

Songs of Thankfulness and Praise

Lutheran Service Book 394 | study by J. H. Sorenson

Introduction

If we look in the dictionary for the meaning of “epiphany,” one meaning is “a sudden realization or intuitive leap of understanding,” another is “a manifestation of a god or divine being in human form.” That’s fine if we know what a

“manifestation” is. The word “manifest” is very important in this hymn, used again and again in every stanza.

- What are some meanings for the word “manifest”?
- What do you think “God in man made manifest” means?

Exploring the Scriptures

One of the key emphases of the Epiphany Season, repeated again and again, is that Christ fulfills the prophecies of the Old Testament. Read Is. 61:1–3 for predictions of things that would occur in the days of the Messiah. Compare this to Matt. 11:1–5.

- What evidence does Jesus Himself provide that He is the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecies?
- Did everyone who saw and heard what Jesus was doing believe in Him? (Luke 4:18–30).

This hymn is packed with Bible imagery in every stanza, starting with the visit of Wise Men (sages) to the infant Jesus.

- What do you think “Branch of royal David’s stem” means? (Is. 11:1; Jer. 23:5, 33:15).
- What is important about Bethlehem?

The second stanza continues the biblical themes.

- What does “Manifest at Jordan’s stream” refer to?
- How does this reveal Jesus as “Prophet, Priest, and King”?

Stanza 2 also refers to the wedding at Cana (John 2:1–11), where Jesus and His disciples were guests and He did His first public miracle, changing water into wine, “and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him” (v. 11).

- How does this miracle reveal Jesus?

- What does Jesus’ presence say about marriage?
- How often does this miracle happen?

Stanza 3 begins with Jesus “Manifest in making whole / Palsied limbs and fainting soul.”

- What does “palsied” mean?
- What does Jesus do for people in that condition?
- How did Jesus quell “all the devil’s might”?
- Can you think of a time when Jesus brought “good from ill”?

Stanza 4 looks ahead to Jesus’ “Great Epiphany,” beginning with the cosmic disturbances that will announce His coming again to judge the living and the dead. Among the many passages that foretell these events are Joel 2:10; Is. 34:4; 13:10; Matt. 24:29–31, and Rev. 19:1–16.

- Is the coming of Christ and the “end time” a lively hope for Christians today?

Biblical themes continue to unfold in stanza 5, as the hymn becomes a prayer for grace to see Christ present to us in His Word and grace to “imitate” Him (Eph. 5:1) in “purity,” so that at His coming we may become “like Him” (1 John 3:2).

- How is Christ present in His Word?
- How do we see Him there?
- In what ways do we imitate Christ?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

The author of this hymn was Christopher Wordsworth (1807–1885), an Anglican clergyman and later a bishop in England in the mid-nineteenth century. The hymn was published in 1862 as part of a collection of hymns for the

Sundays and holy days of the Church Year. He wrote the hymn to be a “Recapitulation of the Subjects presented in the Services of former weeks throughout the season of Epiphany; and Anticipation of the future great and glorious Epiphany, at which Christ will appear again, to judge the

World.” In other words, the stanzas call to mind the Gospels for the Sundays of the Epiphany Season in his day. In our time the hymn fits best with the Gospels of Series C.

Text

Over the years, changes are made to many hymns for various reasons. Sometimes new hymnals leave out certain stanzas in order to shorten the hymn. Sometimes doctrinal reasons are involved. Sometimes changes are made as a matter of style or the “inclusiveness” of language.

- How many stanzas are “enough” for most hymns?
- Should a hymn be left out because of false doctrine in one stanza?
- Should a hymn be left out because the author has elsewhere expressed “wrong” ideas?

In the second edition of his hymn collection, Wordsworth himself changed the words in stanza 5 from “mirrored in Thy holy Word” to “present in Thy Holy Word.” Somewhere between then and now “May we imitate Thee now” became “grace to imitate Thee now.”

Making the Connection

The Epiphany Season starts with the leading of the Magi to see in the infant Jesus the revelation of God in human flesh and blood. It goes on to unfold the whole story of God become man in Christ through the actions and events of the life and ministry of our Lord. Each Gospel reading of the Sundays after the Epiphany is a new revelation, a manifestation of God in Christ. Each of them shows Him as the one

In Closing

“Songs of Thankfulness and Praise” is a very good hymn to sing toward the end of the Epiphany Season. It reminds us of many of the ways God is manifest — plain, obvious, evident — in Jesus through the things He did and said in His earthly ministry. It brings the season together and sums it up.

- Sing or read together *LSB* 394.

- What is your opinion of these changes?

In two twentieth-century Lutheran hymnals, stanza 4 has been omitted, and the last line changed to “God in flesh made manifest.” Both of these have been restored in *LSB*.

- Why would some want to omit stanza 4?
- Is “gender neutrality” always a good thing in hymns?

The great number of biblical references and images used in this hymn is one thing that makes it a great and lasting contribution to the Church’s worship.

Wordsworth’s sensitivity to the needs of regular worship in ordinary churches is another thing that makes it a great hymn. It comes from a real pastoral concern that the worshipers in his congregation should hear and learn the lessons from the Word read and taught every Sunday. To this day this hymn is in regular use by English-speaking Christians throughout the world.

and only Son of the living God. Each of the Gospel miracles of the season shows us God-inspired evidence of this truth.

- How do the Epiphany Gospels strengthen our faith?
- What other ways does Christ manifest Himself to us?
- How can we be “imitators of Christ”?

Prayer

Almighty God, whom to know is everlasting life, grant us perfectly to know Your Son, Jesus Christ, to be the way, the truth, and the life, that following His steps we may steadfastly walk in the way that leads to eternal life; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen (For a right knowledge of Christ, *LSB*, 311).