**MEDITATIONS FOR “The Church Year in Music”**

**Zion Lutheran Church, Dallas, Texas**

**2 June 2019**

**ADVENT**

Lutheran worship emphasizes, first and foremost, that God comes to us sinners. Then, and only then, are we able to respond properly to God.

The Church Year begins by underscoring that truth, for Advent is a word meaning “to come.”! At a particular moment in history God came to us incarnate in the person of his Son, Jesus. God still comes today and every day in his Word and the blessed Sacraments. And when Jesus returns on the Last Day, God will come and incorporate all believers into his victorious Eternity.

Martin Luther helps us understand the depths to which God will go when he comes to us. He once wrote: “For since [God] is the Most High, and there is nothing above Him, He cannot look above Him[self]; nor yet to either side, for there is none like Him. [God] must needs, therefore, look within Him[self] and beneath Him[self]; and the farther one is beneath [God], the better does [God] see him [or her].” (AE, vol. 21, 299-300)

God comes to us, even in the depths of sin and death, and draws us unto himself. No one is so lost that he or she can be found. And once found, our worship in response can truly begin.

**CHRISTMAS**

Christmas, as celebrated in society today, means lots of things to lots of people – not all of which are aligned with the true meaning of Christmas, which, of course, centers on the birth of Jesus.

But the true meaning of Christmas includes something even more than just remembering that Christ was born (celebrating Jesus’ birth). The true meaning of Christmas becomes reality when we recognize and trust that Christ was born for us!

On Christmas Day, 1522, Martin Luther proclaimed: “It is of no value only to believe that this history is true as it reads; . . . [T]he right and gracious faith which God’s Word and work demands is that you firmly believe that Christ is born for you and that this birth is yours and occurred for your benefit. The Gospel teaches that Christ was born because of us, and that He did and suffered everything because of us, . . .” (AE, vol. 75, 215)

At Christmas God is the giver, we the receivers!

**EPIPHANY**

“Christ is born for you” – including those who are seemingly unworthy of divine acceptance. On Epiphany we remember the Visit of the Wise Men – an amazing occurrence, because those magi were Gentiles (“outsiders”!). They, too, are welcome in God’s presence.

Recall that it was, in fact, God himself whom the Wise Men encountered that day long ago in Bethlehem when they paid homage to Baby Jesus. St. Paul underscored that reality when he declared that Jesus “is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation. . . . For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, . . .” (Col. 1:15, 19)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was as German Lutheran pastor martyred at the age of 39 at the end of World War II. In what is arguably his most famous book (*Discipleship*), he writes: “In God’s Son, Jesus Christ, God assumes our flesh. In Christ’s body, God carries our human flesh into death on the cross.” (DBW, vol. 4, 255)

During Epiphany God manifests himself in the person of Jesus . . . manifests his divine self to one and all alike, to you and me.

**LENT**

As Jesus began his public ministry in the wilderness for forty days, so Christians still to this day set aside forty special days in the Spring (from whence we get the term “Lent”). And as Jesus was tested and tempted during his forty days, so we also struggle with our own particular demons.

Jesus’ encounter with Satan in the wilderness would eventually climax on Calvary’s cross, and so Lent leads us through our time of self-examination and repentance ever closer to a focus on the suffering and death of Jesus (and, ultimately, to his victorious resurrection). For at the heart of God’s plan of salvation is this marvelous truth: Christ was born *to die – for us!*

The Episcopal preacher Fleming Rutledge offers us this reflection: “*The crucifixion is the touchstone of Christian authenticity, the unique feature by which everything else, including the resurrection, is given its true significance*. . . . Without the cross at the center of the Christian proclamation, the Jesus story can be treated as just another story about a charismatic spiritual figure. It is the crucifixion that marks out Christianity as something definitively different in the history of religion. *It is in the crucifixion that the nature of God is truly revealed*. Since the resurrection is God’s mighty transhistorical Yes to the historically crucified Son, we can assert that *the crucifixion is the most important historical event that has ever happened*.” (The Crucifixion, page 44; italics in the original)

**EASTER**

Christ was born to die – for you! That profound truth was verified for time and all eternity when God the Father raised his Son from the dead on Easter morning. Yes, Jesus’ sacrifice was sufficient! Yes, Jesus’ death atones for all our sins! Yes, Jesus’ rising guarantees our place in eternity! All that and more is verified by Jesus’ resurrection! Easter is the exclamation point of God’s plan of salvation. As St. Paul wrote, “if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. . . . But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.” (1 Corinthians 15:17,20)

The 20th century theologian Karl Barth once wrote: “Easter is indeed the great pledge of our hope, . . . . It is the proclamation of a victory already won. . . . The Easter message tells us that our enemies (sin, the curse, and death) are beaten. . . . One thing still holds, and only this one thing is really serious, that Jesus is the Victor.” (Dogmatics in Outline, 122-123)

Risen, and now ascended and seated at the right hand of the Father – Jesus is Lord of lords and present at all times and in places, thereby drawing us into his eternal bliss. It is his living voice we hear in Sacred Scripture. It is his real body and blood which nourishes us in the Holy Eucharist. It is his ever-vigilant providence which undergirds the unfolding moments of our days.

Jesus is Lord and lives, because he is risen! **He is risen, indeed. Alleluia!**

**PENTECOST**

How can events which occurred some 2,000 years ago still be relevant for us? The answer lies in the ministry of the Third Person of the Holy Trinity. It is the Holy Spirit’s task to make Jesus Christ contemporary in our lives today. The Holy Spirit brings us to faith and empowers to lead godly lives. This work he accomplishes through the Means of Grace (Word and Sacraments). These are the truths we celebrate on Pentecost.

Some of us learned of our spiritual dependence on the Holy Spirit from our study of Martin Luther’s Small Catechism: “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.” (Small Catechism, Creed, Third Article)

It is important to affirm that this work of the Holy Spirit is not a once-and-for-all occurrence, but rather a daily discipline. Each day the Holy Spirit confronts us new, confirms our faith, empowers our living, and seals our salvation. You and I would not continue to know of or nor be a current participant in God’s marvelous plan of salvation were it not for the person and the on-going work of the Holy Spirit.