

First Sunday in Advent (Series A)

“Savior of the Nations, Come” (*Lutheran Service Book* , #332)

Awaiting a royal birth has become almost commonplace in our time. From the first hint of that “baby-bump” to the happy birth announcement, columnists and paparazzi clue us in to the progress of the pregnancy and the family heritage and history. Then, ultimately, there is the retrospective remembrance yet to come.

Ambrose, reluctant bishop of Milan some 50 years after the Council of Nicaea, was known for his high regard for the liturgy and for introducing hymns and antiphonal chants in which the congregation could participate. His greatest challenge, perhaps were prominent members who continued to hold to heterodox Arian views that said that the relationship of Jesus to the Father was less than equal. It is in this context that we have “Veni redemptor gentium” (“Come, Redeemer of the Nations”).

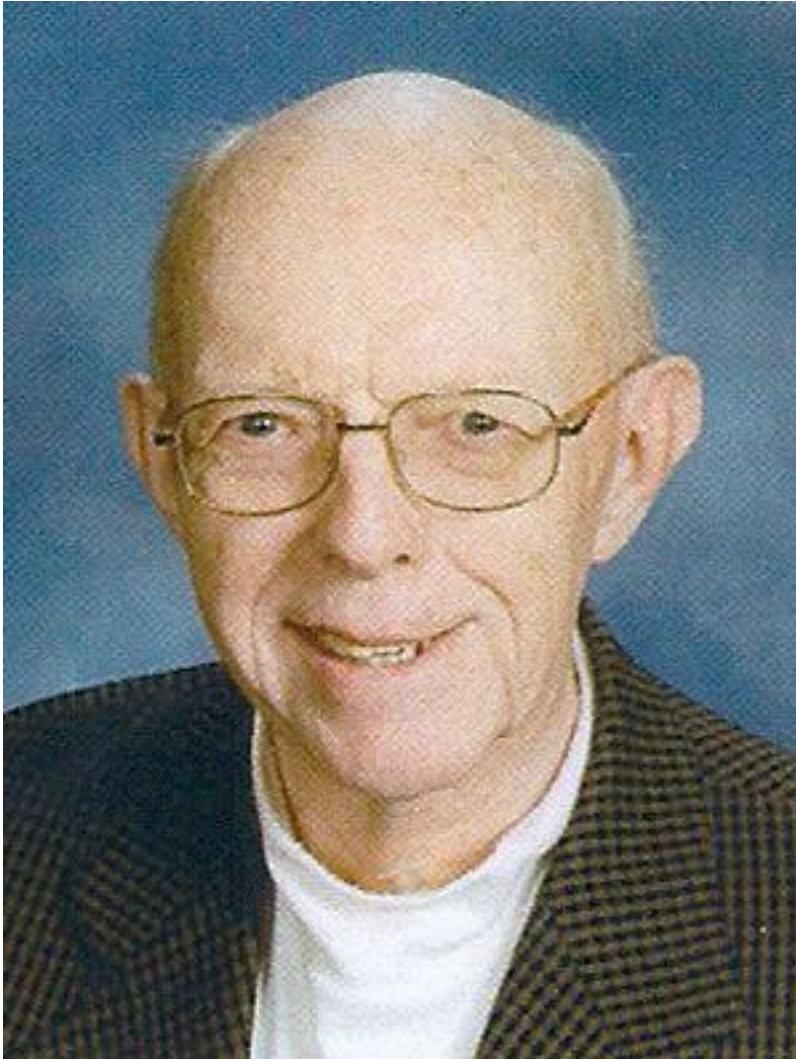
Martin Luther, 1100+ years later; in the 5th year after posting his 95 *Theses* also valued the liturgy and the singing of the people and the power of hymns in their “heart-language” to embed orthodoxy in the lives of the people. Imagine him at table, after the evening meal, with his companions (he had yet to marry) picking tunes on his lute and talking about Ambrose’s hymn and how it might sound in German; and how it sings about Jesus’s **person** (stanzas 1-3) “truly God, begotten of the Father from eternity and truly human, born of the Virgin Mary” and **purpose** (4-6) “who has redeemed me ... with His holy and precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death” and **presence** (7) “that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom” and **praise** (8) “this is most certainly true.”

J. S. Bach loved this hymn enough to set it in chorale preludes (BWV 599, 659, 660, 661, 699) and two cantatas for the First Sunday in Advent (BWV 61, 62); the first of which includes this prayer for the church in a central Aria: Come, Jesus, come to this your church / And grant a blessed New Year! / Promote the honor of Your name, / Uphold the wholesome teaching / And bless the pulpit and the altar! Then follows Revelation 3:20 “Behold I stand at the door and knock” in Recitative.

To this day, countless church musicians and composers enrich our hearing as they elaborate on this text and tune. And when you listen carefully you will even hear it in the movies (Brian Easdales’s score for *The Red Shoes* for example)

That our New Birth in Christ never become commonplace, do join in celebrating Jesus's Person, Purpose, Presence and Praise with this glad song.

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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.

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.

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

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.

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.

Text: Attributed to Ambrose of Milan, 340-397; translated into German by Martin Luther. English translations by William Reynolds, Samuel Janzow, and Gifford Grobien.

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