

LUTHER'S CHRISTMAS PAGEANT

By Martin Luther

Adapted by Professor Emeritus Arnold Koelpin*

Pageant Introduction: Martin Luther liked to celebrate Christmas with the freshness and spontaneity of a child. He composed the Christmas hymn "From Heaven Above to Earth I Come" to be enacted as a family Christmas pageant. Published in 1535, it may well have been written for the previous Christmas, when his son Hans was 8 and his daughter Lenchen was 5.

Imagine: Near the Christmas tree stood a cradle. Most likely Luther himself, with his fine tenor voice, took the part of the angel and sang stanzas 1-2, where the angel announced: "From heaven above to earth I come to bear good news to every home."

Perhaps his wife, Katie, continued the angel's announcement in stanzas 3-4, and then together, in stanza 5, they invited the children to come to the cradle.

The Luther children, like shepherds, were probably waiting not far from the cradle. "Look now, you children, at the sign" was their cue. They took up the song at stanza 6: "How glad we'll be that it is so! With all the shepherds let us go."

We can imagine them approaching the cradle, individually or together, as they sang each of the subsequent stanzas, marveling at the Christ-child and inviting him into their hearts. And finally, the entire family joined in the closing doxology of stanza 15: "Glory to God in highest heaven!"

You can reenact this inclusive and intimate family Christmas pageant in your home, whether you have just a few people or a large group. Here are the steps.



PREPARATION:

- Make copies of these pages for your group.
- Find a pianist or guitarist to play the hymn (CW 38).
- Choose a "Baby Jesus": a small cradle with a real baby or a doll

PAGEANT:

- Hand out these pages.
- Read aloud the "Pageant Introduction" and "Meet Luther's Children."
- Assign individuals or groups to sing each stanza: 1-5: *two adults*; 6-14: *several children*; 15: all (Or divide the parts in whatever way works for your family or group.)
- Sing the hymn, with different people coming up to the cradle as they sing their stanza.
- Finish with a reading of the Christmas story in Luke 2.

"Let no one think he is too wise and disdain such child's play. When Christ wished to teach men, he became a man. If we wish to teach children, we must become children. Would to God we had more of this child's play. We should then see in a short time a great treasure of Christian people, souls rich in the Scriptures and in the knowledge of God." Martin Luther

From Heaven Above to Earth I Come

LUTHER FAMILY
CHRISTMAS
1535

YOUR FAMILY
CHRISTMAS
2017

Martin		1. <i>(Angel)</i> “From heaven above to earth I come To bear good news to every home; Glad tidings of great joy I bring, Whereof I now will say and sing:
Martin		2. <i>(Angel)</i> “A little child for you this morn Has from a chosen maid been born, A little child so tender, sweet, That you should skip upon your feet.
Katie		3. <i>(Angel)</i> “He is the Christ, our God indeed, Who saves you all in every need. He will himself your Savior be, From all your sins to make you free.
Katie		4. <i>(Angel)</i> “He brings you, every one, to bliss. The heavenly Father sees to this: You shall be here with us on high. Here shall you live and never die.”
Martin & Katie		5. <i>(Angel)</i> “Look now, you children, at the sign, A manger-cradle far from fine. A tiny baby you will see, Creator of the world is he.
All children	All children	6. How glad we’ll be that it is so! With all the shepherds let us go To see what God for us has done In sending us his own dear Son.
Elizabeth <i>(Elizabeth died in infancy, but we have included her in the pageant nonetheless.)</i>		7. Look, look, my heart, and let me peek. Who in the manger do we seek? Who is that lovely little one? The Baby Jesus, God’s own Son.

John		8. Welcome to you, Lord, be our guest. By you poor sinners have been blest. All naked and in cold you lie. How can I thank you – how can I?
Magdalena		9. O Lord who has created all, How did you come to be so small? That you should lie on mere dry-grass, The foodstuff for both ox and ass?
Martin Jr.		10. And if the world were twice as wide, With gold and precious jewels inside, Yet such a cradle would not do To hold a baby great as you.
Paul		11. For velvet and a silken cuff, For these the hay is good enough. Here lies a Prince and Lord of all, A King sleeps in a donkey's stall.
Margaret		12. You wanted so to make me know That you had let all great things go; You had a palace in the sky And left it there for such as I.
All children	All children	13. Ah, dearest Jesus, holy Child, Now make a bed, soft, undefiled Within my heart that it may be A quiet chamber kept for Thee.
All children	All children	14. Now we can play the whole day long. We'll dance and sing for you a song! We, too, must sing with joyful tongue That sweetest ancient cradle song:
Whole family	Whole family	15. Glory to God in highest heaven Who unto us his Son has given, While angels sing with pious mirth, "A glad new year to all the earth."

MEET LUTHER'S CHILDREN

Martin Luther was fond of children. He admired their simplicity and trustfulness. Even though he wed later in life, his 21 years of marriage were blessed with six children.

John (June 7, 1526), better known as Hans, was named after his grandfather. On the occasion of his birth, Luther opened his heart in a letter to his friend Spalatin: "I am a happy husband, and may God continue to send me happiness, for from the most precious woman, my best of wives, I have received, by the blessing of God, a little son, John Luther, and, by God's wonderful grace, I have become a father."

The affectionate father suffered intensely when **Elizabeth** (December 10, 1527), born a year after Hans, died at seven months. "My little daughter Elizabeth is dead," he wrote to a friend. "She has left me strangely sick at heart. . . . I would never have believed that a father's heart could be so tender for his child. Pray to God for me." *Note that even though Elizabeth died in infancy, we have included her in the pageant.*

The sorrow eased with the birth of another daughter, **Magdalena** (May 4, 1529). A beautiful girl with a sweet disposition, she was named after Aunt Lena, who lived in the Luther household. The father seemed to dote on her, his little "Lenchen." She died of a prolonged illness as a teenager. Shortly before her death, Luther prayed: "I love her very much. But if it is thy will to take her, dear God, I shall be glad to know that she is with you."

Another son was born on November 7, 1531, and named **Martin** after his father, since their birthdays almost matched. "The youngest children are always the most loved by the parents," Luther commented introspectively. "My little Martin is my dearest treasure. Hans and Lena can now speak and do not need so much care; therefore it is that parents always love the little infants who need their love the most. What a heart-stab it must have been to Abraham when he was commanded to kill his only son. Truly I would dispute with God if he asked me do such a thing."

On January 28, 1533, the Luthers received a third son, **Paul**. At the christening the next day, the proud parent said to the sponsors, "I have called him Paul, for St. Paul has given me many good sayings and arguments, wherefore I wish to honor him."

The last child, **Margaret** (December 17, 1534), named after Luther's recently deceased mother, was the only one of his three daughters to reach maturity.

THE BIRTH OF JESUS ON RECORD IN THE GOSPEL OF LUKE 2

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Professor Koelpin adapted his introduction from Heritage and Hope (Mequon: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Press, 2013) "Luther on Education," 312f. 319f.

He adapted the hymn text from Roland Bainton's Martin Luther Christmas Book (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1948), to interface with the hymn as published in Christian Worship (hymn 38).

The painting "Luther on Christmas Eve" was painted by Bernhard Plockhurst in 1887.