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# Learning to Preach in Advent and Christmas from Luther

John T. Pless

“For whatever reason, in the ineffable wisdom of God, the speech of Martin Luther rang clear where others merely mumbled.”<sup>1</sup> The clarity of Luther’s voice is surely apparent in his Advent and Christmas preaching—the Lord’s Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem, the preaching of John the Baptist, the annunciation, and the nativity. Showing remarkable theological insight and pastoral warmth, Luther crafts vivid and graphic pictures of the meanness and misery of the biblical stories of the Lord’s birth. All the great themes of Luther’s theology—incarnation, justification, the “happy exchange,” sacraments, the theology of the cross—are present in these sermons. Advent and Christmas evoke the best in Luther’s preaching as he proclaims Bethlehem’s crib in light of the cross. Ulrich Asendorf rightly notes that “Luther’s Advent sermons are a microcosm of his spiritual world.”<sup>2</sup>

Luther’s preaching in Advent and Christmas is extensive. No less than 110 of Luther’s Christmas sermons have been preserved. Roughly half of these sermons are based on Luke 2:1-20, although he clearly delighted in preaching the prologue of the Fourth Gospel. Reading Luther’s Advent and Christmas sermons confirms the observation of Johann Gerhard that Luther’s preaching was “heroic disorder.”<sup>3</sup> This paper does not

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<sup>1</sup>Mark Noll, “The Lutheran Difference,” *First Things* (February 1992): 31.

<sup>2</sup>Ulrich Asendorf, “Luther’s Sermons on Advent as a Summary of His Theology,” in *A Lively Legacy: Essays in Honor of Robert Preus*, edited by Kurt Marquart, John Stephenson, and Bjarne W. Teigen (Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary, 1985), 13.

<sup>3</sup>Fred Meuser, *Luther the Preacher* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1983), 57. On Luther’s preaching, also see Ulrich Asendorf, *Die Theologie Martin Luther nach Seinen Predigten* (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988); Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: Shaping and Defining the Reformation 1521-1532*, translated by James Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 284-288; Richard Lischer, “Luther and Contemporary

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aim to systematize Luther's preaching (that would be an impossible task), but to lift up several central themes in his Advent and Christmas preaching that can help shape, inform, and enliven our preaching in this segment of the Church Year. To that end we will look primarily to Luther's church postils of 1521 and his house postils of 1532-1534.<sup>4</sup>

Some of Luther's most potent Advent preaching is based on Matthew 21:1-9, the gospel for the first Sunday in Advent. Luther's preaching of the Palm Sunday account focuses on the character of the "Beggar-King," as Luther calls Jesus, and the nature of our reception of Him. Luther glories in the lowliness of the Beggar-King, noting in a 1533 sermon:

Christ comes riding along like a beggar on a borrowed donkey without saddle or other trappings, necessitating that the disciples place their cloaks and garments on the donkey in a makeshift arrangement for the poor king. Accordingly in no way could the Jews excuse themselves. The prophecy had been so perfectly clear: when Christ would ride into Jerusalem, he would not do so as some earthly monarch with armor, spear, sword, and weaponry, all of which betoken bloodshed, severity, and force; but as the Evangelist says, meekly, or in the words of the prophet, poor and lowly. It is as though the prophet wanted to forewarn everyone to take good note of the donkey and realize that the one riding it is the Messiah indeed. So be aware and don't be gawking for a golden throne, velvet garments and pieces of gold, or impressive mounted retinue. For Christ will come in lowliness, meekness, and sorrowful of heart, for all to see, riding on a donkey. That

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Preaching: Narrative and Anthropology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* (1983): 487-504.

<sup>4</sup>*Sermons of Martin Luther*, volume 1, edited by John Nicholas Lenker (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983). All citations from this volume will be noted as Lenker; *The House Postils*, volume 1, edited by Eugene Klug (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996). All citations from this volume will be noted as Klug.

would be the extent of the pomp and splendor he would display with his entry into Jerusalem.<sup>5</sup>

Yet hidden in the weakness of the Beggar-King is God's own power to rescue sinners. Here Luther's theology of the cross leaves its imprint on his preaching as he vividly describes the outcome of the Lord's coming in our flesh: "This King is and shall be called sin's devourer and death's strangler, who extirpates sin and knocks death's teeth out; he disembowels the devil and rescues those who believe on him from sin and death, conducting them to be among the angels where eternal life and blessedness are."<sup>6</sup> In his coming to die for the sins of the world, Jesus "is life personified," says Luther, "and he comes to give you life."<sup>7</sup> The fact that Christ comes not on a proud steed with pomp and power, but on a donkey demonstrates that He is coming not to make war against sinners but to save them. "He indicates by this that he comes not to frighten man, nor to drive him or crush him, but to help him and carry his burden for him."<sup>8</sup> Christ comes as gift and blessing.

Luther's Advent preaching is, therefore, a call to faith. Luther warns his hearers not to be like the Jews who rejected their Messiah, failing to discern that He would not be like a secular lord. Instead Luther points to the humility of the Lord Christ as a very sign that He is the Savior promised by the prophets, saying to the congregation: "Don't gawk with your eyes but let your ears give insight to your eyes."<sup>9</sup>

In his preaching on the first Sunday in Advent, Luther does not weary of emphasizing that we do not come to the King, but that the King comes to us. In a 1521 sermon Luther drives home this point saying:

This is what is meant by "Thy king cometh." You do not seek him, but he seeks you. You do not find him, he finds you. For preachers come from him, not from you; their

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<sup>5</sup>Klug, 26.

<sup>6</sup>Klug, 27.

<sup>7</sup>Klug, 18.

<sup>8</sup>Lenker, 19.

<sup>9</sup>Klug, 27.

sermons come from him, not from you; your faith comes from him, not from you; and where he does not come, you remain outside; and where there is no Gospel there is no God, but only sin and damnation, free will may do, suffer, work, and live as it may and can. Therefore you should not ask, where to begin to be godly; there is no beginning, except where the king enters and is proclaimed.<sup>10</sup>

It should come as no surprise, then, that Luther directs his hearers to the preached word and the sacraments as the concrete places where the King makes His entry.<sup>11</sup> Even as Christ humbled Himself in His incarnation, so He stoops to us in the lowliness of the preaching, baptism, and the Sacrament of the Altar. According to Luther, the lowliness of the means that the Lord uses to distribute the gifts of salvation parallels the humility of His coming in the flesh. In both cases, faith clings to what is heard, not to what is seen.

If we don't want to understand this with our ears, but accept only that which our eyes see and our hands touch, we will miss our King and be lost. There's a big difference between this King and other kings. With the latter everything is outward pomp, great and gallant appearance, magnificent air. But not so with Christ. His mission and work is to help against sin and death, to justify and bring to life. He has placed his help in baptism and the sacrament, and incorporated it in the Word and preaching. To our eyes baptism appears to be nothing more than ordinary water, and the Sacrament of Christ's body and blood simple bread and wine, like other bread and wine, and the sermon, hot air from a man's mouth. But we must not trust what our eyes see, but listen to what this King is

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<sup>10</sup>Lenker, 27.

<sup>11</sup>Luther accents the preached word. Note his comment in his 1521 sermon on the First Sunday in Advent: "This agrees with the word 'Bethphage,' which means, as some say, mouth-house, for St. Paul says in Romans 1, 2, that the Gospel was promised afore in the Holy Scriptures, but it was not preached orally and publicly until Christ came and sent out his apostles. Therefore the church is a mouth-house, not a pen-house, for since Christ's advent that Gospel is preached orally which before was hidden in written books" (Lenker, 44).

teaching us in his Word and Sacrament, namely, I poured out my blood to save you from your sins, to rescue you from death and bring you to heaven; to that end I have given you baptism as a gift for the forgiveness of sins, and preach to you unceasingly by word of mouth concerning this treasure, sealing it to you with the Sacrament of my body and blood, so that you need never doubt. True, it seems little and insignificant, that by the washing of water, the Word, and the Sacrament this should all be effected. But don't let your eyes deceive you. At that time, it seemed like a small and insignificant thing for him to come riding on a borrowed donkey and later be crucified, in order to take away sin, death, and hell. No one could tell this by his appearance, but the prophet foretold it, and his work later fulfilled it. Therefore we must simply grasp it with our ears and believe it with our hearts, for our eyes are blind.<sup>12</sup>

Luther located the rejection of Jesus by the Jews in "their carnally minded thinking," which did not recognize the eternal God clothed in human flesh. As Luther preaches the offense of Advent, he identifies the same "carnally minded thinking" as the cause for continued contempt of Christ as He comes in word and sacrament.

But the rejection of Christ does not happen only with the Jews, but also among us, for the high and mighty scorn us because of our gospel and sacraments. What folly, they say, that I should let myself be baptized with water poured on my head, supposedly to be saved thereby; or that some poor parish preacher, barely able to put a coat on his back, should pronounce forgiveness and absolve me from my sins; or that receiving bread and wine in the Sacrament I should be saved. On that basis they despise a Christ-preacher. For it goes with the territory to be despised by reason of Christ's poverty. As a result, when a man becomes a preacher he is more despised than some lowly knave of no reputation. There is no station in life quite as scorned and humble as that of a preacher. That happens

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<sup>12</sup>Klug, 28.

not because of us or the preacher, but because Christ is despised on all sides in the world. No wonder that the aristocrats and plutocrats say, Why should we believe some tramp-like, beggarly cleric? Why doesn't our Lord God send us a fine pulpit-prince to preach to us? Him we would believe. However, just as Christ's preachers are despised, so people despise his baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar. Virtually no peasant retains respect for them, let alone burghers and nobles. Under the papacy people mocked at indulgences and pilgrimages, and yet they were highly regarded. Now, however, the prevailing word is, Huh, if all you can do is preach about Christ and faith, I'm fed up with that already, I've heard it all many times before.<sup>13</sup>

In the traditional lectionary, the Second Sunday in Advent sounds an eschatological note based on Luke 21:25-36. Luther contrasted the previous Sunday's focus on the coming of Christ to suffer with the apocalyptic message of the Gospel for the Second Sunday in Advent:

Last Sunday you heard about his riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, minus all pretentious show. He had no place to call his own, not even a foot of space; and besides, he later was crucified. He is facing a poor, miserable future, not as a master but as a servant, whose desire was to serve in such a way as to die for us. . . . To sum up, during his first advent he rendered the greatest service which no angel, no creature was able to render, and prepared a kingdom for his believers and elect, but when the number of elect is complete, he will return not as a servant but as a master, in order to free us from earth, maggoty mire, death, and decay.<sup>14</sup>

Compared with much of the eschatological preaching of the late Middle Ages, Luther's preaching seems mild.<sup>15</sup> While

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<sup>13</sup>Klug, 35.

<sup>14</sup>Klug, 38.

<sup>15</sup>John Dolan describes such preaching at the threshold of the Reformation: "Preachers were preoccupied with the theme of sin and the grim face of



Luther's preaching for the Second Sunday in Advent is replete with warnings regarding the quickness of the Lord's return to judgement and the need for constant watchfulness lest that Day overtake people unprepared, he strives to have his hearers "discern Judgement Day correctly, to know what he (Christ) means for us and why we hope and await his return."<sup>16</sup> After describing how the pope preaches a Christ who is a stern judge with whom we must be reconciled by our works, Luther goes on to preach the comfort which is to be found in Christ's final advent:

. . . in this Gospel he teaches us differently, namely, that he will come not to judge and damn us but to redeem and save us, and to fulfill all for which we have petitioned him, and to bring us his kingdom. To the ungodly and the unbelievers he will come as judge and punish them as his enemies and the Christians' foes, who have afflicted Christians with all kinds of misery. But to the believers and Christians he will come as a redeemer.<sup>17</sup>

In a similar fashion, Luther chides the fanatics for robbing Christians of the comfort of the Lord's return.

The godless fanatical preachers are to be censured who in their sermons deprive people of these words of Christ and faith in them, who desire to make people devout by terrifying them and who teach them to prepare for the last day by relying on their good works as satisfaction for their sins. Here despair, fear, and terror must remain and grow

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death waiting for the moment of merited punishment. There was an emphasis on the horrors of hell and the suffering of the damned. Their sermons were filled with descriptions of burning trees on which hung the souls of those who did not attend church services, vultures gnawing at men's vitals, venomous serpents stinging the unholy, boiling lakes, frozen fens, heated ovens and vile dungeons. . . . Everywhere the emphasis was on the negative side of man's salvation, his sins and punishment" (*History of the Reformation* [New York: The New American Library, 1965], 186, cited in Stanley Schneider, "Luther, Preaching, and the Reformation," *Interpreting Luther's Legacy*, edited by Fred Meuser and Stanley Schneider [Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1969], 124).

<sup>16</sup>Klug, 51.

<sup>17</sup>Klug, 51.

and with it hatred, aversion, and abhorrence for the coming of the Lord, and enmity against God be established in the heart; for they picture Christ as nothing but a stern judge whose wrath must be appeased by works, and they never present him as the Redeemer, as he calls and offers himself, of whom we are to expect that out of pure grace he will redeem us from sin and evil.<sup>18</sup>

While Luther expresses his personal opinion that the end times are near, he does not engage in detailed speculation regarding the parousia.<sup>19</sup> Instead, Luther's preaching on this theme is "an eschatology of faith," to use the words of T. F. Torrance, as Luther urges his hearers to find joy in the glad announcement that "your redemption draweth nigh."<sup>20</sup>

The traditional Gospel pericopes for the Third and Fourth Sundays in Advent tell of John the Baptist. Luther develops two major themes in his preaching on Matthew 11:2-10 and John 1:19-28 – the offense of Christ and the function of John the Baptist as God's finger. In his sermons for the Third Sunday in Advent, Luther underscores our Lord's words to the disciples of John, "And blessed is he who is not offended because of me" (Matthew 11:6). Here Luther notes that the Jews are offended by the Christ who establishes His kingdom among the poor, the lame, and the blind. John the Baptist points to a Savior who offends the spiritual instincts of the self-righteous. "The world is offended that Christ is so miserable and poor."<sup>21</sup>

Originally, God sent John the Baptist to the Jews. Thus Luther says in a sermon on Matthew 11:2-10, that Jesus did not preach

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<sup>18</sup>Lenker, 78.

<sup>19</sup>For example, in a 1521 Advent sermon Luther states: "I do not wish to force any one to believe as I do; neither will I permit anyone to deny me the right to believe that the last day is near at hand. These words and signs of Christ compel me to believe that such is the case" (Lenker, 62). For a treatment of Luther's apocalyptic views, see Mark Edwards, *Luther's Last Battles* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 97-114.

<sup>20</sup>T. F. Torrance, "The Eschatology of Faith: Martin Luther," in *Luther: Theologian for Catholics and Protestants*, 145-213, edited by George Yule (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986).

<sup>21</sup>Klug, 66.

this sermon for the sake of John the Baptist. "Rather he preached this sermon for the sake of the Jews that they might recognize John the Baptist and understand his mission."<sup>22</sup> Now John the Baptist preaches to us for "to the Jews he (Christ) came in the flesh; to us he comes in the Word."<sup>23</sup> It is the mission of John the Baptist that Luther takes up in his sermons for the Fourth Sunday in Advent. Here Luther holds up John the Baptist as finger of God. "Let us look to the mouth and finger of John with which he bears witness and points, so that we do not close our eyes and lose our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; for to the present day John still very diligently, faithfully, and richly points and directs us here, in order that we may be saved."<sup>24</sup> According to Luther, John is the great preacher of the law, but he is an even greater preacher of the gospel. Luther calls John "an image, and a type, and also a pioneer, the first of all preachers of the Gospel," because he points to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.<sup>25</sup>

John's proclamation of the Lamb of God prepares the way for the preaching of Christmas. Thomas Wabel has characterized Luther's Christmas sermons as reflecting "the simplicity of Scripture."<sup>26</sup> At the beginning of a 1522 Christmas sermon on Luke 2:1-14, Luther suggests that "this Gospel is so clear that it requires very little explanation, but it should be well considered and taken deeply to the heart."<sup>27</sup> For the most part, Luther follows his own rule; he simply narrates the events of the nativity. Luther's Christmas preaching is marked by a simplicity that assists the hearer in pondering the profound things that are taking place as God's Son is born.

Luther sees the incarnation of Jesus in light of His atonement, His birth in light of His death. We have already noted how Luther's theology of the cross left its imprint on the Advent

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<sup>22</sup>Klug, 69.

<sup>23</sup>Klug, 95.

<sup>24</sup>Klug, 91.

<sup>25</sup>Lenker, 130.

<sup>26</sup>Thomas Wabel, "The Simplicity of Scripture in Luther's Christmas Sermons," *Lutheran Quarterly* (Autumn 1995): 241.

<sup>27</sup>Lenker, 137.

sermons; this is true to an even greater degree with the Christmas sermons, as Herman Sasse appropriately notes:

Obviously the "theology of the cross" does not mean that for a theologian the church year shrinks together into nothing but Good Friday. Rather it means that Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost cannot be understood without Good Friday. Next to Irenaeus and Athanasius, Luther was the greatest theologian of the incarnation. He was this because in the background of the manger he saw the cross. His understanding of the Easter victory was equal to that of any theologian of the Eastern Church. He understood it because he understood the victory of the Crucified One.<sup>28</sup>

Luther saw Bethlehem through the lens of Calvary. Luther's theology of the cross, formulated in the Heidelberg Theses of 1518, is given expression in his commentary on the Magnificat three years later. There Luther speaks of God's work in Mary as a work that "is done in the depths," a work that cannot be perceived by carnal eyes. He writes: "Even now and to the end of the world, all His works are such that out of that which is nothing, worthless, despised, wretched, and dead, he makes that which is something, precious, honorable, blessed, and living."<sup>29</sup> Mary, no more than "a simple maiden, tending the cattle and doing the housework," hardly esteemed in the eyes of the world is chosen and exalted by the Most High God to be the mother of the Savior. "Thus God's work and His eyes are in the depths, but man's only in the height."<sup>30</sup> The "foolishness of God" (1 Corinthians 1:27) is not confined to Calvary, but embraces the incarnation as well.

Luther sees God operating "in the depths" at Bethlehem. Drawing attention to the ordinariness of the circumstances

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<sup>28</sup>Hermann Sasse, *We Confess Jesus Christ*, translated by Norman Nagel (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1984), 39. For the influence of the theology of the cross on Luther's preaching, see John T. Pless, "Martin Luther: Preacher of the Cross," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* (April-July 1987): 83-101.

<sup>29</sup>*Luther's Works* (American Edition) 21:299. The text of the Heidelberg Theses may be found in LW 31:35-70.

<sup>30</sup>LW 21:301, 302.

surrounding the Lord's birth—the poverty of Mary and Joseph, the arduous journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, and the birth in the stable, Luther concludes:

Nobody notices or understands what God performs in the stable. . . . Thus God indicates that he pays no attention at all to what the world is or has or can do, and on the other hand the world proves that it knows nothing at all of, and pays no attention to what God is or has or does. Behold, this is the first symbol wherewith Christ puts to shame the world and indicates that all of its doing, knowledge, and being are contemptible to us, that the greatest wisdom is in reality foolishness, that its best performance is wrongdoing, and that the greatest good is evil."<sup>31</sup>

In obscure Bethlehem, God demonstrates His goodness "by stepping down so deep into flesh and blood."<sup>32</sup>

Luther's Christmas preaching hangs on to the flesh and blood of God in the manger. Sentimental reflections on the "little baby Jesus" are not present in his preaching. Rather Luther leads his hearers to the crib that now holds the enfleshed God. In a 1534 sermon, Luther exults in the fact that God did not become an angel but a man:

The angels are much more glorious creatures by nature than we human beings. But God did not consider that; he is not an angel, nor did he become an angel. The angels, moreover, are blameless and holy. But he sets the course, chooses the lowly, poor human nature, lost in sin and subject under the devil's rule and power of death, plagued and troubled through and through by the devil and his ceaseless pressure. That meant sinking to the lowest depths.<sup>33</sup>

In "sinking to the lowest depths" God raises our humanity above and beyond the angels; He exalts our flesh to the right

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<sup>31</sup>LW 52:9-10.

<sup>32</sup>LW 52:12.

<sup>33</sup>Klug, 113.

hand of God. "That is why we can boast that God has become our brother."<sup>34</sup>

As Luther preaches the Lukan birth narrative, he approaches Christmas from the perspective of Mary, the angels, and the shepherds. Luther emphasizes the naturalness of our Lord's birth in a sermon for Christmas Eve in 1522:

. . . there are some who express opinions concerning how this birth took place, claiming Mary was delivered of her child while she was praying, in great joy, before she was aware of it, without any pains. I do not condemn these devotional considerations – perhaps they were devised for the benefit of simple-minded folk – but we must stay with the Gospel text which says "born of the Virgin Mary." There is no deception here, but, as the words indicate, it was a real birth. . . . The birth happened to her exactly as to other women, consciously with her mind functioning normally and with the other parts of her body helping along, as is proper at the time of birth, in order that she should be his natural mother and he her natural normal son. For this reason her body did not abandon its natural functions which belong to childbirth, except that she gave birth without sin, without shame, without pain, and without injury, just as she had conceived without sin. The curse of Eve, which reads: "In pain you shall bear your children" (Genesis 3:16) did not apply to her. In other respects things happened to her exactly as they happen to any woman giving birth.<sup>35</sup>

From the body of the Virgin, the Son of God takes on our flesh and blood and so is born to be our Redeemer. Luther's Christology controls his view of Mary, leading him to acknowledge her as the Mother of God.

Luther esteems Mary as the mother of the incarnate Savior and he honors her as the model of faith for all believers. It is from Mary that we learn to meditate rightly on the Lord's birth.

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<sup>34</sup>Klug, 133.

<sup>35</sup>LW 52:11-12.

In an illustration which he attributes to St. Bernard, Luther declares:

there are three miracles here (in the incarnation): that God and man should be joined in this Child; that a mother should remain a virgin; that Mary should have such faith as to believe that this mystery would be accomplished in her. The last is not the least of the three. The Virgin birth is a mere trifle for God; that God should become a man is a greater miracle; but the most amazing of all is that this maiden should credit the announcement that she, rather than some other virgin, had been chosen to be the mother of God. . . . Had she not believed, she could not have conceived. She held fast to the word of the angel because she had become a new creature. Even so must we be transformed and renewed in heart from day to day. This is the word of the prophet: "Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given" (Isa. 9:6). This is the hardest point, not so much to believe that he is the son of the Virgin and God Himself, as to believe that this Son of God is ours.<sup>36</sup>

As Mary heard the heavenly words of the angel, believed those words, and so conceived and carried the Son of God in her womb, so we hear the words of God and by those words faith is conceived. In fact, Luther says "He is more mine than Mary's."<sup>37</sup>

The first Christmas sermon was preached by angels to a congregation of shepherds. In a 1532 sermon on the Lukan pericope, Luther points out that "This Gospel has two parts. The first has to do with the account itself and its meaning for us today. The second part is the message of the angels telling of its fruit and power, and how we are to profit from it."<sup>38</sup> It is not enough that Christ is born. Without the proclamation of His birth, we would left without its blessing; the new born Savior

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<sup>36</sup>Roland Bainton, *The Martin Luther Christmas Book* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 22-23.

<sup>37</sup>LW 51:215.

<sup>38</sup>Klug, 100.

would still be the "hidden God."<sup>39</sup> God not preached remains hidden and inaccessible, that is, we are left under the terror of His silence. In the same sermon, Luther asserts that "Christ might have been born a hundred times over, but it would all have been in vain if it had not been preached and revealed to us." Through the gift of preaching, the angel brings joy to the shepherds by proclaiming "For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11). This angelic message, says Luther, is a short sermon but one which "compresses the entire Holy Scripture in one bundle."<sup>40</sup>

In a 1533 sermon Luther dwells on the doxological character of the angelic anthem. "It could justly be called the true SANCTUS, in letters of gold, even as the message might rightly be called the angel's sermon, because it was an angel, not a human being, that delivered it. So this song is properly the angels' hymn, because a heavenly host sang it, not human beings."<sup>41</sup> In their hymn, angels tutor human beings in the true worship of God, a worship that is grounded in the flesh of Jesus. Luther understands the true worship of God in light of the First Commandment.<sup>42</sup> As Luther knows of no God apart from the one who sleeps in Mary's lap and hangs dead on the cross, his understanding of worship is normed by the First Commandment and given incarnational content with the flesh of Jesus. Thus Luther preaches on the *Gloria*:

Accordingly this angel anthem proclaims that whatever is outside of or apart from Christ stands condemned before God as blasphemy, idolatry, and abomination. God can

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<sup>39</sup>One may see Chapter 4, "The Preached God," in Gerhard Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation*, 87-133 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

<sup>40</sup>Klug, 109, 119.

<sup>41</sup>Note the implications here for liturgical preaching. The Divine Service is founded on the twin pillars of word and sacrament. As Christ comes to us in His word, the congregation welcomes Him with the angelic hymn that announces the incarnation. As the same Lord comes to us in His body and blood, the congregation anticipates this gift with the angelic hymn (the Sanctus) that proclaims His presence. Note the way in which the Gloria and the Sanctus are parallel in the liturgical structure of the Divine Service.

<sup>42</sup>One may see Vilmos Vajta, *Luther on Worship*, translated by Ulrich Leupold (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), 3-63.



only be honored in and through this child who is Christ the Lord. Apart from him no person can find and worship God, but grossly offends and dishonors him. That means that everything across the world that is called worship and service of God must end. Truly holy and God-pleasing offerings, genuine service of God, will bear Christ's name or is in Christ; otherwise it is no divine service. God has channeled his worship in this child, and where he is not worshiped in this way, true worship is not present.<sup>43</sup>

The angels deliver their sermon to the shepherds, held captive by sin, death, and the devil. Because "this hymn did not originate on earth but was brought down from heaven to the earth by the angels" it gives joy and courage to the shepherds.<sup>44</sup> As good preachers, the angels direct the shepherds to the place where Christ is—to the manger in Bethlehem. "If these shepherds had not believed the angel, they would not have gone to Bethlehem nor would they have done any of the things which are related of them in the Gospel."<sup>45</sup> From the shepherds we learn "that the preaching and singing of the angels were not in vain."<sup>46</sup>

For Luther, the revelation of the glory of God in the birth of His Son to the shepherds is consistent with the way in which God uses what the world holds to be weak and foolish to make His mercy manifest. Like Mary, the shepherds are models of faith, which lives from the word. Luther also sees in the shepherds a model for Christian vocation.

Here is another excellent and helpful lesson, namely, that after the shepherds have been enlightened and have come to a true knowledge of Christ, they do not run out into the desert—which is what the crazy monks and nuns in the cloisters did! No the shepherds continue in their vocation, and in the process they also serve their fellow men. For true faith does not create people who abandon their secular

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<sup>43</sup>Klug, 122-123.

<sup>44</sup>Klug, 143.

<sup>45</sup>LW 52:32.

<sup>46</sup>Klug, 144.

vocation and begin a totally different kind of living, a way of life which the totally irrational monks considered essential to being saved, even though it was only an externally different way of existence.<sup>47</sup>

Although most of Luther's preaching was based on the Lukan account of the nativity, he demonstrates a fondness for John's Gospel and his preaching of the Christmas story often echoes John 1:1-14.<sup>48</sup> Luther asserts that this pericope "is the most important of all the Gospels of the church year, and yet it is not, as some think, obscure or difficult. For upon it is clearly founded the important article of faith concerning the divinity of Christ."<sup>49</sup> In a sermon on John's prologue, Luther says "John

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<sup>47</sup>Klug, 148. In Luther's homiletical treatment of the shepherds, we are given an excellent window into his doctrine of vocation—a doctrine that contemporary Lutheranism desperately needs to recover in light of the "neomonasticism" of contemporary American Evangelicalism. One may see Harold Senkbeil, *Sanctification: Christ in Action* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1989), 12-15. In his treatise of 1520, "On the Freedom of a Christian," Luther writes (*LW* 31:371): "We conclude, therefore, that a Christian lives not in Himself, but in Christ and in the neighbor. Otherwise he is not a Christian. He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbor." This is expressed liturgically in the Post-Communion Collect: "We give thanks to you, almighty God, that you have refreshed us through this salutary gift, and we implore you that of your mercy you would strengthen us through the same in faith toward you and in fervent love toward one another. . . ." Homiletically, Luther gives expression to this in his Christmas sermons. For example in a 1521 Christmas sermon Luther says (Lenker, 146): "These are the two things in which a Christian is to exercise himself, the one that he draws Christ into himself, and that by faith he makes him his own, appropriates to himself the treasures of Christ and confidently builds upon them; the other that he condescends to his neighbor and lets him share in that which he has received, even as he shares in the treasures of Christ." Contra Richard Caemmerer's distinction of "faith-goal sermons" from "life-goal sermons" (*Preaching for the Church* [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959], 179-190), Luther preaches faith which is active in love.

<sup>48</sup>On Luther and the Fourth Gospel see Victor Pfitzner, "Luther as Interpreter of John's Gospel," *Lutheran Theological Journal* (August 1984): 65-73; Carl Stange, "The Johannine Character of Luther's Doctrine," *Lutheran World Review* (October 1949): 65-77.

<sup>49</sup>Lenker, 173.

begins his Gospel in such an exalted tone and continues in the same vein so that in almost every single letter he preaches the deity of Christ, which is done by no other evangelist."<sup>50</sup> Luther loves John's Gospel because the evangelist makes it clear that "Whoever has touched Christ's skin has actually touched God."<sup>51</sup> The Christian's comfort is only to be found in the Word made flesh. A Christmas sermon from 1527 makes this point in a most striking way:

He has power to cast us into hell and yet he took soul and body like ours. . . . If he were against us he would not have clothed himself in our flesh. . . . Here God is not to be feared but loved, and that love brings the joy of which the angel speaks. . . . Satan, on the other hand, brings home to me the Majesty and my sin, and terrifies me so that I despair. . . . But the angel does not declare that he is in heaven. . . . "You shall find . . ." He points out that he has come to us in our flesh and blood. . . . Our joy is not that we ascend and put on his nature as is the case when the Mass is made a boastful decking of ourselves in divinity. Do not be driven to distraction, but remain down here and listen, "Unto you a Saviour." He does not come with horses but in a stable. . . . Reason and will would ascend and seek above, but if you will have joy, bend yourself down to this place. There you will find that boy given for you who is your Creator lying in a manger. I will stay with that boy as he sucks, is washed, and dies. . . . There is no joy but in this boy. Take him away and you face the Majesty which terrifies. . . . I know of no God but this one in the manger. . . . Do not let yourself be turned away from this

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<sup>50</sup>LW 52:53

<sup>51</sup>Ian Siggins, *Martin Luther's Doctrine of Christ* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 232. In addition to Siggins' outstanding treatment of Luther's incarnational Christology, one may see Marc Lienhard, *Luther: Witness to Jesus Christ* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1982), 153-194; Norman Nagel, "Martinus: 'Heresy, Doctor Luther, Heresy!'" The Person and Work of Christ," in *Seven-Headed Luther*, edited by Peter Newman Brooks (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 25-49; and Franz Posset, *Luther's Catholic Christology* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1988).

humanity. . . . What wonderful words (Col. 2:9)! . . . If you separate them, the joy is gone. O Thou boy, lying in the manger, thou art truly God who hast created me, and thou wilt not be wrathful with me because thou comest to me in this loving way – more loving cannot be imagined.<sup>52</sup>

In Luther's preaching Christology and soteriology are never separated. Or as Ulrich Asendorf notes: "Christ shares all He is and has with those who belong to Him. In this way christological facts are directly transformed soteriologically."<sup>53</sup>

Luther's Advent and Christmas preaching, like all good preaching, is finally doxological. In many respects his ballad-like "From Heaven Above to Earth I Come" is a summation of Luther's Christmas preaching.<sup>54</sup>

In his book *Against the Protestant Gnostics*, Philip Lee suggests that if contemporary Protestantism is to be delivered from its enslavement to gnostic captivity, preaching that is faithful to the biblical narrative, Christological in content, and liturgical in shape will need to be restored to the church's pulpits.<sup>55</sup> The gnostic forces of our age threaten the church nowhere as much as they do in December as the clear preaching of repentance in Advent is often muted by the sentimentalism encouraged by the hungry consumerism of our culture and Christmas is transformed into a festival of moralisms. Preaching cannot but benefit greatly from that preacher of Wittenberg who always proclaimed that we have God in the flesh for our forgiveness, life, and salvation.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>Quoted in Nagel, 48.

<sup>53</sup>Asendorf, 2.

<sup>54</sup>TLH 85; LW 37/38.

<sup>55</sup>Philip J. Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 218-225. One may also see Maxwell Johnson, "Let's Keep Advent Right Where It Is," *Lutheran Forum* (November 1994): 45-47.

<sup>56</sup>Recommended for the pastor's own devotional reading and spiritual formation in preparation for Advent-Christmas preaching (and liturgical preaching in general) are *Day By Day We Magnify Thee: Daily Readings for the Church Year From the Writings of Martin Luther*, edited and translated by M. Steiner and P. Scott (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1982); *Luther's Family Devotions*, edited by Georg Link and translated by Joel Baseley (Dearborn: Mark V Publications, 1996).