

5 December 2012
Advent 1 Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Savior of the Nations, Come”

We’re doing something a little different this Advent as for our midweek meditations we take a look at some of the ancient hymns that we sing during this season. And the way we’ll do that is to intersperse some brief thoughts in between the verses of the hymn as we sing it, so that we’ll think about the words that we’re singing and what they mean. Tonight we’ll be looking at one of Luther’s favorite hymns, *Savior of the Nations, Come* (LSB #332), written by St. Ambrose all the way back in the fourth century, as best as we can determine. Luther loved this hymn so much he translated it into German for his people to sing, and it has become the tradition that this is always the Chief Hymn of the First Sunday of Advent. We begin by singing the first two verses.

*Savior of the nations, come,
Virgin’s Son, make here Your home!
Marvel now, O heav’n and earth,
That the Lord chose such a birth.*

*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.*

Marvel now, O heav’n and earth, that the Lord chose such a birth.

Not much makes us marvel anymore. Or if we do, it doesn’t last long. Today’s marvels, especially technology, quickly become obsolete tomorrow. Violence that once made us marvel in shock and horror now seems commonplace. Even sins that not too long ago were hidden in shame are now flaunted in public, and those who disagree dared to speak a word against them. So maybe this is what we marvel at - how quickly our world has changed, how completely many have fallen, and how resigned we have become to all this, reduced at times to simply shaking our heads and wondering: *What will they think of next?*

But tonight, and throughout this season of Advent, we are called once again to marvel. To marvel *that the Lord chose such a birth*. That God would become man. The Creator become a creature. The King become a servant. The sinless Son of God become a sinner under the sentence of death. And this **for you**. For God’s love for

you never changes. He promised a Saviour and so sent a Saviour - His very own Son - that you might be His sons and daughters. That you might love Him as He loves you.

And so, as we sang, the Word of God, the second person of the Holy Trinity, was made man, *not by human flesh and blood* - not in the normal way of birth, but *by the Spirit of our God*. That born of a virgin without a human father, He would not inherit the plague of original sin which would have disqualified Him from being the perfect Lamb of God that could take away the sin of the world. No, He was born perfect, *woman's offspring pure and fresh*. And so the eternal Son of God, begotten of the Father from eternity with no mother, is born a son of man in time with a mother but no father. Uniquely qualified to be the Saviour of the nations. *Is that not worthy of marvel?*

We sing the next two verses.

*Here a maid was found with child,
Yet remained a virgin mild.
In her womb this truth was shown:
God was there upon His throne.*

*The stepped forth the Lord of all
From His pure and kingly hall;
God of God, yet fully man,
He heroic course began.*

In her womb this truth was shown: God was there upon His throne.

The early Church went through a controversy about whether or not Mary could be called "the mother of God," in Greek: *theotokos*. Some thought that was saying too much. But what the Church determined was what we are confessing in the singing of this hymn: that we can and we must. For that little developing embryo in the womb of Mary was the one true God. While Mary was with child, her womb was God's throne.

We confess that, though we cannot fully understand or comprehend it. And it is our joy to confess that, just as John the Baptist leapt with joy when he heard of it, even though still inside *his* mother's womb. That inside that womb is not just my Saviour, but my God. He whom the universe cannot contain, is yet contained there.

And then *stepped forth the Lord of all from His pure and kingly hall*. That's what happened in Bethlehem that night we celebrate at Christmas. The world saw a birth; the reality was this: that God stepped forth from *this* throne to begin His

march to His *next* throne: the cross. From one unlikely throne to the next. *God of God, yet fully man*. Yes, Mary is the *god-bearer*, the mother of God, who now begins *His heroic course*. And where would that take Him? We sing the next two verses of the hymn, verses 5 and 6.

*God the Father was His source,
Back to God He ran His course.
Into hell His road went down,
Back then to His throne and crown.*

*For You are the Father's Son
Who in flesh the vict'ry won.
By Your mighty pow'r make whole
All our ills of flesh and soul.*

Into hell His road went down.

There are two ways to understand that phrase. One is that Jesus suffered all the pangs and condemnation of hell while on the cross. *My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?* (Ps 22:1) All the separation and wrath against sin that we deserve, He took in our place. And it crushed Him.

But Jesus then also descended into hell, as we confess in the Creed. And this not to suffer, but as part of His victory over sin, death, and devil. When on the cross Jesus said "It is finished" it was finished. So when He descended into hell it was not as a prisoner but to *take* some prisoners - to take captive what had held us captive, namely death and hell, and so set us free. That we have nothing to fear. Not now, not ever.

And this victory - of His cross and His descent - He did as a man, in our flesh and blood. As we sang: *For You are the Father's Son Who in flesh the vict'ry won*. It was not just as God that Jesus did all this for us, but as our brother. That we be His brothers.

But then one more thing had to happen . . . *By Your mighty pow'r make whole All our ills of flesh and soul*. And that's the resurrection. By joining us in our death and then rising from the dead, Jesus promised that we would rise with Him from our deaths, and when we do, *all our ills of flesh and soul* will be gone. No more sin, no more sickness, no more weakness, suffering, or pain. As it was in the beginning before sin so shall it be again. Jesus' resurrection makes all things new (Rev. 21:5).

We sing the last two verses of the hymn.

*From the manger newborn light
Shines in glory through the night.
Darkness there no more resides;
In this light faith now abides.*

*Glory to the Father sing,
Glory to the Son, our king,
Glory to the Spirit be
Now and through eternity.*

When you look at pictures of the nativity, they often have the light backward. Instead of light shining from the outside in, the light comes from the inside out - from the manger, from Christ to everyone else.

Now while not physically, historically accurate, that is exactly what is *spiritually* happening and what the manger is all about. And what we just sang. *From the manger newborn light Shines in glory through the night.* And where this child is, *darkness there no more resides.*

The darkness of sin can no more reside where there is the light of His righteousness.

The darkness of pride can no more reside where there is the light of His lowliness.

The darkness of death can no more reside where there is the light of His life.

The darkness of satan can no more reside where there is the light of His truth.

But where the darkness can no more reside, we do! For His light shines from the manger and onto us. His light shines from His Word and onto us. His light shines from His font and altar and onto us. And *in this light faith now abides.* And not just now, but forever. When our Lord comes again and takes us to that place where no sun or moon is needed, for the glory of God and the Lamb will be our light (Rev 21:22-23).

And what can we sing in response to that? Simply what we did to conclude such a marvelous hymn:

*Glory to the Father sing,
Glory to the Son, our king,
Glory to the Spirit be
Now and through eternity.*

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.