



And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. (Luke 2:7)

What a lovely scene of love and solitude this hymn evokes in those whose hearts are conditioned to appreciate beauty and warmth. It is a Lutheran hymn whose author remains a mystery. It has been suggested that this hymn was one which Martin Luther wrote himself for his own children though this claim has never been confirmed. It first appeared formally in 1887 in a songbook for children entitled, *"Dainty Songs for Little Lads and Lasses."* The most common tune to which the carol is sung is that composed by James R. Murray by the same title. Of course, truly great hymns and carols actually have no earthly author if composed, as Bach alleges, by the inspiration of God. Furthermore, who cares whose name is on the title line as long as the intrinsic beauty of the words and music are the most compelling aspect of the hymn?

The great benefit of these Christmas Hymn/Carols we have been studying is the natural spirit and setting that they provide to the Gospel account of the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. In addition to the intellectual understanding conveyed in the Words of the Gospel, these Carols add a spiritual dimension that enlarges our heart-knowledge of all that transpired in tiny little Bethlehem that cold winter night. I can remember, from my earliest childhood recollections, being entranced by the simple beauty of this, and all other, carols of Christmas. As a toddler, I could not comprehend the gravity of what transpired there, but the carols gave me a mystical curiosity that led to a much deeper understanding as I matured in my faith.

It is quite conceivable that a stable would not be an ideal environment for a child to be born. It most likely would violate many health and environmental regulations in our day, but it was, nonetheless, the place that God chose for His son to be born in order to demonstrate His intention of sharing in all human experiences. When this carol was sung at church, I could, in my child's eye, envision the meager surroundings of the stable yard with a manger at center, the precious mother holding and caressing her sweet baby, Joseph standing by in awe of the sight along with the mute beasts of the

field who were privileged to be there too. There was likely the warm glow of a fire in the midst to provide some warmth from the cold night air. That was it! A very simple scene, is it not? Of course, all that Jesus ever did was the epitome of simplicity. He had a stone for a pillow for his head, and the plain drab of the common man as His apparel. He spoke in simple parables that the simple-minded could grasp greater truths than elevated vocabulary could convey. He simply loved, and simply lived. Let the words to this simple carol bypass your mind at present and sink, first, into your heart:

Away In A Manger

Away in a manger, no crib for a bed,
the little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head.
The stars in the sky looked down where he lay,
the little Lord Jesus, asleep on the hay.

The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes,
but little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes;
I love thee, Lord Jesus, look down from the sky
and stay by my cradle till morning is nigh.

Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask thee to stay
close by me forever, and love me, I pray;
bless all the dear children in thy tender care,
and fit us for heaven to live with thee there.

Jesus began His life with no place to lay His head, except a wooden trough for the feeding of cattle and sheep. He lived His life after the same fashion as the Bread of Heaven (Life) to feed those others who, without Him, are no better than the beasts of the field: *“Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head.”* (Luke 9:58) *“Away in a manger, no crib for a bed, the little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head.”* It may have been far away in a manger both in time and geography for many of us, but God came near at Christmas. Jesus is our Emmanuel to be with us forevermore if we believe unto salvation. Time and distance are not obstacles to God who exists beyond those worldly values.

“The stars (literally, angels) in the sky looked down where he lay, the little Lord Jesus, asleep on the hay.” Jesus was once, in His humanness, as small as any baby alive. He was once a teenager, and then a young man who gave His life for you and me in the fullness of His manhood. But in His Godhead, He was ancient and timeless. He was with the Father before the worlds were formed, and He was the executive engineer of Creation. (John 1:1-3)

The sheep and cows round about never did an evil deed in their lives. They consume only grass and hay and never kill for food. These were present at the birth of Christ – perhaps not without reason. Perhaps even the rude beasts of the field sensed the reverence and majesty of that night: *“The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes, but little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes;”* We all come into this world screaming for whatever will satisfy our insatiable appetites. But Jesus had no selfish bone in His body. He was sinless from the moment of conception. The cattle softly low, and the baby awakes, not out of startled surprise, but out of the distant memory of when the world was formed and He gave the breath of life to these lowing cattle. He REMEMBERED, just as He remembers exactly how many hairs with which He has adorned every head of mankind.

"I love thee, Lord Jesus, look down from the sky and stay by my cradle till morning is nigh." How can we not help loving the Lord Jesus who loved us long before we were conceived, and whose love will continue in the Eternity of future days beyond our passing from this vale of tears. He came and laid down His head on a crude instrument of wood (manger) for you and me. He laid Himself down on another crude instrument of wood (a cross) at the end of His earthly days to redeem us since we could not redeem ourselves. And He has ascended into the heavenlies to be our Advocate with God the Father. What love is this? *"We love Him because He first loved us."* (1 John 4:19)

"Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask thee to stay close by me forever, and love me, I pray;" A reminder: **HIS NAME IS EMMANUEL!** How much nearer can God come to us than to abide with us, and in our hearts, forever? Of course, He is a gentleman and never intrudes His presence where He is not welcome. He awaits our invitation: *"Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me."* (Rev 3:20) We do not need to ask Jesus to love us; He has already proven His love for us. *"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."* (John 15:13)

". . . bless all the dear children in thy tender care." It is good that we pray the prayers of this little carol since we know already that it is the perfect will of God to grant such petitions of love and care. Jesus does, indeed, love the little children. Jesus used uncommonly strong language to describe His love and favor for little children: *"At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them, And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me. But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea."* (Matt 18:1-6)

". . . and fit us for heaven to live with thee there." We must allow Jesus to "fit us for heaven" for that wonderful place for we cannot fit ourselves. In fact, without His redeeming sacrifice, we are already walking dead (zombies so to speak) who are destined for the eternal darkness. I will close with these powerful verses of Paul in his Epistle to the Ephesians: *"And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins; Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others. But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus: That in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus. For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God."* (Eph 2:1-8)

Are you dead this Holiday Season, or is it truly the CHRISTMAS SEASON you celebrate?