

*Ah, dearest Jesus, holy Child,  
Prepare a bed, soft, undefiled,  
A quiet chamber set apart  
For You to dwell within my heart.*

The appearances of God to His people Israel in the Old Testament are great and majestic. He is enveloped in fire in the bush when He comes to Moses to call and send him as the deliverer of His people from bondage in Egypt. Throughout the exodus He is wrapped in clouds and fire. He dwells in the cloud of glory between the cherubim in the tabernacle, later the temple. The prophet Isaiah beholds Him on His glorious throne in heaven, the angels flying and veiling their faces, singing His praise, the clouds of incense, swirling about.

But when this same God comes because it is time to finally, once and for all save His people from their sins, to fulfill all the ancient promises given over centuries and centuries, to accomplish for all humanity what the great acts of salvation for Israel foreshadowed, this mighty and majestic God of Gods comes as a little baby, born like any other child after growing in His mother's womb for nine months as any other child. He now cries out for hunger, soils Himself and needs to be changed as any other child.

And where is He born? Not in a palace, where even any mortal king belongs, no, the eternal King is born where no baby, royal or not, should ever be, in a poor and lowly stable, surrounded by slobbery, smelly animals, their filth and the accompanying flies.

Why is He there? Because there's no room in the inn. This phrase does not mean as the old movies or pageants so tamely put it, that there's no vacancy in Hotel Bethlehem. It's that in the appointed guest space in Joseph's family's house (he has family there, that's his ancestral home, why he had to go to Bethlehem), there's no room for Joseph, Mary, and her Child. And while that may simply be because other of Joseph's relatives are there as well – first come, first serve – it might just as well be that word of Mary's condition has crept through the Judean grapevine. Chatty gossip then was just as destructive as it is today. And so there is no place for a girl like Mary and her you-know-what child in that home. Already the Lord Jesus is rejected, but the first instance of what He will suffer His whole life.

And what is this rejected newborn King clothed in? The newborn God is wrapped not in the glorious robes seen by Isaiah, not even a warm, fuzzy onesie or cute outfit, but rather in strips of cloth, scraps, for we know later that Joseph and Mary are poor. Forty days later, for the sacrifice for Mary's ritual purification after childbirth according to the Law of Moses, it is the offering for the poor, two doves, which they bring. Luther captures the great contrast of who this noble Guest is and where He is in his Christmas hymn, what we will sing later tonight:

*Ah, Lord, though You created all,  
How weak You are, so poor and small,  
That You should choose to lay Your head  
Where lowly cattle lately fed!*

*Instead of soft and silken stuff  
You have but hay and straw so rough  
On which as King, so rich and great,  
To be enthroned in royal state.*

All the while, in such lowliness this One remains who He was from eternity: almighty God, the eternal and glorious Son of the Father. He is still Lord and King, and He chooses this. God has chosen to come and endure already as a Child everything that you must. Weakness. Crude epithets. Rejection. Being in the lowliest of places. Having very little. Even marked for death as so many artists brilliantly depict His swaddling clothes as grave wrappings. And He will soon be hounded out of Bethlehem by jealous and murderous threats, forced into exile.

He is where no God should be, why Judaism and Islam stumble over this day, it is far too humiliating and debasing for Almighty God to be subject to this. And yet this is the most necessary thing for God to do. This is how He redeems us from where we belong, from what we justly suffer because of our sins. It is already here that we see how salvation comes. Not by our self-improvement or self-help. It is by God Himself coming among us, to bear and suffer all our lowliness and far worse, to be harried by wicked men not just as an infant or toddler, but His whole life long, to go on and bear our sins, to die our death.

He counts no debasement, no lowliness as too beneath Him to take up and endure. Because you are subject to it all, and you are far more helpless than a newborn babe. You are incapable. You know these past weeks are but a short time and yet you still could not keep yourself from getting tired, overwhelmed. You know flu season is in full swing, yet you cannot keep yourself from getting sick. You know the hurts and pains others will inflict on you, and not only can you not prevent them, you cannot keep them from hurting. You know how you will be tempted and fail, that you have fallen short of the glory of God, and there is nothing you can do to make it otherwise.

You need Him. You need this Child, God come as a man, as a baby, to take up all that is yours, all that is beyond your control, all that is outside your ability to solve, and to give to you what is His. Here you see that most majestic of mysteries, the beginning of that great and marvelous exchange: your sins for His pardon, your weakness for His strength, your sorrow for His joy, your death for His life.

All this is shown by the Father in heaven to be yours, done and offered freely to you in the birth of His Son among us in our flesh. And it is given in His Gospel preached to you this night in words and hymns. It is bestowed most beautifully in the Holy Sacrament, where He comes in that same flesh and blood born of Mary, laid in a manger, praised by angels, and worshiped by shepherds, to take up whatever sorrows and burdens you bear, and in return to give you His very self, to dwell within you, your heart as His manger, filling you with the blessing of His presence and His peace.