

Christmas Eve

“From Heaven Above to Earth I Come” (*Lutheran Service Book*, #358)

Text: Martin Luther, tr. Catherine Winkworth

Tune: VOM HIMMEL HOCH

Imagine people dancing, jumping, and singing around Jesus’ cradle. This was a familiar sight in the 15th and preceding centuries in Europe where there was a tradition of devotion to the crèche that included such activities as round or circle dances that ringed the crib. Lively carols and music accompanied this devotion, which had implications for preaching and for telling the story of the birth of Jesus.

Luther wrote this children’s hymn for his own children to sing on Christmas Eve. Might there have been dancing and jumping with excitement as they (adults included?) sang? *From Heaven Above to Earth I Come* was first published in Joseph Klug’s *Geistliche Lieder* under the title “Children’s Hymn for Christmas Eve . . . taken from the Second Chapter of the Gospel of St. Luke.”

As the liner in *Lutheran Service Book* states:

“The first five stanzas declare the joyful words of the angel proclaiming the wondrous news of Jesus’ birth. The remaining stanzas declare the response of the shepherds and the meaning of the Savior’s birth for all the world.”

Stanzas 1-5

“From heaven above to earth I come To bear good news to every home;
Glad tidings of great joy I bring, Whereof I now will say and sing:

To you this night is born a child Of Mary, chosen virgin mild;
This little child of lowly birth Shall be the joy of all the earth.

This is the Christ, our God Most High, who hears your sad and bitter cry;
He will Himself your Savior be From all your sins to set you free.

He will on you the gifts bestow Prepared by God for all below,
That in His kingdom, bright and fair, You may with us His glory share.

These are the signs that you shall mark: The swaddling clothes and manger dark.
There you will find the infant laid By whom the heavens and earth were made.”

Along with the shepherds we, too, respond in faith.

Stanza 6: Our response—Joy, great joy at what God has done FOR US
*How glad we'll be to find it so! Then with the shepherds let us go
To see what God for us has done In sending us His own dear Son.*

Stanza 7: Our response—Tell our friends. Invite them to “come and see!”
This is God with us!
*Come here, my friends, lift up your eyes, and see what in the manger lies,
Who is this child, so young and fair? It is the Christ Child lying there.*

Stanza 8: Our response—Welcome to our lowly estate, Lord
This is Luther's “Great Exchange”
*Welcome to earth, O noble Guest, Through whom the sinful world is blest!
You came to share my misery That You might share Your joy with me.*

Stanza 9: Our response: The mighty, creator Lord comes as a lowly child
God with us—Emmanuel
*Ah, Lord, though You created all, How weak You are, so poor and small.
That You should choose to lay Your head Where lowly cattle lately fed!*

Stand 10: Our response: The earth can never be grand enough to cradle our Lord
*Were earth a thousand times as fair And set with gold and jewels rare,
It would be far too poor and small A cradle for the Lord of all.*

Stanza 11: Our response: God has become a human child.
Jesus shares our humanity and the “stuff” of this world
*Instead of soft and silken stuff You have but hay and straw so rough
On which as King, so rich and great, To be enthroned in royal state.*

Stanza 12: Our response: Our worldliness is not what God desires
*And so it pleases You to see This simple truth revealed to me:
That worldly honor, wealth, and might Are weak and worthless in Your sight.*

Stanza 13: Our response: God desires our heart, our whole being
that He may dwell within us. Our Christmas prayer

*Ah, dearest Jesus, holy Child, Prepare a bed, soft, undefiled.
A quiet chamber set apart For You to dwell within my heart.*

Stanza 14: Our Response: We sing, we dance, we leap for joy at this good news
*My heart for very joy must leap; My lips no more can silence keep.
I, too, must sing with joyful tongue That sweetest ancient cradlesong:*

Stanza 15: Our response: Doxology. Praise to God for this marvelous gift.
*Glory to God in highest heaven, Who unto us His Son has given!
While angels sing with pious mirth A glad new year to all the earth.*

The angels wish us a glad new year.

But, because the wood of the cradle becomes the wood of the cross, God grants us a new beginning in Christ—forever and ever and ever. And we will sing and dance and leap for joy!

Linda Kempke
The Nativity of Our Lord, Anno Domini 2014



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