

Worship Service

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

The service includes an optional Christmas drama, "Three Visitors," in which the characters gradually merge into the congregation's worship on Christmas Eve. The order of service may be followed without the drama. If the drama is performed, only its title should appear in the printed order of service.

The drama requires four empty chairs in a catty-cornered row on the podium, simulating a pew that faces both the congregation and the pulpit. The lights in the sanctuary are low. Four candles are lit on the Advent wreath. The musician meditatively plays variations on the hymn tune, A LAMB IS BORN. The sanctuary lights are increased for the reading of the prophecy of Isaiah.

Prelude: Variations on A LAMB IS BORN

The Witness of the Prophets: Isaiah 9:2, 4-6

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.

For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.

For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Gathering Carol

“A Lamb Is Born among the Sheep”

A Lamb is born among the sheep,
sing, sing nowell.
The shepherds’ Shepherd lies asleep,
sing, sing nowell.

*Nowell, nowell, nowell,
now sing, sing nowell.
Nowell, nowell, nowell,
now sing, sing nowell.*

Eternity breaks into time,
sing, sing nowell,
while angel choirs sing songs sublime,
sing, sing nowell.

Refrain

The Light into the darkness shines,
sing, sing nowell,
as heaven now with earth combines,
sing, sing nowell.

Refrain

*David W. Music (2011)
Tune: A LAMB IS BORN
(pp. 41-43 of this volume)*

A Christmas Drama: “Three Visitors”

As the musician resumes playing A LAMB IS BORN, a woman who is well known to the congregation enters. She carries a large purse. She arranges herself in the third empty chair from the congregation and drops the purse onto the second one. She glances through her order of service until the music stops.

She muses to herself in a stage whisper: “You never know who will come to a Christmas Eve service. Visitors from all over, I suspect....” (Pause) She reads to herself from the order of service: “A Lamb is born among the sheep, / sing, sing nowell. / The shepherds’ Shepherd lies asleep, / sing, sing nowell.” She looks puzzled. “I wonder what ‘nowell’ means?”

A young man dressed in working clothes enters. He carries a stuffed lamb. He sits in the first open chair, the one closest to the congregation. Leaning toward the woman, he answers her question gently: “It means ‘birthday.’ ‘Nowell’

means birthday...as in 'happy birthday' to the Lamb of God." *He continues speaking, now to the lamb cradled in his arms: "I love that verse: 'A lamb is born among the sheep / The shepherd's Shepherd lies asleep.'"*

The woman is staring at the lamb. Seeing this, the young man smiles and says to her: "It's all right. I'm professional. You know – a shepherd, from Bethlehem." Looking often to his lamb, the shepherd reads aloud the meditation from the order of service.

Meditation on the Lamb

Little Lamb, who made thee?
Dost thou know who made thee,
gave thee life, and bid thee feed
by the stream and o'er the mead;
gave thee clothing of delight,
softest clothing, woolly, bright;
gave thee such a tender voice,
making all the vales rejoice?
Little Lamb, who made thee?
Dost thou know who made thee?

Little Lamb, I'll tell thee,
Little Lamb, I'll tell thee:
He is called by thy name,
for he calls himself a Lamb.
He is meek, and he is mild;
He became a little child.
I a child, and thou a lamb,
we are called by his name.
Little Lamb, God bless thee!
Little Lamb, God bless thee!

*William Blake (1757-1827)*¹

The woman is staring at the shepherd. Noticing this, he says to her in a stage whisper: "What? Shepherds may be poor and disadvantaged, but we're not dumb. We see things...." He stands, and motions for the congregation to stand, as someone comes to the pulpit to read the Witness of the Gospels.

The Witness of the Gospels: Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to

Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

This is the gospel of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

After some silence, the shepherd and woman begin singing "Silent Night! Holy Night!" The shepherd motions the congregation to join them.

Response Carol

"Silent Night! Holy Night!"

Silent night! holy night!
All is calm, all is bright
'round yon virgin mother and child;
holy infant, so tender and mild,
sleep in heavenly peace,
sleep in heavenly peace.

Silent night! holy night!
Shepherds quake at the sight,
glories stream from heaven afar,
heavenly hosts sing alleluia;
Christ, the Savior, is born!
Christ, the Savior, is born!

Silent night! holy night!
Son of God, love's pure light
radiant beams from thy holy face
with the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth,
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth.

Josef Mohr (1792-1848); tr. John F. Young (1820-1885)

Tune: STILLE NACHT

An older woman enters. She carries a quill pen and a small notebook, square at the bottom but rounded at the top. The shepherd and woman make room for her in the first chair by shifting themselves and the purse to the other chairs. The shepherd says to her: "Good evening, Hildegard. I thought the beautiful music of Christmas might draw you to join us." He introduces her to the first woman: "Hildegard, this is _____, a member of this congregation; _____, this is Hildegard of Bingen, who writes wonderful songs, and plays, and books on theology and medicine...."

Hildegard stops him quickly by raising her hand. "Just let me join you in worshipping the Lamb at his Nativity." The shepherd is impatient: "But please say you will write a song to celebrate the occasion!" Hildegard replies: "No one can just write a song for the Nativity. As you said, one must first 'see things.' Your poet, for instance, sees in the story how the angels' song links heaven to earth as God comes to us – for he says, 'Eternity breaks into time.'"

The shepherd will not be satisfied: "And what have you seen in the story, Hildegard?" She replies: "To contribute to our worship, here is a song I have received; may it be our prayer to the Lamb." She closes her eyes for a brief moment as if recalling a vision; as the others bow to pray, she reads the Prayer to the Lamb from the order of service.

Prayer to the Lamb

Holy Life Giver,
Doctor of the desperate,
Medicine for all wounds,
Fire of love,

Joy of hearts,
fragrant Strength,
sparkling Fountain,
Protector,
Penetrator,
in you we contemplate
 how God goes looking for those who are lost
 and reconciles those who are at odds with Him.
Break our chains!

You bring people together.
You curl clouds, whirl winds,
 send rain on rocks, sing in creeks,
 and turn the lush earth green.
You teach those who listen,
 breathing joy and wisdom into them.

We praise You for these gifts,
Light-giver,
Sound of joy,
Wonder of being alive,
Hope of every person,
and our strongest Good.

Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179)²

The first woman and shepherd say, "Amen!" After a moment, Hildegard smiles and says to the congregation: "Now, I would really enjoy hearing your songs to the Lamb's Nativity. Would you honor me by sharing some of your favorite carols to tell me what you have seen in the story?"

Sharing of Favorite Carols³

The Witness of the New Testament: Titus 2:11-14

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

A man in his forties, wearing a suit, arrives. He is carrying a sheaf of papers. Once again the other characters make room for the newcomer in the first chair by shifting themselves to the other chairs. The woman looks at her large purse, shrugs her shoulders, and hides it out of the way on the floor.

Hildegard speaks first to the newcomer: "Welcome, Dietrich. You remember the young shepherd, and this is ____." The man smiles and nods to the shepherd, but stands to extend his hand to the first woman: "Hello, my name is Dietrich Bonhoeffer." She replies: "Ah! The theologian and pastor of the Confessing Church in Germany during World War II—nothing surprises me now. Welcome to our worship." He nods and responds: "Thank you. It is my pleasure to join your worship of the Lamb."

Returning to his seat, Bonhoeffer indicates the sheaf of papers and says to the shepherd with a bit of embarrassment: "I have prepared just a few notes." The shepherd smiles: "Be brief, Pastor Bonhoeffer, but do tell us what brought you to us tonight." Bonhoeffer says to him and then to the congregation: "It was your reading of that wonderful promise in Titus which says so much about the manger: 'For the grace of God has appeared....' Or as your poet wrote, 'The light into the darkness shines / as heaven now with earth combines.' It is this about the manger that calls out our response." Looking to the others and receiving their nods to continue, he stands to read his Meditation on the Lamb's Nativity to the congregation.

Meditation on the Lamb's Nativity

When God decides to come in person into this world, in the manger of Bethlehem...we cannot just sit there like a theater audience and enjoy all the lovely pictures. We ourselves will be caught up in this action, this reversal of all things; we will become actors on this stage... What story is being enacted when Mary becomes the mother of God, when God comes into the world in a lowly manger?

The judgment and redemption of the world—that is what is happening here. For it is the Christ Child in the manger himself who will bring that judgment and redemption....

It is God, the Lord and Creator of all things, who becomes so small here, comes to us in a little corner of the world, unremarkable and hidden away, and wants to meet us and be among us as a helpless, defenseless child—not as a game or to charm us, because we find this so touching, but to show us where and who God really is, and from this standpoint to judge all human desire for greatness, to devalue it and pull it down from its throne.

The throne of God in the world is set not on the thrones of humankind but in humanity's deepest abyss, in the manger. There are no flattering courtiers standing around his throne, just some rather dark, unknown,

dubious-looking figures, who cannot get enough of looking at this miracle and are quite prepared to live entirely on the mercy of God.

...Who among us will celebrate Christmas rightly? Who will finally lay down at the manger all power and honor, all high regard, vanity, arrogance, and self-will? Who will take their place among the lowly and let God alone be high? Who will see the glory of God in the lowliness of the child in the manger?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945)⁴

Bonhoeffer says "Amen." After a moment, he motions for the congregation to stand as someone comes to the pulpit to read the Witness of the Gospels.

The Witness of the Gospels: John 1:1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

This is the gospel of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

The four characters sit silently for a minute. Then the shepherd stands and beckons: "When John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him, he declared, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!' Given what you have seen and heard in the story tonight, who will light the Christ candle for us to declare the Lamb's glory?" A young family from the congregation answers, "We will." The sanctuary lights are dimmed as they come to light the Christ candle on the Advent wreath.

Lighting of the Christ Candle

The shepherd, Hildegard, and Bonhoeffer light their small candles from the Christ candle. They move through the congregation, passing their light on others who do the same. The musician softly plays variations on A LAMB IS BORN.

When every congregant's candle is lit and the music stops, the woman character, who is alone on the podium, stands and goes to the pulpit. She reads the benediction, as with newfound insight.

Benediction: 1 Peter 2:9-10

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Once you were not a people,
but now you are God's people;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy.

She concludes: "Nowell, nowell, everyone, a blessed nowell. To all who visit with us tonight, a blessed nowell. May we go now to live in the redemptive grace and peace of the newborn Christ." She blows out her candle as a signal for all.

NOTES

1 William Blake, "The Lamb," *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1789).

2 Hildegard of Bingen, "Holy Life Giver," in Carmen Acevedo Butcher, *Hildegard of Bingen: A Spiritual Reader* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2007), 37. Used by permission.

3 Invite members of the congregation to call out a favorite Christmas carol, briefly saying what the carol highlights in the Christmas story. Then sing one or two familiar verses of the carol.

4 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *London, 1933-1935*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, volume 13, translated by Isabel Best (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2007), 344-347.



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