

One of the burning questions of the season has become “When do you allow yourself to start listening to Christmas music?” Some might answer, “I never stopped.” Others might say, whenever the 24/7 radio station starts playing it. For me personally, it has to be after Thanksgiving, and I try to hold out until the first Sunday of Advent. But it’s a challenge because I’m kind of a collector of Christmas music and trying to get it all in doesn’t always work. The larger point is self-evident: there is an entire body of music that signals Christmas is coming or has arrived, and our celebration wouldn’t be the same without it.

Songs have great power. They touch the heart and the mind. Melodies get stuck in our heads and along with them, the information contained in the words being sung. This fact is not lost on advertisers and those who compose commercial jingles. Nor has it ever been lost on the hymnwriters and composers of church music. Martin Luther famously grasped the power of music to engage the whole person and to teach the faith. At today’s Lutheran seminaries, pastors-in-training are taught that hymns are “sung confessions,” meaning that every hymn that we sing is a statement of faith. What we choose to sing matters, because it is teaching. And if that hymn is one of those special marriages of text and tune, we’re going to carry it around in our hearts, and we won’t even need a book.

I don’t know if you’ve ever thought about it this way before, but hymns preach. They preach little, condensed, poetic sermons. That is absolutely true of Christmas Carols and Advent hymns, which is why this year we are giving them the pulpit. I’m going to do my best to get out of the way and let the Christ-centered songs of Christmastime speak for themselves, and I think you will see that they proclaim Jesus in a marvelous way.

And so our first preacher this Advent is “See Amid the Winter Snow.” I invite you to open your bulletin and take another look at the words as I read.

See amid the winter’s snow/Born for us on earth below/See the gentle Lamb appears/Promised from eternal years.

There, in exactly twenty words, we are presented with a robust description of Advent expectation and fulfillment. But perhaps it’s worth asking at the very first, “what about the winter’s snow” of the first phrase? Is that merely a poetic flourish, or could there have been snow in Bethlehem at Jesus’ birth? According to Dr. Paul L. Maier in his book, “The First Christmas,” it is “by no means impossible.” He writes, “Snow does fall in the Jerusalem area about three or four days each winter, and sometimes in considerable quantity.” Unusual—yes; impossible—no, and the winter’s snow pulls us into the story, since our experience of Christmas is often accompanied by the white stuff. What is far more important than that bit of trivia is the picture of the gentle Lamb who has appeared, promised from eternal years. The Christian recognizes this as Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world; the Lamb to which every single spotless Passover Lamb had pointed. This, along with the refrain, presents clear reference to Jesus’ mission. The shed blood of the perfect lamb caused death to pass over Hebrew households

in Egypt; the shed blood of this perfect Lamb, who goes to His cross in silence, will cause death to pass over all who believe. This belief; this faith in the gentle Lamb is supported by the fact that his mission of redemption has been promised from eternal years. One could make the case that this promise was first made in the garden of Eden, when the Lord God spoke of the one who would crush the serpent's head. But one could also make the case that the plan was place even before that—a contingency that reveals much about the heart of God. The phrase “promised from eternal years” lets us know that the wait for the fulfillment of the promise has been long, and the redeeming Lamb's arrival is cause for happiness, singing, and proclamation. And let us not miss that the arrival of the promised Lamb is not merely a historical footnote—but he was “Born for us on earth below.” For us. This sacrificial Lamb is here for our benefit. “...the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory...” This realization sparks true Christmas praise.

Stanza Two: Lo, within a stable lies/He who built the starry skies/ He who throned in height sublime/ sits amid the cherubim/

We are now plunged into the deep mystery of Christmas. This is not just a promised child. This child is the Creator. “All things were made through him...” This child sits on the throne of God between fearsome angel guardians. From the throne of God to a stable. This is the dizzying contrast at the heart of what we call Jesus' incarnation; his coming into flesh and blood; his coming in vulnerability; the designer of the universe contained in an animal barn, subject to the elements and dependent on the care of his earthly parents. This little stanza illuminates who Jesus actually is, and the word “sublime” is perfectly chosen; our meditation on the grandeur and excellence of His identity inspires pure wonder. That he would descend to the level of a human infant provokes the utmost awe. It is beyond comprehension, yet in faith, it is cause for an eruption of worship.

The third stanza says: Sacred Infant, All Divine/what a tender love was thine/thus to come from highest bliss/down to such a world as this!

A subtle shift takes place now as the hymnwriter begins to directly address the Sacred Infant; we've gone from talking *about* Jesus to talking *to* Jesus. What caused the change? It's the discovery of Jesus' motive. The writer of the hymn knows why Jesus has come from highest bliss to a world such as this--it is "tender love." Experiencing such love melts the heart. Father, Son and Spirit wanted a loving relationship with you so much that Jesus left the indescribable joy of heaven to come here; and we know what “here” is like; and in order to obtain us, He faced the worst of what's here. He faced rejection: “He came to his own, and His own people did not receive Him.” “The true light...was coming into the world,” and the world snuffed it out. Coming here killed him. He knew it would, and He still did it. Do not take “tender love” to mean weak love; it's the strongest power there is. Tender love drove Jesus from a throne to a manger to a cross to a tomb, in order to gain you for himself.

Finally, stanza four: Teach, O teach us, holy Child, by thy face so meek and mild, teach us to resemble thee in thy sweet humility.

Peering into the manger, the hymnwriter continues to speak directly to baby Jesus. Having been overcome by the love of the Sacred Infant, he seeks also to be guided by the Holy Child. Something in the delicate features of the newborn moves the writer to identify humility as a characteristic that Jesus embodies, and that this humility is something worth 'resembling,' emulating, imitating. This is completely appropriate, for it is humility that enabled Jesus to become incarnate for us, and our service to others ought to resemble Jesus' willingness to sacrifice, to set aside comfort or privilege when necessary. Perhaps C.S. Lewis described this best when he wrote, "Humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less."

At this season we come to the manger bed of the One who thought more of others than himself. Let this little one teach you how to resemble Him. "And from His fullness we have all received grace upon grace" to do just that.

Hail, O ever blessed morn! Hail, redemption's happy dawn!

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