

Hymns of the Faith: “Away in a Manger”

By [Dr. Bill Wymond](#)

*A Presentation of First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Mississippi
with
Dr. Ligon Duncan, Dr. Derek Thomas, and Dr. Bill Wymond*

Dr. Wymond: Good morning! This is “Hymns of the Faith” brought to you by First Presbyterian Church. The minister of the First Presbyterian Church is Dr. Ligon Duncan. Here with “Hymns of the Faith” is Dr. Ligon Duncan.

Dr. Duncan: Thank you, Bill Wymond, and Merry Christmas to Bill and to Derek as we continue our discussions of great hymns of the faith on “Hymns of the Faith.” In fact we’ve been looking the last couple of weeks at Christmas carols, and having already looked at *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*, we come to one of the simplest and favorite, certainly here in America, Christmas carols, *Away in a Manger*. I don’t think there can be many people in the listening audience this morning who haven’t heard a child at school or a children’s choir at church or perhaps a children’s choir gathered in a mall somewhere singing *Away in a Manger*, or perhaps have had carolers show up at their door to sing this very beautiful simple hymn and tune. There are actually two well-known tunes associated with this Christmas carol, and we’re going to listen to both of them this morning and talk about them just a little bit and about the varying strengths and weaknesses of them.

But I want to start off with a little bit of background about this hymn. I can remember (and I think I’m not making this up!) that in the old Southern Presbyterian hymnal, which was simply called *The Hymnal*, this hymn was labeled as to its tune title “Luther’s Cradle Hymn.” And for a number of years, I think mostly in the middle of the twentieth century, there were people who actually attempted to ascribe it to Martin Luther. Now the tune comes out of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America in the late nineteenth century, and then (as we were talking off air just before we came on this morning) a Methodist bishop actually commissioned the writing of the third stanza of it in the early 1900’s. But the Lutherans themselves never ever misunderstood this as being a product of the pen of Martin Luther. I think that was somebody else that got that idea, Derek!

Dr. Thomas: Well, yes, and we should just inform folks that the book that James Murray wrote, in which he ascribed it as “Luther’s Cradle Song” was called — the

classic title of it was called *Dainty Songs for Little Lads and Lasses*.

Dr. Duncan: You're not thinking that's going to be a big seller today, Derek?

Dr. Thomas: I don't think so today! [*Laughter*] Published in 1887....

Dr. Duncan: But he ascribes that sort of title to the tune, but never meaning to associate it with Martin Luther. And many people...I mean, this happens in hymnody from time to time. People will misunderstand certain things and they ascribe it. But the song comes out...it's anonymous. We don't know exactly who wrote it, but it does show up in 1885 in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America hymnal.

And we will listen to tunes to it. MUELLER is one tune — good Lutheran name for a tune; and then CRADLE SONG is another tune. And, Bill Wymond, you were telling me that both of these tunes are American. One is by Kirkpatrick, and then Mueller is by this James Murray fellow. You want to tell us about these gentlemen?

Dr. Wymond: Well, let me tell you about this tune first, by Mueller. *Away in a Manger*... I will make a confession here before the world and all the world to hear, that I have never liked this tune! Even as a child (and I was certainly not sophisticated), I just didn't think it had anything to it. I didn't like to sing it then. And actually that may be indicative of the simplicity of it, which is not a bad thing. Children have no trouble learning this tune.

Dr. Duncan: Well, and people that aren't musical. I mean, I think people that are more interested in being challenged or stimulated by a tune would be bored to tears by the tune. For those ordinary mortals out there that don't have yours and Derek's gifting, they appreciate a simple tune, Bill! [*Laughter*]

Dr. Wymond: And it has a kind of innocence about it as it goes down the scale... [demonstrates].. and just playing that must evoke emotions in people...

Dr. Wymond: ...because we have such...Derek, we will get to your tune in just a minute!

Dr. Duncan: We'll get to you in a minute, man!

Dr. Wymond: ...but it is an emotional....

Dr. Duncan: ...lullabye...

Dr. Thomas: Is there a strange chord there in the second line? The second note? That's an odd...

Dr. Wymond: You mean where it goes... [plays "...Lord Jesus, laid down..."] No, The Beatles used it all the time!

Dr. Duncan: I should know it well, then! You missed it Derek — you were listening to Wagner!

Dr. Wymond: It's just the 5 of I...a V7, actually. It may have just struck you at some moment like that. But anyway, it is lullaby-like. It is in s time, which is what comforting music often is. [Plays more...] and so this tune just does a lot of the same thing, just coming down the scale. It repeats that again, and it goes... [plays "...the little Lord Jesus, asleep on the hay."] But again, as I was saying, all of us have emotions and memories tied up with that tune, and so it's comforting in itself.

But the second tune that I would like to get to, also by an American, whose name was William James Kirkpatrick, is to me a much better tune. And I must tell you that I first heard this tune in England. Once again we sent over some help to them in the form of this fine tune, which they adopted. And it is also in s time, as it probably needs to be because of the text, but it has much more worth to it, I think. [Plays CRADLE SONG] That is what I think of as a "narrative tune." It is a tune that is built to tell a story. And it is childlike in a sense; it's not difficult for children to sing, but it has much greater possibilities for good harmonization. And some fine composers — including that fine Englishman, John Rutter — has made some good settings of this.

Dr. Duncan: Well, it sounds English. It really does. It does sound like an English folk...play it one more time, Bill. I want to draw your attention to something. [*Dr. Wymond plays the first phrase.*] Now listen to the melody, and then the rhythm of it gives it that sort of staid English, stately sort of manner of an English folk song. But if you'll listen to it, Kirkpatrick also gave us the tune — and I've forgotten...we sing two different hymns to it — it's very much gospel song-y in its rhythm and its mode. If you listen to the tune of it...[hums *Hallelujah, Praise Jehovah*; Dr. Wymond joins and plays]...that melody line actually picks up some of the same kind of melody line that he's got in this, even though that one doesn't sound English remotely! It sounds so American-gospel-song-like.

Dr. Wymond: As I look through his corpus of hymns, I'm sort of surprised that this particular tune sounds as it does. He wrote two or three hymns that we love, such as '*Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus*. There's a real simplicity to that hymn. He only uses about three chords.

Dr. Duncan: Yes, *Hallelujah, Praise Jehovah* is the one that I think we sing it to... "Hallelujah, praise Jehovah, from the heavens praise His name..." or something like that.

Dr. Wymond: Another one he wrote is *He Hideth My Soul* [plays tune]. Another

is *Lead Me to Calvary* — many would know that particular one. So he was writing right in the midst...in the middle nineteenth century, in the midst of gospel hymn production. And most of his hymns are in the gospel vein.

Dr. Duncan: But this is just a beautiful, beautiful tune, and it is substantive and it's interesting. And like you, I think...I may have sung this tune as a boy, but I think it was probably listening to the King's College Choir sing at Christmastime when I first heard *Away in a Manger* sung to this tune, and I've been hooked on this tune that you just played for a long time. I love the melody and the harmony to it, and it carries the song along in a way that...I mean, the other tune does bring up sentimental memories and associations, but isn't as interesting, I think, as this particular tune.

There's a lot to say actually about the text of this song, as simple as it is, and so I want to explore some of those theological themes with you for a minute, Derek. The setting again is someone observing the manger scene. And you know, in our mind, I think — with our sort of Hallmark™ card Christmas pictures, you know — it's very romantic, this manger. But in Jesus' and Mary and Joseph's experience there would have been nothing romantic at all about a child being born in a manger. We wouldn't wish that on our worst enemy today, to have to have a child laid in a manger. So talk us through the first stanza a little bit, Derek. What's the imagery of the hymn drawing our attention to?

Dr. Thomas: Yes...I...I've never been drawn very much to this particular carol. Because I think as soon as you begin to sing these words “Away in a manger, no crib for a bed...” you have to almost tangibly remove those Hallmark™ pictures of cows that are half-fuddled, and sort of grins on their faces as they're looking at the manger...

Dr. Duncan: ...and the light shining from the blissful babe, yes...

Dr. Thomas: ...yes, and then the baby in the manger with a sort of halo around the baby's head, and so on. And all those are very distracting thoughts.

Dr. Duncan: ...although that's something we really have to fight with against most Christmas carols, because they have so many layers of our own traditional experiences during Christmastime that we're removed from the stark, hard realities of the first Christmas.

Dr. Thomas: You know, theologically there are some important things going on. First of all, that Jesus is born in a manger. “The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have their nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.” He's not born in Jerusalem; He's not born in New York or Chicago or a hospital in Jackson, Mississippi, but He's born ...it's...Bethlehem at that point was just a nowhere place outside Jerusalem somewhere. But also of course theologically, the...you know, why do the Gospel writers mention the manger and the sheep

and the cattle and so on? Because there's a restoration of creation involved in the work of redemption, and it's not just the saving of sinners but the restoration of the totality of what the fall had brought about upon creation.

Dr. Duncan: All of those details are designed in the biblical narrative to shock, to assault our sensibilities by the ... amazing announcement that the God of gods, the Light of light, has been brought into this world in this unbelievable state of degradation from the very beginning. And so you have hymnody that tries to draw this to our attention, like "*Who is He in Yonder Stall* at whose feet the shepherds fall?" and the whole design of that language is to shock you with the reality that this child who is lying in low estate is in fact the Lord of glory.

Dr. Thomas: That's why when we sing hymns, and especially carols, we have to sing them with our minds attached, not detached; otherwise we're overwhelmed by the sentimentality of the picture. But here it's the "little Lord Jesus" and that's mind-boggling, that He is Lord, He is God, with all the prerogatives of deity, and yet He's a little child asleep. There's no way to explain that...He's both God and man. But He's not just man here; He's an infant who is utterly and completely dependent upon others for life itself, for food and shelter.

Dr. Duncan: It may be, too, that some of the language of this hymn is so typical of late Victorian sentimentality. You've already brought the attention of the listening audience to that phrase "the little Lord Jesus", but it's followed up by "laid down His sweet head." I mean, that is so late Victorian in the kind of sentiment that it conveys. "The stars in the *bright* sky...the little Lord Jesus, asleep on the hay." It's possible that the very sentiment of the language of the poetry could remove you from the stark reality of which the Gospel narrative wants you to be aware. So that's something as you sing the hymn to be up on.

But then when you get to the second stanza, here we come with one of your favorite theological problems in familiar hymnody, Derek! We're singing along, and the cattle are lowing, and the baby wakes up, but He doesn't cry.

Dr. Thomas: "...the little Lord Jesus no crying He makes." I've always found that difficult to sing, and often don't sing it. I don't think it's right. I believe it could be descriptive of an event, that Jesus could wake up and not cry, but that's not the point. The reality of the incarnation means that He took our frame. He was made like us in every way except for sin; and crying, for an infant, because it hears sounds that it's unfamiliar with, is not necessarily an indication of sin. And so I think that Jesus as an infant could well have cried and probably did. Now, there's a crying and there's a crying...a sinful crying. I mean, even little babies...

Dr. Duncan: ...throw yourself down on the floor and have a temper tantrum, yes...

Dr. Thomas: ...temper tantrum, even as a very little child...and so that, for sure,

but...

Dr. Duncan: Derek, you have often said that you think that evangelicals in general are tempted to think of Jesus in (to use the old language)... in *docetic* terms. In the early days of the church there were certain people that denied the full humanity of Christ. And evangelicals, because we have a high view of Christ, are not so tempted to deny His deity, but sometimes His humanity. And you've talked about that before in your preaching and teaching here.

Dr. Thomas: Well, you know this hymn is written in the late nineteenth century, and where *Kenoticism*, to use a very technical word now, was right out of Germany and the seminaries in Europe generally — and not to say in the United States here, too — there was a wholesale attempt to deny the deity of Christ in various shades and forms. So in the simplicity of this hymn I think there's an attempt here to assert His deity, perhaps at the expense of affirming the fullness of His humanity. And I've been turned to that in my own ministry, that every time I've pressed home the humanity of Jesus, that He had a human mind as well as a divine mind...that there were things in His human mind He did not know...that He had a human will, that He had a human psychology, that He had a human emotional state, that He could cry, that He could be angry — without sinning — I think evangelicals, particularly those who have come out of liberal denominations where they've heard chipping away at the deity of Jesus, they are on the defensive to defend Jesus' deity, and I understand that. And that's a wonderful, wonderful instinct to have, to defend the deity of Jesus. But I'm not sure what's going on here. If I sing this line, as I occasionally have done, I've interpreted it in my head differently, because I do think it's vitally important that Jesus became a fully human infant.

Dr. Duncan: Well, the Apostle John thought that was pretty important! And goes out of his way to press this home, and in fact will say that those who deny that Jesus has come in the flesh have denied what is absolutely essential for salvation. And he'll say it not only in his Gospel, but he'll say it in his letters to the people. So this was something that the early Christians took very seriously.

Probably one reason that all of those lines are included in *The Apostles' Creed* that affirm aspects of the true humanity of Christ — that He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, buried, descended into hell. All of those lines are actually in some way in *The Apostles' Creed* meant to affirm to us the reality of the humanity of Christ, and so it is very important to early Christians, as it is to all Christians who know their Bibles and who know what God is doing in the incarnation and in our redemption.

But then towards the end of that stanza...and here is where you see the sort of, you know, bedtime lullaby child's song that you can see a mother singing to her child, because now the child is bid to...

“I love thee, Lord Jesus! Look down from the sky,
and stay by my cradle till morning is nigh.”

And so it's almost like...

Dr. Thomas: ...*The New England Primer*... I will both “lay me down to sleep...”

Dr. Duncan: (joins Dr. Thomas)

... “I lay me down to sleep;
I pray Thee, Lord, my soul to keep.
If I should die before I wake,
I pray Thee, Lord, my soul to take.”

And so it is in that mode of a child's petition to the Lord to be near to him. And then the final stanza carries that idea out:

“Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask Thee to stay
Close by me forever and love me, I pray.
Bless all the dear children in Thy tender care,
And fit us for heaven to live with Thee there.”

It's theologically...I mean, in comparison with *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*...Bill Wymond was commenting, you know: Wesley is loading theological textbooks full of theology into every phrase! This one is not so. It's very, very spare in that regard.

Dr. Thomas: I put this one in the genre of children's hymns, and I like the idea of children's hymns, and I think it's right to teach children children's hymns...hymns that are suitable for children to sing. I think this is that. I would sing the second line, and in my mind I have “no sinful crying He makes” and that justifies that in my head. But I think it's a wonderful hymn for a mother to sing to a little child at bedtime, especially around Christmastime, because the aspirations, like *The New England Primer* — “I lay me down to sleep” and so on — those aspirations are exactly the kinds of things that you want a child to be thinking of as they go off to sleep.

Dr. Wymond: I would tell you that as a child, when I prayed that prayer and I asked the Lord “my soul to keep, and if I should die before I wake,” I always wondered, “Wow! I didn't know I was in such peril!” You know I really did think that: “Am I about to die?” This hymn makes a reference to that partly in “...and fit us for heaven, to live with Thee there.” Talking about going from the beginning to the end of life, I think maybe these that were written in the era of great infant mortality probably brought some of that to bear. But I would like to think there's a lot of sanctification in that “and fit us for heaven”; you know, make us to grow up to love Christ.

Dr. Duncan: And you know, it is a good prayer. As I think back on my first singing of this hymn, as best as I can remember it, I do think that those two lines stood out to me as meaningful as a young boy singing the song:

“I love Thee, Lord Jesus...” [a profession of love for Christ];

“Look down from the sky,
and stay by my cradle till morning is nigh.

“Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask Thee to stay
Close by me forever, and love me, I pray.”

And then it turns outwardly: “Lord, bless all the children in Your care.”

And I do think that those lines stood out to me as important for me to personally affirm in my relationship with Christ. But, Bill, this morning you’re going to let us listen to both of these versions?

Dr. Wymond: Let’s do. We will play the first and common version, and then we’ll play the second tune as well.

Dr. Duncan: MUELLER is that first and common version, and Kirkpatrick’s is called CRADLE SONG. Let’s listen to these hymns.

Dr. Wymond: Singing *Away in a Manger* for us today is Victor Smith.

Away in a manger, no crib for a bed,
The little Lord Jesus laid down His sweet head;
The stars in the bright sky looked down where He lay,
The little Lord Jesus, asleep on the hay.

The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes,
But little Lord Jesus no crying He makes;
I love Thee, Lord Jesus! Look down from the sky
And stay by my cradle till morning is nigh.

Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask Thee to stay
Close by me forever, and love me, I pray;
Bless all the dear children in Thy tender care,
And fit us for heaven, to live with Thee there.

Dr. Wymond: And now singing the second version of *Away in a Manger* is the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.

[Choir sings...]

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