

The Savior of the Nations Is Coming Home

Luke 1:26-38 / "Savior of the Nations, Come" - ELH #90

by Rev. Michael G. Lilienthal

Read Luke 1:26-38

P: O Lord, have mercy upon us.

C: Thanks be to You, O Lord!

Dear Christian friends,

We live in constant expectation. Like Mary, who heard the good news, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is *with you!*" we are eager to see this Immanuel, God *with us*. This is why we sing in the hymn by Bishop Ambrose of Milan, "Savior of the nations, *come!*"!

Sing ELH #90:1-4

Let us pray:

O God, You gave Your servant Ambrose grace to proclaim the Gospel with eloquence and power. As bishop of the great congregation of Milan, he fearlessly bore reproach for the honor of Your name. Mercifully grant to all bishops and pastors such excellence in preaching and fidelity in ministering Your Word, that Your people shall be partakers of the divine nature; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.¹

I. His Home Is Here, Among Us

¹ William C. Weedon, *Celebrating the Saints* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2016), 223.

“Virgin’s Son,” we address our Lord, “make here Thy home!” In this one line of poetry, we acknowledge something important: the Virgin-born Savior did make his home in Mary’s womb – but it was only to sojourn there for nine months until his birth. And we declare, “Marvel now, O heav’n and earth, / That the Lord chose such a birth.” We “Marvel” because the almighty Lord, God, the creator of the cosmos, chose, stooped, humbled himself to *such* a birth.

St. Paul reflected on this birth: “Christ Jesus...though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (Phil. 2:5-7). Is there anything more worthy of marveling? The position of God, of ruler over all creation, was relinquished, in order for that great King to take the position of a servant. God became man.

This is an incomprehensible miracle. As the great theologian Martin Chemnitz said,

Scripture affirms that it is a mystery, and indeed beyond controversy a great mystery, that God was made manifest in the flesh (1 Tim. 3:16), and in 1 Cor. 2:7 Paul says that it is wisdom hidden in a mystery, which none of the princes of this world understands, that the Lord of glory was crucified.²

Indeed, Paul says “it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God which God

² Martin Chemnitz, *The Two Natures in Christ*, translated by J. A. O. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), 143.

decreed before the ages for our glory” (1 Cor. 2:6-7). And he confesses in poetic, song-like fashion:

Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness:

He was manifested in the flesh,
vindicated by the Spirit,
seen by angels,
proclaimed among the nations,
believed on in the world,
taken up in glory. (1 Tim. 3:16)

This, in fact, is what Luther understands to be the “only one single sacrament” if we spoke “according to the usage of the Scriptures.”³ The incarnation of the Son of God, God made flesh, which is nothing but God given to us for our salvation, this is *the* sacrament. This is why we call him, “Savior of the nations.” St. John writes, “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God,... born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:12-14). And we remember the promise of God himself from Genesis: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, / and between your offspring and her offspring” (Gen. 3:15).

Therefore, we sing,

Not by human flesh and blood,
By the Spirit of our God
Was the Word of God made flesh—
Woman’s Offspring, pure and fresh.

³ LW 36:18

And so, look: the Son of God sojourned in the womb of a virgin for nine months. His second sojourning was on this earth for 33 years; his third was in the grave for three days. This was all done for us and for our salvation. To this, Martin Chemnitz again assigns a great deal of ink for discussion, including this: It “was necessary for our Mediator, Redeemer, and Savior to be not only God or only man...

1. Because human nature was doomed to eternal punishment in accord with the sentence of divine judgment spoken on the day when Adam fell, therefore the Son of God offered Himself for the assumption of human nature and later did assume it, so that man might not be destroyed by death.

2. Because human nature after the Fall was subject to the wrath of God and damnation, it was necessary that our Mediator make satisfaction for us in the human nature....

In the same way we should piously consider not only why the human nature suffices for the work of redemption and salvation, but also why it was necessary that the divine nature of the Son be united with it.

1. Because there would not have been an adequate ransom (λύτρον) for sin and God’s wrath, which are boundless evils. For this reason therefore the price is so great and the merit of the suffering and death of Christ [so great] [sic] that it is the propitiation for the sins of the whole world. For the Son of God suffered and died in His own flesh.⁴

It is truly, therefore, a “Wondrous birth,” and “wondrous Child / Of the Virgin undefiled.” It was therefore also necessary for him to be “by all the world disowned,” for he took on humility for us, “he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8). And out of that death, “Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at

⁴ Chemnitz, *Two Natures*, 148.

the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:9-11). When Jesus’ sojourning began in the womb of Mary, there was his humiliation. But when he paid the price, when he proffered the ransom, when all the world was saved under him, there was his exaltation, as he came out of the grave. So when we look at our nativity scenes, and we see the Christ-child resting in the manger, surrounded by Mary and Joseph and the wise men and shepherds and animals, we understand that Christ-child in the context of what he would accomplish: That child would perform miracles, he would suffer, he would die, he would rise from the dead, and he would ascend to heaven to rule over all creation, and thus we sing,

Wondrous birth! O wondrous Child
Of the Virgin undefiled!
Though by all the world disowned,
Still to be in heav’n enthroned.

Through his sojourn, the Son of God and Savior of the nations was working to save the world. And when he did, his resurrection sealed the accomplishment. He returned, therefore, and rules now in the age of our salvation. The mighty, kingly God—how comforting!—is our Savior! He has paid the price! We come before him in confidence! The angel Gabriel summarized all this to Mary: “you shall call his name Jesus,” which means “the Lord is salvation.” “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will

be no end.” Our Savior is our King. The Savior of the nations is the King of the nations. Therefore his kingdom is a kingdom of salvation, and the citizens are saved and holy.

The fourth verse of St. Ambrose’s hymn gives this summary as well:

From the Father forth He came
And returneth to the same,
Captive leading death and hell—
High the song of triumph swell!

So our Savior’s home, having completed his threefold sojourn of humiliation, is also a threefold home: he dwells there in heaven, at the right hand of the Father — from Mark’s Gospel: “So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God” (Mark 16:19); he dwells here with us, in our hearts — from Matthew’s Gospel: “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20); and finally, he will be united with us in eternity — from John’s Gospel: “In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also” (John 14:2-3).

II. Our Home Is There, With Him

So when we continue with St. Ambrose’s hymn, we summarize what went before: “Thou, the Father’s only Son, / Hast o’er sin the vict’ry won.” This is the foundation of our faith, of our hope, of our singing. We have witnessed Christ winning the victory! “For everyone who has been born of God vanquishes the world,” wrote John. “And this is the victory that has vanquished the world — our faith” (1 John 5:4,

Lilienthal). We know, having witnessed Christ's victory, that that victory is also ours.

So the hymn goes on:

“Boundless shall Thy kingdom be; / When shall we its glories see?”

Our theme is “Witnessing Christ.” But with eyes veiled in this corrupt world, how can we see him? Too often we instead see only pain. We see our lack. We see suffering. We see only the material. We see only a young pregnant woman, with a child out of wedlock. But we are taught to witness behind all these things, the spiritual truths. Behind the pain, we see eternal joy. Behind our lack, we see superabundant gifts and grace. Behind suffering, we see resurrection. Behind the material, we see the heavenly. Behind that pregnant young woman, we see the Savior of the nations. We are taught to see all this in our worship. Here is where we witness Christ, because here the Word comes to you, the Sacraments are administered to you. Jesus was born as a baby *for you*, and he has left *for you* his blessed Spirit in Word and Sacrament. There you receive the full payment of your sins, and you receive the inheritance of heaven. It is *because* we have this that we ask, “When shall we [your kingdom's] *glories* see?” The glory is yet to come, when we will join our Savior in the place he prepares for us.

In the Lord's prayer we petition, “Thy kingdom come.” Do you remember from your Catechism instruction what this means?

The kingdom of God certainly comes of itself without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may come *to us also*.

How does God's kingdom come?

The kingdom of God comes when our heavenly Father gives us His Holy Spirit, so that by His grace we believe His holy

Word and live godly lives here in time and hereafter in eternity.⁵

This is the very purpose of our entire worship. We are given here the forgiveness Christ won, the Salvation he accomplished. We are promised the inheritance he prepares for us. We see here the specifically chosen humble objects: the baptismal font which calls us to remember the Flood which killed the evil and raised the righteous (just as it killed our Old Adam and raised the new man in Christ Jesus), the cross where our Lord died (just as we also bear our crosses in this life, but know that because of what was done on the *one* cross, we will trade it for a crown of glory), the pulpit where the Word descends to you (just as the Word came on mountaintops, at Sinai, at Olives, at Zion, at Calvary), the altar draped in linen (because no more sacrifices need be offered, so the altar is clean, as the body of our Lord was cleaned and draped in linen, and the empty white linen attests to his resurrection, just as we also will rise in him). And you see, you learn, by coming to worship regularly, you learn to see the glory behind the humble. This we also sing in our hymn:

Brightly doth Thy manger shine,
Glorious is its light divine.
Let not sin o'ercloud this light;
Ever be our faith thus bright.

This stanza is beautifully constructed: The manger is where Christ was first visible, in humility, sojourning, but with eyes of faith we see it shining brightly in glory. In the Christ-child, we see God. Therefore we ask that our sin be suppressed, so that we

⁵ Martin Luther, “The Small Catechism,” *Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary*, 31-39 (Mankato, MN: Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1996), 33.

may continue to see the light and not blind ourselves, and we ask our faith to shine just as brightly, which means that we will be united with him in the glory he prepares for us.

We end the hymn with a doxology. We “sing” our praise, for in this our stable, this church, we witness the humble Christ with hidden glories – that babe is our “King,” and we *will* “Praise” him “*Ever and eternally*”!

Amen.

Sing ELH #90:5, 6