Christmas gives way to Epiphany, we start in earnest to follow Christ in His intentional journey to Jerusalem and to the Cross.

One of the great hymns of Epiphany is Wordsworth's 1862 hymn "Songs of Thankfulness and Praise." Although it is most commonly sung in the season of Epiphany, Wordsworth begins at the manger. The first stanza reads:

*Songs of thankfulness and praise,
Jesus, Lord, to you we raise,
Manifested by the star
To the Magi from afar,
Branch of royal David's stem,
In your birth at Bethlehem.
Anthems be to you addressed,
God in man made manifest.*

In the Epiphany season we hear much about Christ's manifesting His glory. The Epiphany season is known for its use of light in this regard. However, the Light of Christ was first manifest not in Jordan's stream but under the Bethlehem star. Even in the lowliest of circumstances, the glory of the Christ Child was manifest for those gifted with the eyes of faith. Luther writes:

What can be said that is more marvelous than this, that the Son of God assumes the flesh of man and is born of a virgin? What is more astounding than this, that the Son of God, battling with death and the devil, allows Himself to be overcome, offers His life to His enemies, and overcomes while being overcome? And the miracle supreme is this, that the man Christ, who died on the cross, rises from death and from the sealed grave on the third day, ascends to heaven and sits at the right hand of God with His flesh. What can possibly be said—no, even conceived—that is equal to these miracles? (SL 14:1160)

Like Herod, the unbelieving world continues to demand signs and wonders. But the birth of Christ appears most un-glorious. For this reason, the Evangelists remind us that despite the lowly and humble guise Jesus took upon Himself, the favor of God was with Him. For bound up with Christ and His Incarnation and birth, suffering and death is our reality of being declared righteous before God for the sake of our lowly and despised Redeemer. The miracle of Christ's Incarnation is the greatest miracle, bringing with it wonder and amazement, fear and trembling. But only with the eyes of faith—God-created faith—are we able to embrace the Christ Child as our own Deliverer.

A blessed Epiphany season to you and yours. Again, we pray the first verse of Martin Luther's 1523 Christmas hymn:

O Jesus Christ, all praise to Thee, Who art pleased a man to be; The virgin's womb Thou dost not scorn, And angels shout to see Thee born. Kyrieleis!