

2013_12_11 Midweek Advent 2 | Sermon
Ascension Lutheran Church, Batavia IL
Pastor David Pfeiffer

Advent Series:
Songs that Prepare the Way
Meditations on Hymns of the Advent Season

“Savior of the Nations, Come”
4th c. by Saint Ambrose
1524 German version by Martin Luther, TLH #95

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Let us PRAY: O Savior of the Nations come and make Thy home within us. Amen.

To all who look for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, the love of God has appeared and is yours, dear fellow redeemed, (Titus 2 and 3)

Mandy was a great catechism student. She passed the exam with flying colors. Everyone was impressed by her memory work. When she was confirmed, she knew all the answers – or so she thought.

She thought she knew it all, right up until that moment. It was that time in college when she was making new friends, learning more about other people in the world. She soon realized that not everyone agreed with her beliefs.

That was when she met Jennifer. Jennifer was one of those Christians that other Christians wanted to be like. Jennifer invited Mandy to visit her church. It was so full of vigor and excitement. The songs they sang, the clapping, it was quite exciting. But Mandy really did not feel like joining in. She knew what had been going on in her life since she came to college. She knew that the sins in her life really were not worth clapping about. She thought she knew her faith, but now would come a moment when she was not so sure.

She talked with Jennifer about this. So Jennifer asked Mandy if she had been born again. Mandy wasn't sure what she meant. She knew she had been baptized – but

what did that mean now; now that Mandy had questions, now that Mandy had all these sins. Had she really been committed? had she really accepted Jesus as her personal Savior? A conflict had arisen.

There was a conflict within the walls of God's church. In the 4th century it went by the title "Arianism." It was a movement led by a man named Arius. This 4th century movement denied that Jesus was at the same time both God and Man. What they could not accept was the idea that an infinite God could truly inhabit a finite human being. Nor would they accept the idea that after Jesus, after His ascension, was able to fill all things. The two natures – divine and human – must be kept separate. The finite is not capable of the infinite, they said. Arianism taught that person of Jesus Christ was of a different and lesser essence than the Father; not infinite, not God Almighty in the flesh. A conflict had arisen.

To many a catechism student, it seems so abstract, matters of philosophy. What did it matter if Jesus were truly God or if we believe that God was merely with Him as a spiritual influence? What does it matter if we say that God became man or a man became a god?

Maybe we ought to be asking a different questions. Questions like: how real is salvation? Is it truly composed of flesh and blood or something divine – could it be both? This is a battle of flesh and blood. This is a battle over flesh and blood – that is to say, the flesh and blood of our Savior is at stake.

If Jesus was merely another created being, something lesser than God, then the idea of salvation as a full and free gift is not real. No longer does this man's "captive death" "lead death captive." Now we are left, with a man made into a god, not God made man. We have lost the eternal sacrifice that was needed to give us something real; to save our flesh and blood. We are left with something finite; a man – a good man, yes; a perfect man, perhaps; a great example, of course; but what does that do for Mandy? What does that death do for you and me who are so mortally sinful? This is a real battle.

It is a battle fought right in the midst of God's Church. In fact it is a battle for God's Church. And when the pressure was on, when real flesh and blood was at stake, when a bishop livelihood and life was at stake, how would this conflict be resolved? From within the walls of the Church, the advent cry is heard: "Veni, Redemptor gentium!" – "Savior of the Nations Come."

Tonight we consider a hymn written in the midst of this 4th century conflict over the person and natures of Christ. It was written by St. Ambrose, the bishop of Milan. Our English version is a bit of a medley; primarily based on Ambrose's Latin original, we find some of the hymn also to rely on Martin Luther's German translation. It is #95 in the Lutheran Hymnal. We consider the hymn "Savior of the Nations Come."

They have a Latin phrase for it: *Cuius regio, eius religio* – that is, "whose region, his religion." Unlike the separation of Church and State we are used to in America, in those days, the beliefs of those in power greatly influenced and pressured the beliefs of the church. So when the beliefs of the empress conflict with the beliefs of the bishop, there is bound to be trouble.

The bishop found himself caught right in the middle of it all – and not by choice. In fact, when Ambrose first came to Milan, Italy, he really had no intention of becoming bishop or even being involved as a church leader. He was a magistrate – a secular nobleman and a lawyer. But God had other things in mind.

Milan had been served by an Arian bishop and was being governed by an Arian empress, Justina. When that Arian bishop dies a riot ensues. The city is torn over who should be the next bishop of Milan. This is when Ambrose arrives. He emerges as a natural born leader. When the crowds see his ability to reason and quiet the dispute, a quick decision is made. In one day Ambrose is catechized, baptized, and made bishop. But the conflict was far from over.

Ambrose dedicates Himself to the study of Scripture and the writings of the fathers. As he considers passages like John 1:14, "The Word became flesh" he begins to see the mystery of it all. As he reads Jesus' words in John 10:30, "I and My Father are one" he lays his reason aside and joins the confession of Nicea: "begotten of the Father, of one substance with the Father, God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten, not made." Needless to say, the empress was not pleased with the bishop.

In 386, the conflict would come to a head. The empress of Rome, Justina, insisted that the church vessels be handed over to the Arians. It was a battle within God's church and was now a battle for God's church. How would the bishop respond?

A similar conflict would arise the 16th century. It went by the title: "enthusiasm." By 1524, protestants had become divided over whether or not the finite was capable of the infinite. Could God be contained to the finite water, to bread and wine, to the Word itself? Like our Savior's flesh and blood, these are only finite, earthly things. Arianism

had allowed reason to define the coming of Christ – not just in His first coming, but also in His Sacramental coming.

The enthusiasts will not rely on such a mystery for the assurance of salvation. Instead they will tell someone like Mandy that the place to look is within. They will say that the right response to a troubled conscience is your experience. Have you truly experienced the Spirit of God?

It was, yet again, a battle of flesh and blood. It was the real eternal flesh and blood of our Lord that was at stake. The real flesh and blood coming of Christ through the means of grace was at stake. Yet again the advent cry would arise from within the walls of God's Church. Luther would bring back that age old song, and put it into the common German language of the people. And they called upon God to come in flesh and blood: "Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland." – "Savior of the Nations Come!"

It was an echo of a situation and a song sung long ago. A song sung long ago within the walls of a church in Milan. The empress Justina had insisted that the church vessels be handed over to the Arians. So the bishop would respond by teaching his people to sing. He led them into the church, and there they sit. There they sat, within the walls of the basilica at Milan, peacefully holding fast to their church and to God's teachings. And it was there, within those walls, that their beloved bishop would teach them to sing. From within those walls would emerge the words: Veni Redemptor gentium.

The people sang, as was the manner of the eastern church – Antiphonally. Back and forth they learned to sing the words of this hymn.

*Thou, the Father's only Son,
Hast o'er sin the victory won.
Boundless shall Thy kingdom be;
When shall we its glories see?*

The Savior would come and the empress would back down. The phrase *Cuius regio, eius religio* would be defeated and the conflict resolved in Christ and His Word. The Savior of the nations had come, in the presence of His body, His people, His Church.

Mandy would return home for Christmas that year with questions on her mind. Was the faith she grew up with really hers? What had happened to the salvation that seemed so real and sure to her in catechism class? Maybe Jennifer was right. Maybe she did need to do something; to change herself; to recommit herself and make a decision for Christ.

Yet it was there, within those walls, that the answers would come. Gathered with her family for the annual Christmas Eve Service, the words of a hymn would give her the answer:

*Savior of the nations, come,
Virgin's Son, make here Thy home!
Marvel now, O heaven and earth,
That the Lord chose such a birth.*

She marveled. She marveled that God had chosen such a birth. And suddenly she remembered. She remembered those passages she had learned in catechism class. It was not a mere man that died for her, but it says in 1 Corinthians “they crucified the Lord of glory.” The Savior of the Nations has come. As the Bible also says, “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” (Ephesians 2:13). What value would that blood have if it was the death of a mere man? But yes, they crucified “the Lord of glory” (1 Corinthians 2:8). This body and this blood has taken on eternal value and has obtained an eternal redemption. It is not about the excitement of clapping and singing a catchy song – it is about the words; the depth of our Savior’s gift; the thoughts that confess this real, flesh and blood Gospel of salvation. She marveled.

*Brightly doth Thy manger shine,
Glorious is its light divine.
Let not sin o'ercloud this light;
Ever be our faith thus bright.*

She thought: I don’t want this to ever be clouded. I don’t know how God did it, but He did. He took my sins away. God took away my sins. And here He is, giving me this forgiveness in His Word, in His holy supper. His blood cleanses me from all sin. This is the faith I know.

Knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot. (1 Peter 1:18–19)

Mandy kept singing. And we do too. The hymns of Advent are more than melody; they are more than a catchy refrain. They are the Word of God. And in that Word; in those thoughts of Scripture, our Savior does come – Our Savior is here. This is true praise – that is, these hymns declare God’s coming and teach His great works of

salvation. So Martin Luther would say, "Next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise. The gift of language combined with the gift of song was given to man that he should proclaim the Word of God through Music." We are following in the example of Ambrose and of Luther by using music as an instrument to learn and proclaim the Gospel – the good news of our God who came in the flesh and obtained an eternal and unchanging salvation for you.

So the psalmist David prays: *O Lord, open my lips, And my mouth shall show forth Your praise.* Psalm 51:15.

*Praise to God the Father sing,
Praise to God the Son, our King,
Praise to God the Spirit be
Ever and eternally.*