

For the Life of the World

Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne

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The Advent of Our King

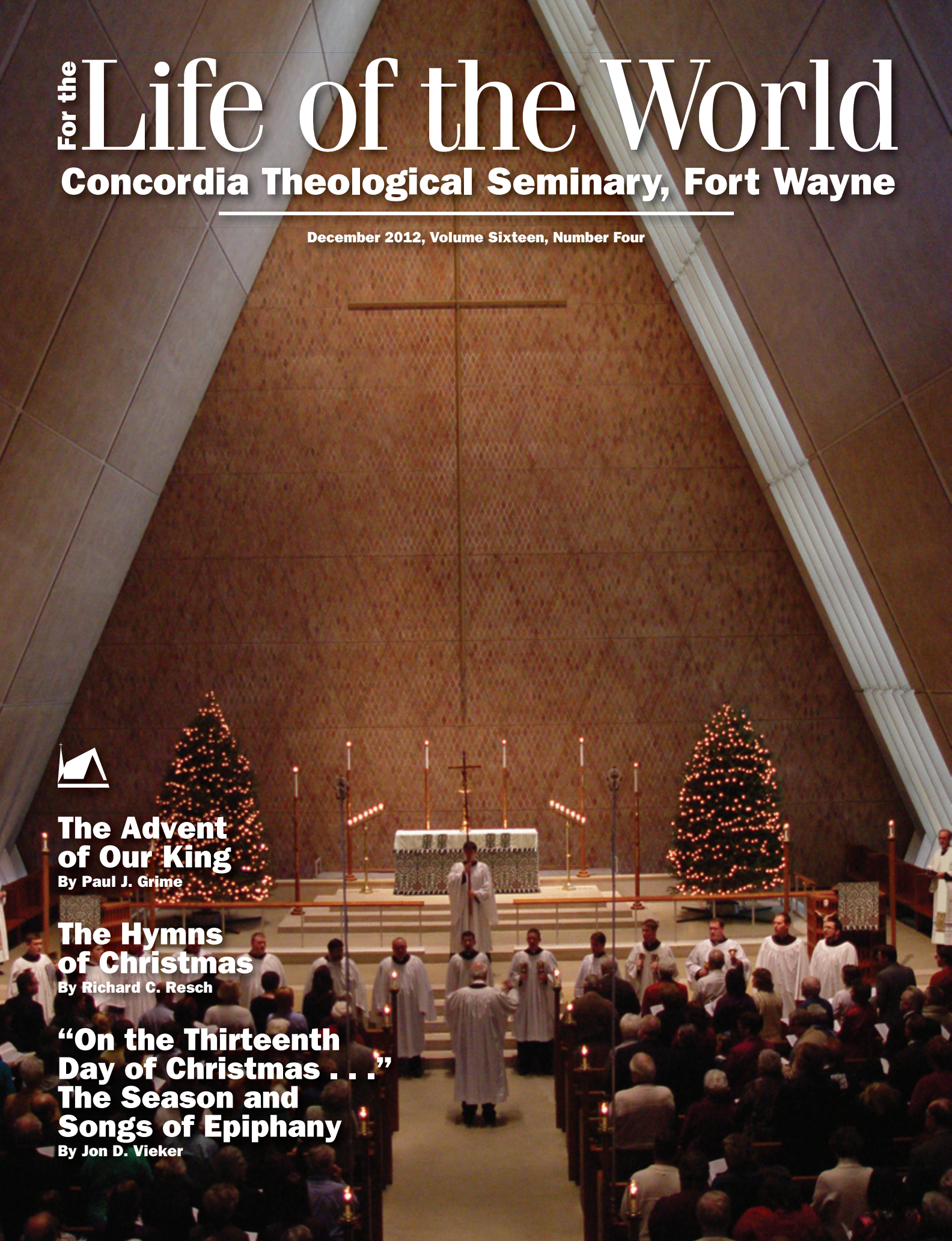
By Paul J. Grime

The Hymns of Christmas

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"On the Thirteenth Day of Christmas . . ." The Season and Songs of Epiphany

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7 The Hymns of Christmas

By Richard C. Resch

A survey of hymnals from a wide range of denominations reveals that the “Hymns of Christmas” section will usually end up being the clearest and strongest theology in the whole book. Perhaps that is because regardless of what a church believes, at Christmas there is a strong expectation that “Once in Royal David’s City,” “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing,” “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” “Angels We Have Heard on High” and “Joy to the World” *will be sung*.

10 “On the Thirteenth Day of Christmas . . .” The Season and Songs of Epiphany

By Jon D. Vieker

Within a few days after Christmas, the world has had enough. Following months and months of commercial hype, the decorations are down, the tree is on the curb and most folks are preparing for the obligatory, end-of-the-year countdown and half-hearted New Year’s resolutions. Yet the Church *continues* with its Christmas celebration . . . for 12 days and beyond. For throughout the Season of Epiphany, the Church confesses and proclaims to a world of darkness the Incarnation of the Jesus Christ, “the light who was coming into the world” (John 1:9).

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The Advent of

Over the course of her 60-year reign, Queen Elizabeth has made thousands upon thousands of appearances before her subjects. No matter where she goes, the reaction is nearly always the same: wild anticipation and excitement at the prospect of standing in the presence of royalty. While television and the Internet have lessened the distance between the people and their queen, there's nothing that can quite replace an actual face-to-face encounter with her.

In ancient times, rulers would often travel through their territories in order to assess the conditions in which their subjects lived. While most people, especially in remote regions, ordinarily had little communication with the outside world, you can be sure that communication stepped up in advance of a royal visit. Runners would go ahead of the king's entourage, entering each village with the exciting news, "The king is coming! The king is coming!"

That, essentially, is the message of Advent: "The King is coming!" And He's coming not just passing through town but coming to dwell with you! The hymns of Advent are replete with such announcements. One example, of Danish origin, begins like this:

*O bride of Christ, rejoice;
Exultant raise thy voice
To hail the day of glory
Foretold in sacred story.
Hosanna, praise, and glory!
Our King, we bow before Thee. (Lutheran Service Book [LSB] 335:1)*

Our King

By Paul J. Grime

And another begins:

*Lift up your heads, ye mighty gates!
Behold, the King of glory waits.
The King of kings is drawing near;
The Savior of the world is here. (LSB 340/341:1)*

Other hymns of Advent have titles like "O Lord, How Shall I Meet You" (LSB 334) and "Prepare the Royal Highway" (LSB 343).

As one might expect, these hymns don't appear out of a vacuum. For centuries, the Holy Gospel for the First Sunday in Advent was the story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Admittedly, that choice seems somewhat out of place. Why would we hear about an event that

occurred just days before Jesus' crucifixion when we are getting ready to celebrate quite a different event, namely, Jesus' birth?

The season of Advent, though the first on our Church Year calendars, was actually the last season to be added. Like the other seasons of the Church Year, its origins are far from clear. Once the celebration of our Lord's birth became firmly established in the fourth century, some churches began to add a period of preparation. At first, it was only a week or two; later, additional weeks were added. In some places, Advent consisted of a full seven weeks! Eventually, the Church settled on a four-Sunday observance.

The name "Advent," as you've likely heard before, comes from the Latin word *adventus*, which means "coming." Over the years, many have suggested a threefold "coming" that characterizes our Advent devotion: Christ came, Christ comes and Christ will come again. (We even have a hymn that embraces all three of those comings; see *LSB* 334.)

For most people, however, it's only the first coming, the coming at Bethlehem, that occupies their imagination. That's certainly fitting. Taking time to ponder God's promise of a Savior, a promise that was kept at that birth in Bethlehem, sets the joy of Christmas in its proper perspective. In one sense, our Advent devotion enables us to join with expectant Israel, capturing the centuries of anticipation during which God's people waited for their release from bondage to sin.

And so He came. By His life, death and resurrection He accomplished salvation for the whole world. But with His ascension, our Lord in no way wants to suggest that He has, in the meantime, left us to fend for ourselves. No, our Lord comes to us now to serve us. Through His divinely appointed means—through Word and Sacrament—Jesus continues to come to us with forgiveness, life and salvation in His wake. Weekly, even daily, we celebrate our Lord's advent among us.

There is still one more promise of our Lord—namely, that He will come again in glory. That will be His final advent, the coming for which the Church waits in anticipation. Through the ages, the Church's persistent prayer for the Lord's return has gone forth: "Come, Lord Jesus!"


Every season of the Church Year has its own character that shapes our prayer. At Christmas, we rejoice. During Lent, we express remorse for sin. At Easter, we celebrate Christ's victory over sin and death. Similarly, Advent has its own watchwords that characterize the season: hope and expectation. Given that the Christian lives with one foot planted in this world and the other planted firmly in heaven, those are good words. We need to cultivate a sense of expectancy, which is precisely why Advent is beneficial for us. When we rush too quickly through Advent in order to get on with Christmas, we shortchange ourselves. Thus, it is good to hear the Advent readings and sing the Advent hymns as they gently prod us to set our minds on things above and not on earthly things.

As we now enter a new Church Year, savor these weeks of Advent. Heed the preaching of John the Baptist and his call to repentance. Rejoice in the Lord and His gracious visitation among us. Join your voice with the saints of every age in that ancient prayer, "Come, Lord Jesus!" And in the words of one Lutheran hymnwriter, Valentin Thilo,

Arise, O Christian people!

Prepare yourselves today;

Prepare to greet the Savior,

Who takes your sins away. (LSB 354) 

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