

“Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending” (*Lutheran Service Book*, #336)

**Revelation 1:7-8**

*Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him,  
and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.*

*“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”*

***God Moves in Mysterious Ways!***

In his poem, “Light Shining out of Darkness,” William Cowper wrote the following oft-quoted words:

God moves in a mysterious way,  
His wonders to perform;  
He plants his footsteps in the sea,  
And rides upon the storm.<sup>1</sup>

Cowper suffered from depression for most of his life and, on several occasions, attempted suicide. In spite of this, he penned many hymn texts and, along with his friend and collaborator, John Newton, of “Amazing Grace” fame, tended the sick and destitute, led prayer meetings and wrote the renowned hymn collection *Olney Hymns* (1779).

I mention this because the hymn assigned for the Last Sunday of the Church Year, “Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending,” is another example of how God works mysteriously, in what might be described as a series of seemingly convoluted steps, to proclaim His message of good news through poetry and music written by flawed, imperfect people of faith.

“Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending,” by Charles Wesley (1707-1788), was originally inspired by what could be one of the most dreadful poems ever written. In 1752 an itinerant Methodist evangelist and church planter, John Cennick (1718-1755), published an Advent hymn entitled “Lo, He Cometh” that began with the following stanza:

Lo, he cometh endless trumpets blow before his bloody sign!  
Midst ten thousand saints and angels see the crucified shine.  
Alleluia! Welcome, welcome, bleeding Lamb.

In spite of its aesthetic shortcomings, it proved, by God’s grace, to be inspirational. It so happened that the redoubtable Charles Wesley<sup>2</sup> took inspiration from Cennick’s six-stanza poem and reinvented it into the hymn that appears, with minor alterations, in the *Lutheran Service Book*. Lest we appear too ungrateful to Cennick, it should also be mentioned that he composed “Be Present at Our Table, Lord” (*LSB* #775) which is one of the most widely sung table hymn/prayers ever written.

The *LSB* tune “HELMSLEY”<sup>3</sup> is attributed to Thomas Olivers (1725-1799) and also comes to us out of mysterious circumstances. Olivers was orphaned before he was four years old and was raised by a series of

<sup>1</sup> “Light Shining out of Darkness,” from *Olney Hymns*, 1779. Cowper’s text is retitled “God Moves in a Mysterious Way” and is found in the *Lutheran Service Book* #765.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Wesley wrote over 6,500 hymns! In all fairness, many of Wesley’s hymns were not all that memorable. He often wrote what might be called “liturgical deadline poetry” that was written to enhance a specific occasion, but not meant for universal use. However, Wesley was by no means a doggerelist; his *oeuvre* includes some of the greatest hymns ever penned in the English language. In addition to “Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending,” Wesley wrote “Come, O Long-Expected Jesus” (*LSB* #338), “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” (*LSB* #380), “Jesus Christ Is Risen Today” (*LSB* #457), “Love Divine, All Love Excelling” (*LSB* #700) and “Christ, Whose Glory Fills the Skies” (*LSB* #873), to name but a few. <sup>3</sup> (Modern “deadline poets” included The Nation’s Calvin Trillian and CBS radio and TV commentator, Charles Osgood.)

<sup>3</sup> Helmsley is a town in northern England. According to Mary Kay Stulkin, the tune resembles Thomas Arne’s “Thomas and Sally” (1761) and appeared in John Wesley’s *Sacred Melody* (1765) under the tune “Olivers.” It is said that Olivers heard the tune being whistled in the streets and set his text to it. The tune also was published in Martin Mandan’s *Collection of Hymn and Psalm*

relatives. At age 18, with little formal education, he was apprenticed to a shoemaker and eventually fell destitute. He left his hometown of Tregynon, Wales, and eventually landed in Bristol where he heard the renowned preacher George Whitefield<sup>4</sup> (1714-1770) who, along with Charles and John Wesley (1703-1791), was one of the founders of Methodism. Whitefield was what one might call an outdoor revivalist preacher whose fiery style drew unrestrained emotional responses from his listeners. Olivers heard Whitefield preach on the following text:

*And the LORD said unto Satan, "The LORD rebuke thee, O Satan; even the LORD that hath chosen Jerusalem rebuke thee: is not this a brand plucked out of the fire?" (Zechariah 3:2)*

Olivers, a self-professed ungodly liar and blasphemer, was stuck by Whitefield's sermon and forever changed by it. He returned to his shoemaking trade, paid off the debts he'd incurred, and became a member of the Methodist Society. "Mysteriuser and mysteriuser!" (to paraphrase Alice in her *Adventures in Wonderland*).

Eventually Olivers met John Wesley, who recognized a spark of divine fire in Olivers and enlisted him as one of his traveling evangelists. Olivers rode over 100,000 miles on horseback as he preached the word of God throughout England, Scotland and Ireland from 1753 to 1775. In 1775 Wesley gave him an editorial position on the *Arminian Magazine*. However, because of his lack of formal education, Olivers made so many editorial blunders that Wesley eventually fired him in 1789. Olivers lived out the rest of his life in retirement in London. When he passed away in 1799 he was buried in Wesley's tomb.

Of the twenty hymns Olivers wrote, "The God of Abraham Praise" (LSB #798) is probably his most famous text.<sup>5</sup> How mysterious it is that an uneducated cobbler turned itinerant preacher, who was fired from his magazine position because his "errata" were "intolerable and innumerable,"<sup>6</sup> could compose such a wonderfully articulate hymn of praise. It would seem, once again, that God worked in a "mysterious way." With that historical introduction to "Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending," let us turn to the hymn itself.

Charles Wesley wrote "Lo! He Comes..." amidst the tumultuous *milieu* of England's industrial revolution. The vast majority of people lived in poverty; alcoholism was rampant; and disease, crime and cruelty were commonplace. London's population grew from 600,000 to one million by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Malnutrition, fetid water and disease killed fifty percent of children under the age of two. Orphans had to fend for themselves without the benefit of education or government assistance, and only the nobility, landed gentry and captains of industry lived in comfort. One only needs to view the moralizing engravings of William Hogarth (1697-1764) such as *Beer Street*, *Gin Lane* or his series entitled *The Four Stages of Cruelty* (all published in 1751) to catch a glimpse of the sordid *Zeitgeist* of 18<sup>th</sup> century England.<sup>7</sup>

It is into that wretched *mélange* that Wesley depicts the second coming of the Christ. Then, as now, Jesus comes into a world filled with of sorrow, sadness, depravity and hopelessness. "Lo! He comes..." proclaims the imperative opening line. We have no choice but to watch as Jesus comes to reign. Every knee bows and every tongue confesses that He is Christ the Lord!<sup>8</sup> See Him descend from His heavenly realm for every one of us sinful creatures as a thousand thousand attendants follow in His triumphal procession...

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Tunes (1769) under the tune "Helmsley." This being said, the origin of the tune is still subject to speculation. See: Stulken, Marilyn Kay. (1981) *Hymnal Companion to the Lutheran Book of Worship*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, pp. 126-127.

<sup>4</sup> See Project Gutenberg's *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* at <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/20203/20203-h/20203-h.htm> for information on Whitefield's preaching abilities during his visit to "the colonies." Look under Chapter XI - Interest in Public Affairs (unfortunately, there is no pagination on the Gutenberg site, but you should have no trouble finding the Whitefield references).

<sup>5</sup> Olivers wrote the "The God of Abraham Praise" after hearing the *Yigdal* (Doxology) sung in the Great Synagogue in London. He composed a twelve stanza English metrical version based on the Hebrew *Yigdal* text and gave it a "Christian character." See Fred L. Precht (1992), *Lutheran Worship Hymnal Companion*, Concordia: St. Louis. p. 467.

<sup>6</sup> Glyn Tegai Hughes, "Introduction" to *Thomas Olivers of Tregynon: The Life of an Early Methodist Preacher Written by Himself* (Tregynon: Gwasg Gregynog, 1979, originally published in 1779), p. 9. As cited by John Westermeyer in his *Hymnal Companion to Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (2010): Augsburg Fortress, p. 257.

<sup>7</sup> The Hogarth illustrations mentioned in this paragraph can be viewed online at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beer\\_Street\\_and\\_Gin\\_Lane](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beer_Street_and_Gin_Lane) & [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Four\\_Stages\\_of\\_Cruelty](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Four_Stages_of_Cruelty) Please note that these illustrations are quite graphic and may be difficult to view. The explanations that accompany the illustrations in the sites listed above are articulate and informative.

<sup>8</sup> Philippians 2:9-11.

Lo! He comes with clouds descending,  
Once for ev'ry sinner slain;  
Thousand thousand saints attending  
Swell the triumph of His train:  
Alleluia, alleluia!  
Christ the Lord returns to reign.

Here we witness the slow and stately procession of Christ from the Kingdom of Heaven to the earth below. There is no need for haste - the outcome is inexorable. Christ descends amid the saints who have gone before us in all His majesty and glory. What else can be said than, "Alleluia, alleluia!" as the Alpha and Omega returns to rule over His faithful. What was promised is now complete and so...

Ev'ry eye shall now behold Him  
Robed in glorious majesty;  
Those who set at naught and sold Him,  
Pierced and nailed Him to the tree,  
Deeply wailing, deeply wailing,  
Shall their true Messiah see.

There is no escaping His return. All eyes train upon the Christ who suffered at the hands of sinners such as us. It is a paradox of the highest order that we, who nailed him to the cross, should be graced by God to see Him "face to face" even in the midst of our deep and sorrowful wailing. Here we see mercy and grace in fruition as we, who counted Jesus as nothing and sold him out, are able to stand in His presence saved only by the faith which His Spirit so generously provides. As the procession nears we are able to see...

Those dear tokens of His Passion  
Still His dazzling body bears,  
Cause of endless exultation  
To His ransomed worshipers.  
With what rapture, with what rapture  
Gaze we on those glorious scars!

Now we contemplate a mysterious paradox as we gaze upon the Savior's "glorious scars." Are not scars shameful and to be hidden from view? No, not these scars of glory! It was with those scars that Jesus ransomed us from death. They are the undeniable proof that Christ made full payment for the sins of the world. They are the scars that Thomas saw and responded to with the confession, "My Lord and my God!" This accolade of "Lord and God" can only be attributed to the Christ who was, and is, and is to come.

As we celebrate together on the last Sunday of the Church year, we remember and anticipate the advent of Christ the King as He descends to us in human form as the babe in the manger, lives with us, dies and rises for us, and ascends to heaven with the promise that He will come to us again. We live in both the now and not-yet time as we await His coming. He is present with us now in bread and wine, but until that time when He comes in triumph from His heavenly throne, we pray the following stanza in joyful anticipation as we sing...

Yea, amen, let all adore Thee,  
High on Thine eternal throne;  
Savior, take the pow'r and glory,  
Claim the kingdom for Thine own.  
Alleluia, alleluia!  
Thou shalt reign, and Thou alone!

In this stanza we are reminded of the prayer that Jesus taught us as we sing in sure expectation that our Master will return to claim the kingdom, power, and glory on that great day when He shall reign forever and ever. This

stanza may conclude the hymn, but it is not the final stanza. The ultimate stanza will be sung when we, with all the saints and angels, join in the unending hymn of praise to the King of Kings and Lord of Lords on the great and manifest day of His returning. Until then, we place our trust in the mysterious ways of God that far surpass our feeble understanding as we struggle to do God's will here on earth. Christ will return! And in that confident hope we live out our lives in faith as His flawed, yet forgiven children, as we, in joyful anticipation, await the return of the Son of Man.

Amen! Come, Lord Jesus! (Rev. 22:20)

**Prayer:**

*O God, Your ways are indeed mysterious. You have blessed us beyond anything that we could ask or imagine, graced us with Your Son's presence, and enlightened us by Your Spirit's guidance. For all You have done and continue to do for us, we give You thanks and praise.*

*Help us, gracious Lord, to be emissaries of your love, compassion, and goodness, so that those that we touch in our everyday life might see Your reflection in all that we do and say, and thus bring glory to You. Lord Jesus, we await your return and pray that Your blessing would rest upon us until that glorious day when all mysteries shall be revealed and we can see You face to face. In Your name we pray. Amen.*

*The following doxological stanza may be sung to HELMSLEY after the prayer.*

**Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,  
Praise and thanks be unto Thee!  
Blessing, honor, glory, power,  
Now and evermore shall we  
Sing in adoration, sing in adoration, sing in adoration  
To the Holy Trinity!<sup>9</sup>**

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[This devotion was prepared for the website of the Center for Church Music, Concordia University Chicago. It may be downloaded and printed for local use.]

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<sup>9</sup> Doxological stanza sung to HELMSLEY by Jeffrey E. Burkart Copyright © 2015.

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Text: Charles Wesley (1707-1788)

Tune: Thomas Olivers (1725-1799) Both text and tune are in the public domain.

HELMSLEY

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