



From Heaven Above to Earth I come

The story goes that Martin Luther wrote this hymn to be sung at the annual Christmas Eve party in his home. A man dressed as an angel would descend the staircase singing the opening verses and everyone else would then respond with the remainder of the hymn. But the hymn here represents only four of the fifteen stanzas Luther originally wrote. In our shortened version, the first two stanzas belong to the angel and the last two belong to the congregation.

Anyone familiar with the Christmas story from Luke's Gospel will recognize the song of the angels who came to shepherds in the field singing glory to God and announcing the birth of the new king in a manger in Bethlehem.

For a different perspective on the story, see the sermon by Barbara Brown Taylor. "God's Daring Plan." In the sermon, she imagines the Christmas story from the perspective of a high council of angels who aren't quite sure of God's idea to become human. They try to talk him out of it by pointing out all the negative parts about being human (Humans die!) and try to come up with other ways to accomplish God's goals, "Couldn't God create himself as a magical baby with special powers?". But God will not be deterred, "No, [God] thought he would just be a regular baby. How else could he gain the trust of his creatures." At the end of Taylor's story, God's cloak of stars opens the hole between earth and heaven so that bewildered angels are looking down while terrified shepherds are looking up. So angels do what angels do: They announce and they sing, "Glory to God in the highest!"

As worship leaders there is not a lot we need to do to dress up the Christmas story. For people who haven't heard it, the magic and wonder of it are compelling. For those familiar with the story, the familiarity may dull our senses to the absolute chaotic wonder of it all, but the familiarity is its own strength as well. The angels, the inn with no room, and the manger all become anchors for a faith passed on from one generation to the next.

Our role as worship leaders isn't to make the story fancier or more dramatic, but to usher modern listeners through the distance of time and space to these strange, wonderful events and to look for the ways we can have the same sense of wonder and imagination in our world now. It's one thing to re-create a first century setting for a Christmas play or live nativity; it's quite another to emerge from Christmas with a re-enlivened imagination of how God is still coming into our lives and world today, how Christ is still being born in us, and how God is still choosing the most unlikely places to make an appearance.

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