

For our final two midweek services this year we will be singing and considering this hymn by Martin Luther, “From Heaven Above to Earth I Come.” Historians think that Martin Luther wrote this hymn to be a sort of play or a musical that he sang with his children to retell the true story of the angel appearing to the shepherds to announce the birth of the Christ-child in Luke chapter 2.¹ This hymn appeared in a hymn book in 1535 so historians guess that Luther sang it with his children on Christmas Eve in 1534. In 1534 Luther’s son Hans was 8 years old and his daughter Magdalena was 5 years old. The Luthers had a big house. It was a former monastery. And they always had house guests so there would have been more people there to join in the musical. The first five verses are sung by a man, probably Luther himself, playing the part of the angel. The angel says to the shepherds, “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.” Everybody then joins in singing verse 6, “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.” Luther loved the Christmas story. He loved his children. And he loved music. And all three of those came together in this Christmas hymn.

The fact that he wrote hymn for his kids, shows that Luther was a very down-to-earth person. He cared about people’s everyday struggles and fears. And what Luther loved about Luke chapter 2 is that miraculous things happened to regular down-to-earth people. So today in our devotion on Luke chapter 2 we will consider all the down-to-earth people in this account. We’ll consider the down-to-earth shepherds and the down-to-earth mother and the down-to-earth baby.

First, the down-to-earth shepherds. Luke tells us, “And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night” (Luke 2:8). The shepherds apparently didn’t get to pick their own hours. They didn’t have a very flexible work-schedule. They were working the night shift. Have you ever had a job where you worked the night shift? One summer in college I worked the night shift at GRANDE cheese factory in Brownsville, WI. If I remember correctly my shift started at 6pm and ended at 6 am. If you have ever worked the night shift. I have enormous respect for you. Now God could have picked anybody in the whole world to be the first ones to tell about the birth of the Savior. He could have picked a king to be the first one to hear about the birth of the Savior. He could have picked a priest in Jerusalem to be the first one to hear the news. But God commanded the angel to go tell the shepherds watching their sheep at night. The angel came from heaven above down to earth to earth to ordinary shepherds. Most of us are ordinary people just like the shepherds. But by sending the angel first to ordinary people like the shepherds God is showing that this good news of great joy is for us! So as you contemplate Luke chapter 2, notice the down-to-earth shepherds. Also notice the down-to-earth mother.

“So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.” (Luke 2:4-5) Mary is 9 months pregnant and she makes the long journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. We don’t know if Mary walked on foot or if she rode a donkey. Either way it would not have been a comfortable journey. And when they get to Bethlehem, there is no state of the art hospital for her to give birth in. In fact, there is not even any place for them to stay. Mary has to give birth in a cattle stall. You sometimes hear great stories about babies being born in the car on the way to the hospital. Mary can relate to those kinds of stories. She gave birth in a cattle stall. It says, **“While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in**

¹ Historical information is taken from *Martin Luther’s Christmas Book*, edited by Roland Bainton (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1948), 6-7; C. T. Aufdemberge, *Christ Worship Handbook* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1997), 55-57.

clothes and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them" (Luke 2:6-7).

When I think of the things that usually stress me out, those things are nothing compared to the things that Mary went through. Martin Luther said, "Don't make of Mary of a stone." I'm sure she was overwhelmed by all this. She was 9 months pregnant and she had to make a journey to Bethlehem. There was no place to stay so she had to give birth in a cattle stall. But in the midst of all this chaos around her, this child gave her peace. In the reading next week we'll hear that **"Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19)**. Our conditions aren't nearly as bad as Mary's were. But our conditions around this time of year can sometimes get us down too. It's bitterly cold outside. It gets dark at 4:30 or 5:00. And that can sometimes get us down. Add to that the fact that Christmas time is often the busiest time of the year and it's easy for us to feel overwhelmed. But if this child could give peace to Mary in her difficult circumstances, then this child can give us peace too.

And that brings us finally to this down-to-earth child. We've looked at the down-to-earth shepherds and the down-to-earth mother. Finally let's consider this down-to-earth child. This child is down-to-earth in a special way. This child is the mighty God who came down to earth to as a little baby. Jesus was up in heaven on his throne of glory and he came down to earth and took on human flesh in the womb of the virgin Mary and he was born as a little baby. The mighty God became a down-to-earth baby.

This is incredibly good news for us. It means many important things for us. I'll just point out two. First, he shared the harsh conditions that Mary was in. "She gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger" (Luke 2:7). Jesus left the comfort of heaven to share our conditions on earth. He was cold and had to be wrapped in swaddling clothes. He had to be placed in a manger, in a feeding trough for animals. This means that the God of the universe cared enough about us to come and share our harsh conditions.² And since he came and shared our harsh conditions that means that he is someday going to take us to share in his glorious conditions in heaven. Later today we'll sing, "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 8) He came to share our harsh conditions so that we might someday share in the glorious conditions of heaven.

The second reason this is very good news for us that God the Son became a little baby is that it shows that God is kindly disposed towards us. Martin Luther took great comfort in the fact that Christ became a little baby. He said, **"See how God invites you in many ways. He places before you a baby with whom you may take refuge. You cannot fear him, for nothing is more appealing to humans as a baby. Are you afraid? Then come to him, lying in the lap of the fairest and sweetest maid. ... Who is there whom this sight would not comfort? Now is overcome the power of sin, death, hell, conscience and guilt, if you come to consider this gurgling baby and believe that he is come not to judge you, but to save."**³ We have sinned against God and deserve his anger. But the fact that he comes to us as a little baby shows that he wants to invite us and forgive us and be reconciled to us.

So this year as we consider Luke chapter 2 again, find peace in the down-to-earth nature of Luke chapter 2. Consider the down-to-earth shepherds and find joy in the fact that Christ came for down-to-earth people like us. Consider the down-to-earth mother and see that you can find peace in this child even in the midst of difficult circumstances. And finally consider this down-to-earth child and find comfort in the fact that God came down to earth to save you. Amen.

² I owe this thought to Roland Bainton, *Martin Luther's Christmas Book*, 5.

³ *Martin Luther's Christmas Book*, 33,