

Christmas Day

“We Praise You, Jesus, at Your Birth” (*Lutheran Service Book #382*)

For Christian people there is a special bond between the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ and musical expressions of praise. Through the centuries believers have found ways to sing of God’s great goodness to all people through the birth of the Savior. Although much of the music was reserved for the clergy in the early centuries of the Christian Church, by the end of the first millennium the singing of choral responses by the entire gathered congregation had begun to take shape. In Germany these sung responses of praise, traced as far back as the tenth century, were called *Leisen*. The verse sung by people at worship on Christmas day, now the first stanza of “We Praise You, Jesus, at Your Birth,” dates back to the eleventh century. It had been established already for centuries when Martin Luther added six more stanzas to it and published it as a hymn late in 1523 or in 1524 along with the tune to which the song is still sung to this day. The choice of this hymn as the “hauptlied” or chief hymn for Christmas Day has found usage among Lutheran people for almost five hundred years!

The celebration of Christmas is all about praising Jesus and thanking Him for having come into the world to bring salvation to sinful and lost people. Doing this through singing hymns links us with Christians of all times—even back to the very first century. There are texts in the New Testament that may well have been among the earliest Christian hymns, including the verse used by Saint Paul as he writes to his young co-worker Timothy about Jesus, affirming of our Lord that “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.” (I Timothy 3:16) The combination of the German praise verse and Luther’s additional stanzas expands what Saint Paul outlines about our Lord’s coming, accentuating the great exchange of His heavenly realm for the stark reality of our fallen world. In stanza six we reflect on of the sacrifice of

Jesus for us as we sing “In poverty he came to earth, showing mercy by His birth.” Throughout the hymn we are reminded of the magnitude of the sacrifice of the Son of God on our behalf. The realization of the scope of His sacrificial love can do nothing but elicit from us the highest praise. Joining in the singing angels and the saints from all of the centuries past we add our “Alleluia!” and became part of the great, thankful chorus of Christmas Day, joyfully echoing “We praise You, Jesus, at Your birth!”

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[This devotion was prepared for the website of the Center for Church Music. It may be downloaded and duplicated for local use.]

We praise you, Jesus, at your birth;
Clothed in flesh you came to earth.
The virgin bears a sinless boy
and all the angels sing for joy. Alleluia!

Now in the manger we may see
God's Son from eternity,
the gift from God's eternal throne
here clothed in our poor flesh and bone. Alleluia!

The virgin Mary's lullaby
calms the infant Lord Most High.
Upon her lap content is he
who keeps the earth and sky and sea. Alleluia!

The Light Eternal, breaking through,
made the world to gleam anew;
his beams have pierced the core of night,
he makes us children of the light. Alleluia!

The very Son of God sublime
entered into earthly time
to lead us from this world of cares

to heaven's courts as blessed heirs. Alleluia!

In poverty he came to earth
showing mercy by his birth;
he makes us rich in heav'nly ways
as we, like angels, sing his praise. Alleluia!

All this for us our God has done
granting love through his own Son.
Therefore, all Christendom, rejoice
And sing his praise with endless voice. Alleluia!