

# For the Life of the World

## Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne

December 2012, Volume Sixteen, Number Four



### 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.

### 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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Adoration of the Magi, 1981, Sadao Watanabe. Hand colored Kappazuri Dyeed stencil print on Morigami (crumpled) paper, 41/100. Collection of the Brauer Museum of the Saint Procopius Abbey, Benedictine University, Lisle, Illinois.

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The word “epiphany” comes from the Greek New Testament and means “manifestation” or “appearing”—“. . . the *appearing* of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel . . .” (2 Tim. 1:10).

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# The Season and Songs of

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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).

### Christmas Beginnings

Evidence from the first and second centuries suggests that the very earliest celebrations of the Church Year centered around commemorating the most important events in Jesus' life, that is, His suffering, death and resurrection. Thus, Holy Week began to form as a first giant pillar of the Church Year, from which eventually grew the seasons of Lent and Eastertide on either side.

By the end of the second century, a second giant pillar gradually emerged as Christians began to commemorate not only the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection, but also His beginnings as “the Word made flesh” (John 1:14). Already by A.D. 200, Clement of Alexandria wrote that the Basilidians (a Gnostic sect) celebrated the baptism of Jesus on January 6, but that he himself was familiar with the tradition of celebrating Christ's *birth* on January 6. For the Eastern Church, then, the Festival of the Epiphany (January 6) was the original Christmas—a celebration of Christ's Incarnation, from which eventually grew the seasons of Advent and Epiphany on either side.

### Incarnation Manifestations

The word “epiphany” comes from the Greek New Testament and means “manifestation” or “appearing”—“. . . the *appearing* of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel . . .” (2 Tim. 1:10). “Epiphany” is an Incarnation word—God's Son appearing in the flesh for sinners. The themes of the Sundays during the season of Epiphany reflect Christ's gracious appearing:

- ✠ Epiphany (January 6)—the visit of the Gentile Magi to worship the toddler Jesus as King of the Jews (Matt. 2:1–12).
- ✠ First Sunday after the Epiphany—the Baptism of Jesus and the voice of the Father from heaven, “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:3–17).
- ✠ Second Sunday after the Epiphany—the Wedding at Cana and Jesus' “first sign,” where He showed forth His glory “and His disciples believed in Him” (John 2:1–11).
- ✠ Additional Sundays after the Epiphany—various miracles of Jesus, demonstrating that He is the Son of God and calling forth faith from unbelief.
- ✠ Last Sunday after the Epiphany—the Transfiguration of Jesus, where He displayed His divine glory to His disciples and then headed down the mountain toward Calvary and the empty tomb (Matt. 17:1–9).

### Songs of Thankfulness and Praise

The hymns of Epiphany reflect the central, incarnational themes found in the Holy Gospel for each Sunday. One of

# Epiphany

By Jon D. Vieker



the oldest hymns in the Epiphany section is “The Star Proclaims the King Is Here” (*Lutheran Service Book [LSB]* 399). Written in Latin by the fifth-century poet, Sedulius, this hymn was originally part of a much longer hymn tracing the whole life of Christ—literally “from A to Z,” with each stanza beginning with the next letter of the alphabet. The hymn as we know it today tells the Incarnation portion of that story: of cruel King Herod and his “senseless fear” (stanza 1); of the “eastern sages” who “saw from far/And followed on His guiding star” (stanza 2); of Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan as “the heav’nly Lamb . . . of whom no sin was known” (stanza 3); and of “the miracle divine,/When water reddened into wine!” (stanza 4).

Sedulius’ ancient hymn captures wonderfully the central themes of Epiphany all in one hymn, as does Christopher Wordsworth’s “Songs of Thankfulness and Praise” (*LSB* 394). And yet, whole hymns are also dedicated to each of these themes:

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**The hymns of Epiphany reflect the central, incarnational themes found in the Holy Gospel for each Sunday. One of the oldest hymns in the Epiphany section is “The Star Proclaims the King Is Here” (*LSB* 399). Written in Latin by the fifth-century poet, Sedulius, this hymn was originally part of a much longer hymn tracing the whole life of Christ—literally “from A to Z,” with each stanza beginning with the next letter of the alphabet.**

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- ✱ The Visit of the Magi—“As with Gladness Men of Old” (*LSB* 397);  
“Brightest and Best of the Stars of the Morning” (*LSB* 400).
- ✱ The Baptism of Jesus—“Jesus, Once with Sinners Numbered” (*LSB* 404);  
“To Jordan Came the Christ, Our Lord” (*LSB* 406/407).
- ✱ The Wedding at Cana—“Come, Join in Cana’s Feast” (*LSB* 408).
- ✱ The Transfiguration—“O Wondrous Type! O Vision Fair” (*LSB* 413);  
“’Tis Good, Lord, to Be Here” (*LSB* 414).

Each of these hymns beautifully unpacks the theme of the Gospel reading for the Sundays during the Epiphany season, and then retells that Gospel story on the wings of song.

One final theme of the Epiphany season—a theme woven in and around the themes of each Sunday’s Scripture—is the theme of “light,” specifically, Jesus as the light of the world or “Morningstar.” “Arise and Shine in Splendor” (*LSB* 396) expounds the words of Isaiah 40: “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon you” (Is. 60:1). “The People That in Darkness Sat” (*LSB* 412) proclaims in song the words of Isaiah 9: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light . . .” (Is. 9:1).

But the most famous hymn of light among our Epiphany hymns is Philipp Nicolai’s “O Morning Star, How Fair and Bright” (*LSB* 395). Oddly enough, Nicolai never conceived of his hymn as an Epiphany hymn. During the summer of 1597, he stood at the graves of nearly 1,400 members of his parish. In the face of death at every turn, Nicolai clung ever more firmly to the promise of eternal life . . . for himself and for his parishioners. He wrote “O Morning Star” shortly thereafter as a meditation on the life of the world to come. The abiding presence of Christ, the “Morning Star,” from this life into the next is further underscored as Nicolai penned each stanza in the shape of a chalice:

O let the harps break forth in sound!  
Our joy be all with music crowned,  
Our voices gladly blending!  
For Christ goes with us all the way—  
Today, tomorrow, ev’ry day!  
His love is never ending!  
Sing out! Ring out!  
Jubilation!  
Exultation!  
Tell the story!  
Great is He, the King of Glory!

Indeed, “Christ goes with us all the way”—from Incarnation, to font, to His body and blood in the Supper and into life everlasting. And *great* is the celebration . . . from the Thirteenth Day of Christmas and beyond! 🏰

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