

For the Life of the World

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The Advent of Our King

By Paul J. Grime

The Hymns of Christmas

By Richard C. Resch

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

By Jon D. Vieker

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By Paul J. Grime

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.

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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 Hymns of Christmas

By Richard C. Resch



Singing fills the air at Christmas like no other time of the year. People who usually only use their singing voice for “Take Me Out to the Ball Game” and “Happy Birthday,” find themselves humming and singing snippets of the carols that seem to be everywhere in the weeks leading up to Christmas.

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.

What is this music that so defines the season and celebration of Christmas? I am happy to report that for the most part it is a type of hymnody that *sings the birth of Christ*. Now it is not news to anyone that Christmas music has become quite a mixed bag, but let’s leave that bag with the world from which it came and focus instead on that which *sings of Christ and His birth*.

The singing I am talking about is incarnational theology (God made flesh and dwelling among us) in a poetic, strophic (stanza) and simple musical form. It is carol-like hymnody that is often wonderfully tuneful, accessible and memorable. Simply put, it is a combination of music and poetry that voices, announces beautifully and at times almost shouts, to all what God did for the world in a manger.

*“O rejoice, ye Christians loudly,
For our joy has now begun;
Wondrous things our God has done.”
(Lutheran Service Book [LSB] 897:1a)*

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*.

But there are different levels of presenting incarnational theology. This is where things become quite extraordinary

and wonderfully rich for Lutherans. For us, singing at Christmastide is far, far away from snowflakes and a sugar-coated, watered-down theology. We instead will sing of our great need for this Savior, and in doing so, we will not shy away from words like sin, blood or a cross.

Martin Luther sets this beautiful standard for singing the Nativity of our Lord in hymns like, “From Heaven Above to Earth I Come” and “We Praise You, Jesus, at Your Birth.”

*Instead of soft and silken stuff
You have but hay and straw so rough
On which as King, so rich and great,
To be enthroned in royal state. (LSB 358:11)*

*The gift from God's eternal throne
Here clothed in our poor flesh and bone. (LSB 382:2b)*

But Luther was not the first or last to give such clear incarnational theology to the church's singing. “Of the Father's Love Begotten” of Prudentius, “From East to West, from Shore to Shore” of Sedulius and “A Great and Mighty Wonder” of Germanus all sang with the same richness centuries before Martin Luther.

*Oh, that birth forever blessed,
When the virgin, full of grace,
By the Holy Ghost conceiving,
Bore the Savior of our race,
And the babe, the world's Redeemer,
First revealed His sacred face
Evermore and evermore. (LSB 384:2)*

And then, after Luther, Paul Gerhardt develops this theme in a truly magnificent way giving us some of the finest hymns in the whole hymnal. Here he freely talks of hell, Satan, sin, a Lamb, grief and bondage, cross and suffering—subjects that will not be dealt with in most churches on Christmas Eve.



For Lutherans, singing at Christmastide is far, far away from snowflakes and a sugar-coated, watered-down theology. We instead will sing of our great need for this Savior, and in doing so, we will not shy away from words like sin, blood or a cross.

*O Jesus Christ, Thy manger is
My paradise at which my soul reclineth.
For there, O Lord, Doth lie the Word
Made flesh for us; herein Thy grace forth shineth.*

*Thy light and grace Our guilt efface,
Thy heav'nly riches all our loss retrieving.
Immanuel, Thy birth doth quell
The pow'r of hell and Satan's bold deceiving.
(LSB 372:1,3)*


*See the Lamb, our sin once taking
To the cross, Suff'ring loss,
Full atonement making.
For our life His own He tenders,
And His grace All our race
Fit for glory renders. (LSB 360:4)*

*From the bondage that oppressed us,
From sin's fetters that possessed us,
From the grief that sore distressed us,
We, the captives, now are free. (LSB 375:4)*

“What Child Is This” by William Dix is one of the very few well-known, popular Christmas hymns that does indeed tell it like is.

*Why lies He in such mean estate
Where ox and ass are feeding?
Good Christian, fear; for sinners here
The silent Word is pleading.
Nails, spear shall pierce Him through,
The cross be borne for me, for you;
Hail, hail the Word made flesh,
The babe, the son of Mary! (LSB 370:2)*

A Christmas hymn by Pastor Stephen Starke has given us yet a new way of singing this theology. I can think of no better words to end my short commentary on Christmas hymns than this stanza, for it expresses the heart of all our music-making at the celebration of our Lord's birth.

*Lord Jesus Christ, You deigned to dwell
Among us here on earth
As God with us, Emmanuel,
To bring this holy birth.
Though rich, You willingly became
One with our poverty,
That we might share Your wealth and name
For all eternity! (LSB 362:4) *

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