

The Only Son from Heaven

Lutheran Service Book 402 | study by Todd A. Peperkorn

Introduction

In Gen. 15:5 God promised Abraham that his offspring would be like the stars in the heavens. This promise did not come immediately. Abraham and Sarah had to wait for many years before their first son, Isaac, was born. In this hymn we see the story of the brightest star of Abraham's offspring, Jesus Christ, who fulfills all the prophecies of the coming Messiah, and who brings us faith and trust in Him in all our times of need.

- Can you think of any examples in history or in your life where the coming of a child brought with it great promise?
- Why does the coming of a child mean new beginnings in so many ways?
- When is the first time in the Scriptures that God promised to send Jesus? Why did He make the promise?

Exploring the Scriptures

Stanza 2 of this hymn gives us the opportunity to explore the question of God's timing. Read Eccl. 3:1–8, where the preacher speaks about how there are times appointed for nearly everything in our life. These seasons or times demonstrate to us that God is the one who orders everything in our lives, and that these things happen in His way and time.

- If there is a time for everything under the sun, does that mean we have no choices in our lives, in how things turn out? Why or why not?

Read Gal. 4:4–7, where St. Paul teaches us how God's timing in sending Jesus had to be just right (the "fullness of time"), so that His holy purposes might be fulfilled.

- What are God's holy purposes?
- How does that help us to understand God's role in the individual happenings of our life within the context of God's plan of salvation?
- Why does Paul call us *all* (men and women alike) "sons"? What is the relationship between that and Paul calling us heirs?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

This hymn holds many distinctions. It is one of the earliest Lutheran hymns, as it was written around 1524, right about the time that Martin Luther began in earnest to revive the hymnody of the Church. Hymns from that period are well known for being substantive, and this one is no exception.

- Why do you think it would have been so common to have heavily doctrinal hymns during the early period of the Reformation?

The author of our hymn was a woman, Elisabeth (Meseritz) Cruciger (1500–1535), an ex-nun from Rega who married a theologian named Caspar Cruciger in 1524. She and her husband became close friends of Martin and Katherine Luther, and could often be found around the Luther dinner table. Given her age and the times in which she lived, it is nothing short of amazing that Luther and his colleague, Kantor Johann Walter, approved this text for the earliest Lutheran hymnals.

- What does this fact tell us about how Luther and others viewed the writing of hymns in their day? What could this teach us about encouraging poetry and hymn-writing in our circles today?

The hymn was not included in *The Lutheran Hymnal* of 1941, but was reintroduced in the Missouri Synod with its inclusion in *Lutheran Worship* in 1982. It has slowly but steadily gained acceptance and popularity in our circles since that time.

- Think of some of the other new hymns that you have learned over the past five years. Why did you learn them? What is good about learning new hymns? What is the danger in learning new hymns?

Text

Cruciger wrote this hymn in two parts. The first part encompasses stanzas 1 and 2, which are packed with Scripture references and teaching about God's purpose in

sending His Son. Notice how they hold up so many different doctrines or teachings about Christ, such as His relationship to the Father, His prophetic life, the incarnation, His kingship, the virgin birth, God's work in destroying death, opening heaven and eternal life.

- Is this too much to take in with one hymn, or does this teaching emphasis give us more reasons to come back to the hymn year after year? Why?
- What would be a way that a hymn like this could be used in Sunday School or at home to teach the faith?

The second part of the hymn is stanzas 3 and 4, which move from a teaching mode to more of a prayer. Notice what exactly we pray for in stanza 3: to love God more, to stand unshaken in faith and to adore God in spirit. Also note how we receive glimpses of heaven here which we pray would “reap its fullness” hereafter.

- What is the glimpse of heaven to which the author refers?

Making the Connection

“The Only Son from Heaven” ties the birth and epiphany of our Lord to how God is present with us in the Divine Service. How would the following phrases make these connections for us now?

- “He comes, the king anointed, The Christ, the virgin-born.”

In Closing

God gave Abraham a promise that the Son would come in His time and way, and that the entire world would be blessed through Him. The Son has come, and continues to come to us now in the Divine Service. God shows Himself to us week after week, year after year, to give us life, to rescue us from death, and to give us a glimpse of heaven itself.

- Sing or read together *LSB* 402, “The Only Son from Heaven.”

- Why must the Lord awaken our hearts to do these things?

The final stanza is a doxological stanza, that is, a hymn of praise to the Holy Trinity. There is a sense in this stanza that we stand in worship adoring God, and that we are suddenly surrounded by the angels who sing “Holy, holy, holy” with us! The threefold “holy” is from Is. 6:3, where the angels surround the throne of God and sing that the whole earth is filled with God's glory.

- Where in the Divine Service do we sing “Holy, holy, holy”?
- Why would our hymn writer want to make the connection between the worship on earth and the worship in heaven?
- How does it change our view of worship to know that we sing and pray and receive God's gifts “with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven” (*Lutheran Worship* [Concordia Publishing House, 1982], 146)?

- “To open heav'n before us And bring us life again.”
- “That we, through this world moving, each glimpse of heaven proving, May reap its fullness there.”

Prayer

Almighty and everlasting God, who governs all things in heaven and on earth, mercifully hear the prayers of Your people and grant us Your peace through all our days; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for the Second Sunday after the Epiphany).