



Celebrating Christmas
with Luther

By Rev. Jeff Hendrix

Based on Martin Luther's Christmas Program and hymn for his children,

"From Heaven Above to Earth I Come"

Anno Domini 2016

PROGRAM NOTES

This program is based on Luther's Christmas program for his children, his hymn "From Heaven Above to Earth I Come." Rather than using many lines of commentary, the program is moved forward through the verses of Luther's hymn and readings from Scripture. Each section begins with a short narration and ends with an excerpt from Luther. 2017, the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Lutheran Reformation, affords a unique opportunity to reflect on what a 16th century Christmas program may have looked like.

All Scripture is taken from the *New King James Version*. All hymns are from the *Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary*.

This program may be performed according to the following suggestions:

1. **For many children:** Pastor reads excerpts from Luther’s sermon as well as the exhortation and prayers. Older children (confirmation age and up) read the narrations. 4th & 5th grade children memorize and recite longer lessons from Scripture as a group or individually. 3rd-4th children memorize and recite short lessons from Scripture. The youngest children (pre-K) may recite the shortest scripture readings and do responsive recitations with older children, for example:

LUKE 2:12-14

Memorized recitation from a 4th-5th grade student:

¹² And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.” ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying:

Pre-K recite together:

¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!”

2. **For few children:** Pastor reads excerpts from Luther’s sermon as well as the exhortation and prayers. Older children (confirmation age and up) read the narrations. All children below confirmation age memorize and recite individually short Scripture lessons. All children read together longer lessons.
3. **For no children:** Pastor reads excerpts from Luther’s sermon, Scripture lessons (some responsively with the congregation as noted), and exhortation and prayers. Hymns by the children may be omitted.

OUTLINE

From Heaven Above

From Heaven Above to Earth I Come | 123 v. 1

From Earth to Heaven

To You this Night is Born a Child | 123 vv. 2-3

God's Gift in Christ

He Brings those Blessings Long Ago | 123 vv. 4-5

Christ in God's Gifts

Now Let Us All with Gladsome Cheer | 123 vv. 6-7

Heaven Has Descended to Earth

Welcome to Earth, Thou Noble Guest | 123 vv. 8-9

Heaven in a Manger

Were Earth A Thousand Times as Fair | 123 vv. 10-11

Our Brother in a Manger

Thus Hath It Pleased Thee to Make Plain | 123 vv. 12-13

From Heaven to Earth

Thus Hath It Pleased Thee to Make Plain | 123 vv. 14-15

HYMNS USED IN THIS PROGRAM

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel | **110 vv. 1, 3, 6**

From Heaven Above to Earth I Come | **123**

Praise God the Lord, Ye Sons of Men | **148 vv. 1, 6, 8**

Savior of the Nations, Come | **90 vv. 1-3**

All Glory Be to God on High | **35 v. 1**

Now Sing We, Now Rejoice | **135 vv. 2-4**

Behold, a Branch is Growing | **121 vv. 2, 3, 5 ****

Of the Father's Love Begotten | **181 vv. 1-4**

A Boy is Born in Bethlehem | **112 vv. 1-7 ****

To Shepherds as They Watched By Night | **154 vv. 3-6**

We Christians May Rejoice Today | **122**

Silent Night | **140 **** (optional ending when done on Christmas Eve)

**Optional

From Heaven Above

PROCESSIONAL

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel | **110 vv. 1, 3, 6**

EXHORTATION

P: Dearly beloved! We have come together in the presence of God our heavenly Father, to give Him thanks and praise for the gift of His Son, our meek and righteous King, who, by His death became our Savior from sin and eternal death. By His Holy Spirit may He enlighten, govern, and direct us that we may ever remain faithful to this righteous King and Savior, and not be offended by His humble form and despised Word, but, firmly believing in Him, obtain eternal salvation and the fullness of joy in heaven. To this end may God the Father grant us His grace, through our Lord Jesus Christ.

C: Amen.

NARRATION

Every family has their Christmas traditions. Singing certain carols, eating certain foods, decorating at a certain time of year, and getting together with loved ones. Some things stay the same year after year, but some traditions, as the years go on, begin to change and grow as the family changes and grows.

Today we will join the Luther family, singing hymns that would have been familiar to them, hymns that were written during their time, or written by Martin Luther himself, especially “From Heaven Above to Earth I Come.” Some hymns may be familiar to us, a part of our tradition, but some have been replaced with newer traditions. We will also hear Luther himself preach to us through excerpts from his sermons.

Our goal today isn’t tradition for the sake of tradition. At Christmas, or any other time of year, we do certain things over and over because they are important and focus our attention on Christ. In looking in on the past, we can reflect on how the proclamation of what Christ’s birth at Christmas means for us has remained the one important constant – not

only for the past 500 years, but since the promise that the Christ would be born to a woman to save sinful man was first made.

LUKE 2:1-7

And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. ³So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. ⁴Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁵ to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. ⁶So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. ⁷And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

HYMN (*soloist*) From Heaven Above to Earth I Come | **123 v. 1**

NARRATION

It was Luther's tradition to arrange a festival for his family every Christmas Eve. On these nights, many comforting words were sung and spoken. For one Christmas Eve, Luther composed this hymn for his children: 'From Heaven Above to Earth I Come.' It was his version of a children's Christmas program, a play set to music. The first five verses are sung from the perspective of the angels to the shepherds, the next two lead us to the manger to the Christ-child, and in the last eight, we join the shepherds in greeting and praising our Lord who has come to save us.

LUKE 2:8-11

⁸ Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. ¹⁰ Then the angel said to them, "Do not be

afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. ¹¹ For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

From Earth to Heaven

HYMN (*sung by the children*) From Heaven Above to Earth I Come | **123 v. 2-3**

NARRATION

The angels proclaimed joy that a Savior was born. But why was a Savior needed? Why did God need to become Man? The reason is that man tried to become God. Man tried to climb from earth to heaven

RESPONSIVE READING FROM GENESIS 3 & ROMANS 5

Children:

⁸ The Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and there He put the man whom He had formed.

Congregation:

¹⁶ And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; ¹⁷ but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”

Children:

⁴ Then the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. ⁵ For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

Congregation:

⁶ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate.

Children:

¹⁷ Then to Adam [God] said, “Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying,

When one of several brothers becomes a great magnate, how happy the other brothers become! How gladdening they find this, as you see in Genesis when Joseph reveals himself to his brothers. And this is indeed a natural joy. But why is it, then, that we also are not joyful and our hearts are not touched and we do not praise and thank God upon hearing that our God became our flesh and blood and now sits above at the right hand of God as Lord over all creatures?⁸

LUKE 2:19–20

¹⁹ But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them.

From Heaven to Earth

NARRATION

Families have traditions at Christmas, but Christmas is more than just a tradition. Already almost immediately after the promise of the Seed of the woman – the promised Savior of the world – was given to Adam and Eve, we learn that their family could not help but praise and thank God. Genesis 4:26 says “Then men began to call on the name of the Lord.” So too, did Luther’s family praise and thank God at Christmas, upon hearing that Christ was born for them. They repeated the Gospel in word and song. In repeating the Gospel, God is praised!

This a tradition that goes not from earth below to heaven, but like the angels, from heaven above to earth.

Our Christmas tradition is the same: Our hearts leap for joy, our lips cannot keep silent, we sing with joyful tongue the most ancient of all our Christmas songs, the message that heaven has come to earth in Christ, the song that the angels sang and the shepherds repeated:

“Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!”

⁸ Martin Luther, Christmas Sermon, 1543

PRAYER

P: Almighty and merciful God, enlighten our hearts that we may ever find joy and comfort in the birth of Your dear Son, make known abroad Your loving-kindness, give You praise and glory, and with peace abiding in our hearts, be kept steadfast to the end; through the Same Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives, and who reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

C: Amen

BENEDICTION

M: The grace of our Lord † Jesus Christ and the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

RECESSIONAL

From Heaven Above to Earth I Come | **123 vv. 14-15**

OPTIONAL ENDING

NARRATION

Year after year through our traditions, we proclaim the love that God has for us. These traditions may change and grow, but Christ, who showed God’s love by coming from heaven to earth, remains at the center.

We will join now in a newer tradition of our church, singing ‘Silent Night’ while candles are lit, reminding us that Christ is the light of the world who is still in the world today through the brightness of His Word.

HYMN

Silent Night | **140**

INDEX OF REFORMATION ERA CHRISTMAS HYMNS

Hymns Luther would (probably) have sung:

- O Come, O Come, Emmanuel | **110** (*Medieval Latin antiphons*) Advent
A Boy Is Born in Bethlehem | **112** (*13th century*)
A Great and Mighty Wonder | **113** (*634-734*)
Now Hail the Day so Rich in Cheer | **131** (*15th century*)
Now Sing We, Now Rejoice | **135** (*14th century*)
The Star Proclaims the King is Here | **173** (*c. 430*) Epiphany
Of the Father's Love Begotten | **181** (*348-c. 413*)
O Gladsome Light, O Grace | **572** (*c. 200*)

Luther's Hymns:

- Savior of the Nations, Come | **90**
From Heaven Above to Earth I Come | **123-124**
To Shepherds as They Watched by Night | **154**
O Jesus Christ, All Praise to Thee | **136**

Contemporary Hymns for Luther:

- All Glory Be to God on High | **35** (*Gloria in Excelsis. Attr. to Luther*)
Behold a Branch is Growing | **121**
We Christians May Rejoice Today | **122**
Rejoice, Rejoice, Ye Christians | **132**
Once He Came in Blessing | **141**
Praise God the Lord, Ye Sons of Men | **148**
To the Name of Our Salvation | **159**