

Preparing the Manger

An Advent Observance in two parts, written by Jons Olsson, 12/95; updated 12/96)

Part I (4th Sunday in Advent: done between the Epistle and Gospel Lessons)

(Leader)

We have been told to prepare. "Prepare ye the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

"Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let earth receive its King."

We know we are unworthy. We know we cannot make sense of earth or heaven on our own. We know we sin against God and neighbor in spite of our good intentions. We need someone greater than any of us to be our champion in the fight against sin. We need someone to prepare a way, a means, for us to approach God, to plead for our forgiveness and to provide us with a grace that will save us for all times to come.

Therefore we pray:

"Oh come, oh come, Emmanuel. Come and cheer our spirits by your advent here."

And now on this special Advent Sunday, we ask that the Holy Child of Bethlehem descent to us, and be born in us today. Come to us; abide with us; abide in us.

Each time before we partake in the Lord's Supper (as we will shortly do), we prepare ourselves through prayer, admitting our sinfulness and asking for forgiveness. On this final Sunday of Advent, we need to prepare ourselves for the FIRST communion; oh, not the communion of the body and blood of Christ, but the communion with God, the first opportunity God has given us to know him in human form; to commune with God in person.

Today, WE need to journey to Bethlehem to prepare for his coming. And we will now do just that. Like us, the manger awaits Him. Let us prepare the manger and ourselves. If you will follow (*a pre-selected person from the congregation, e.g., a deacon*), he/she will lead you to the box of straw (*placed an end of the church opposite the altar*), the bedding for the babe-to-be-born. Take a bundle* and follow her/him to the manger (*sitting empty in front of the altar*). Place your bundle of straw in the manger, and as you do, say to God and to yourself, "Come into my heart, Lord Jesus; there is room for you here, even though the inn is full tonight."

(Congregation, following the pre-selected person, single files to the basket/box of straw, picks up a bundle 6-8 pieces of straw, 8-10 inches long, tied with a colorful Christmas ribbon, and carried to the manger; filing past the manger, each person*

places his/her bundle in the manger.)

We may not hear His coming, but in this world of sin, our meek souls will receive Him and Christ will enter in.

Part 2 (Christmas Eve; Candlelight Service; done after the closing hymn Silent Night, Holy Night sung while candles are lighted. Church lights remain off/dimmed; candlelight prevails.)

(Leader)

Earlier this week we helped prepare the manger by symbolically traveling to Bethlehem, each putting a bundle of straw in place for His bed. Now we silently await His coming. We look for the fulfillment of the prophecy. This wondrous baby will be wrapped in swaddling clothes; a king unlike any king that has ever been born. No longer will we have to wander the world aimlessly, without hope of reconciliation with God, our maker, without hope of seeing His face, without hope of receiving the blessing of salvation that only He can give. The wonder of wonders is about to happen.

This blessed mother-to-be offers her prayers and makes her final arrangements, while perhaps an angel looks in on the manger preparations. *(As the leader steps forward to light the manger with his/her candle, a pre-selected mother/grandmother of the congregation comes forward, representing all mothers, and places a baby blanket in the manger.)*

The witnesses to this miraculous birth are all in place: the cows, the donkeys, the sheep. They will warm and make moist the air for this baby. The earth in solemn stillness lays, waiting to hear the angels sing.

(Special music: in 1995 the leader sang I Wonder as I Wander with accompaniment. In 1996 the leader sang (a cappella) the following words, sung to the tune of Were you There When They Crucified My Lord; thereby making the Christmas/Easter connection. Coincidentally, the leader sings Were You There a cappella at the close of Good Friday services.)

- 1) *Were you there when God's angels sang that night?
Were you there when God's angels sang that night?
Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when God's angels sang that night.*
- 2) *Were you there when she placed Him in the hay?
Were you there when she placed Him in the hay??
Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when she placed Him in the hay?*
- 3) *Were you there when the shepherds heard the news?*

*Were you there when the shepherds heard the news?
Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when the shepherds heard the news?*

4) *Were you there when kings journeyed from afar?
Were you there when kings journeyed from afar?
Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when kings journeyed from afar?*

5) *Were you there when God's Son was born on earth?
Were you there when God's Son was born on earth?
Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when God's Son was born on earth?*

(Responsively)

Leader: Come into my heart, Lord Jesus.

Congregation: There is room for you here, even though the inn is full tonight.

(final verse of special music)

6) *Let us go now and celebrate His birth!
Let us go now and celebrate His birth!
Oh, God through His Son has come to love us, redeem us, and save us.
Let us go now and celebrate His birth!*

(Leader places rose in manger).

(Church lights resume; pastor gives benediction; concludes service).

*Verses 1, 2, 4 & 5: written by ELCA Pastor Bernhard Hillila, Valparaiso, Indiana.
Verses 3 and 6: written by Jons Olsson.)*

(Other appropriate special music suggestions: Lo How a Rose 'Er Blooming, Away in a Manger, Bring a Torch Jeannette Isabella, O Holy Night)

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