

To the Tune of a Welcoming God

Hymn Texts by David R. Weiss

Hymnody is more than simply an act of worship—and much more than merely a pause in the liturgy! In hymns we bring to mind the stories and images of our faith. Education and spiritual formation (for both adults and children) happens with each breath drawn in and each word released in song. Aided by rhyme and melody, we invite these stories and images to shape our hearts. In 1997 I had an unexpected encounter with Grace, not unlike Saint Paul’s transformative moment on the road to Damascus. I have tried, both in my essays and in my hymn texts, to find words that follow the “tune of a welcoming God” that has filled my soul since then. My hope, in matching these texts to melodies already familiar to many of us, is that these hymns help us fashion a church that reflects God’s longing for welcome and God’s passion for justice. May it be so. – David Weiss

Permission is given to photocopy any of these hymn texts for use in worship.

You can find a larger font set of lyrics online here: www.tothetune.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/drweiss-tothetune-lyrics.pdf

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This hymn text took shape in December 2010, during a 14-day hunger strike, as I moved deeply into my own hunger. Advent is surely the season in which we “deck the halls” and “trim the tree” as we get ready for Christmas. Our homes are filled with Christmas Carols (even if we’re supposed to be waiting until Christmas) and (hopefully) the scent of fresh cookies. And YET, for so much of the world Advent is not merely the four weeks prior to Christmas, it is the gut-deep hunger for justice and for wholeness that swallows entire lives. Unless Advent begins in that place, Christmas is not a cause for joy.

1. The Place Where Advent Starts

As the darkness stretches over / all the daylight, all our lives
In the depths of expectation / where the heart sees, You reside.
Dare we beckon to the hunger / fill our frame and feed our soul
In this dim-lit struggling world / that our feasting be made full.

As we wait with restless longing / for your kin-dom fully come
Rise the cries of warring nations / beats the pulse of terror’s drum.
“Comfort now, my people, comfort,.” / spoke the prophet long ago.
“Still my peace comes to this world / midst its bombs, its spears and bows.”

As the earth cries out in anguish / less for birth than bitter toil;
As the poor, their fortunes falter / as the ill, their spirits spoil.
Steel our vision, so that we see / full the depth of broken hearts;
For in *this* place—hungry, hopeless / yes, in *this* place, advent starts.

Hasten now, come quickly to us / fore our spirits faint with fear.
Be the light in deepest darkness / be the hope that draws us near.
In your advent, may we waken / live the life you call us to:
Every deed a Christmas manger / ready now to welcome you.

Text: David R. Weiss, b. 1959 © 2011 David R. Weiss
Tune: Marty Haugen, b. 1950, Joyous Light © 1987 GIA Publications, Inc. Alternate
Tune: Beach Spring (Lord, Whose Love in Humble Service) – public domain.
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In this new Christmas Carol text, I borrow a familiar carol tune and craft words that hint at how Jesus’ birth foreshadows the welcome that will mark his ministry, revealing the irony of his manger-birth by linking it to the meal by which we remember his death.

2. There’s a Welcome in the Wooden (The Manger)

There’s a welcome in the wooden out back of the inn,
A sweetness in swaddles like new-sewn wineskin,
And poorly strewn straw hints at ripe wheat rolled thin.
There’s a welcome in the wooden out back of the inn.

See Mary, wrapped in wonder, this baby to bear,
The fruit of her womb with the world now to share.
And Joseph in shadows with fatherly care
Soon making their ready to flee Herod’s snare.

Here shepherds, oft outcast, an unlikely sight,
Now guests of this prince by angelic invite.
And sand dunes sing silently deep in the night
As Magi move westward wooed on by starlight.

Here cattle and donkey, here sheep and goats, too,
Are beckoned as creatures, this child to view;
And angels in glory now offer their due.
This wooden speaks a welcome both wondrous and true.

Consider, with me, friends, this daring design:
A manger, made for feeding, a most hungry sign—
Already this infant, holds wheat and holds wine.
There’s a welcome in the wooden that all come and dine.

And outside of the stable, those not yet called in,
Now come to the manger wherever you’ve been,
And hear, as the wooden will call you, too, kin.
There’s a welcome in the wooden out back of the inn.

Text: David R. Weiss, b. 1959 © 2008 David R. Weiss
Tune: Appalachian folk tune, adapted by John Jacob Niles, 1892-1980, arr., I wonder as I wander © G. Schirmer, Inc., admin. Harry Fox Agency, Inc.
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This Lenten hymn text borrows an already familiar Lenten tune, but pairs it with words that focus less on Jesus’ dying than on the vibrant life that he lived—and on the invitation that we follow after him in that living.

3. Now Let Us Follow Jesus

Now let us follow Jesus / the length’ning of these days
To set our face, alongside his / on Zion fix our gaze.
And as we walk along the way / his parables to share
Of a God who welcomes everyone / if we ourselves but dare.

Among the deeds of Jesus / his healings and his meals
We glimpse the wid’ning circle of / all those whom God’s love seals.
And in the way that Jesus did / thus beckon each one home
He caught as well the watchful eye / and iron fist of Rome.

Along our Lenten journey / we trace the path he trod
And in our lives we shape as well / the image of our God.
This path that leads to wood and nails / and culminates in death
Is, too, the path where we partake / in God’s own Holy Breath.

Text: David R. Weiss, b. 1959 © 2011 David R. Weiss
Tune: Frederick C. Maker, 1844-1927, St. Christopher (Beneath the Cross of Jesus) – public domain.
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Written for Maundy Thursday (but appropriate to any service, particularly an evening Eucharist) this hymn intentionally uses the tune of a favorite Christmas Carol—both to link Christmas to Holy Week/Easter, but also to emphasize the theme of incarnation as the driving power of Holy Week. This hymn text sets Jesus’ suffering and death within the context of his radical welcome, as the risk he took to bear witness to God.

4. It was upon a moonlit night (Maundy Thursday)

It was upon a moonlit night / when Jesus broke the bread;
With friends now gathered at his side / in solemn voice he said,
“For, lo, these many days we have / proclaimed the Kingdom at hand;
In turns: at table, by tale, by touch / we’ve shown God gracious and grand.

“But now the forces of power and hate / make ready to bury this wheat,
Before their deeds are done, my friends / each of you, take and eat.”
Then raising high the cup of wine / he looked the room around
And spoke once more of days now past / of children lost now found.

“My friends, the justice of our God / is sealed in gracious love;
As earth gives freely to the vine / so mercy flows above.
Yet gainst the mercy we freely shared / oppression has lengthened its reach.
And now, before my blood is spilled / from this cup, drink of you each.”

With eyes aflame with fear and faith / did Christ thus finish the meal;
And we who gather at his request—rememb’ring, we render it real.
In mercy breaking the bread he gave / in kindness sharing the cup;
In love encount’ring the least of these / and thereby his wounds we bind up.

... In love encount’ring the least of these / and thereby raising Christ up.

Text: David R. Weiss, b. 1959 © 2008 David R. Weiss
Tune: Richard S. Willis, 1819-1900, Carol (It Came Upon the Midnight Clear) – public domain.
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This hymn text lifts up a variety of images of persons touching Jesus: the woman with the flow of blood (Mark 5: 25-34); the woman at the well (John 4: 4-29); the anointing at Bethany (John 12:1-8); Mary Magdalene at the tomb on Easter morning (John 20: 1-18); and Thomas’ Easter encounter (John 20: 19-29). Verse 6 suggests that we, too, touch Jesus whenever we help heal the wounds of the world today.

5. Touching Jesus

Precious Lord, in my need, many years did I bleed;
I reach out, and I touch – touch your hem.
I am healed, like the rest; lepers cleansed, children blest.
Touch your hem, precious Lord, make me whole!

By the well, as I drew, there to drink, I drank you.
I am down, I am out, I am naught.
But you stop, and you speak; you’re the One whom we seek;
Our lives touch, precious Lord, and I’m whole!

At the edge, of the town, there I knelt, to the ground.
Pour the nard, wipe your feet, with my hair.
While you dine, on the bread, through my tears, see you dead
Precious Lord, fragrant love, in the air!

Easter morn, through my tears, call my name, bring me near,
And I hear, and I look, and I hope.
Over cross, over death, bringing life, drawing breath;
Precious Lord, once again, you are whole!

Easter Eve, I’m away; you were there, but I say,
Let me see, let me touch, let me know.
Once again, there you are; fingertips touch your scars;
In my heart, precious Lord, now I know!

Precious Lord, still your hands, bear your wounds, many lands:
Some are lost, some are least, some are hurt,
Let me touch you in deed, as I touch those in need;
Use my hands, Precious Lord, make them whole!

Text: David R. Weiss, b. 1959 © 2008 David R. Weiss
Tune: George Nelson Allen 1812-1877: Maitland (Precious Lord) – public domain.
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This hymn tells the story of Jesus’ ministry of welcome, then the tale of Pentecost, Peter’s vision in Acts 10, and a concluding verse that invites us to make that welcome real now.

6. Now the Welcome

Christ the healer, Christ the host, raising cup in festive toast
Christ the one who sets the feast, Christ the one who calls the least
Christ the holy, Christ the lowly, Christ the teller of new tales,
Christ the bearer of a God who never fails, never fails.

Thus the leper, thus the lame, alleluias both proclaim
Thus the deaf can hear a cry, thus the blind can use their eye
Thus the praying, thus the playing, thus the laughter and the grin
Thus the graciousness of God who gathers in, gathers in.

Then the Spirit, then the Friend, then the mighty Rushing Wind
Then the Wisdom from on high in the tongues of flame come nigh

Then the telling, then the yelling, then the hearing each their own
Then the wideness of God’s love is thus made known, thus made known.

Then the blanket, then the food, Peter’s palate by God wooed
Then the Spirit of the Lord on the Gentiles freely poured
Then the seeing and agreeing and the witness to the rest
Then the op’ning of the church at God’s behest, God’s behest.

Now the wonders, now the signs, mark of God’s surprise designs
Now the mustard seed grown full, now the lamp atop the bowl
Now the thirsting, now the bursting, now the new wine spilling out
Now the welcome of our God hear us shout, hear us shout!

Text: David R. Weiss, b. 1959 © 2008 David R. Weiss
Tune: Carl Schalk, b. 1929, Thine (Thine the Amen, Thine the Praise), © 1983 Augsburg Publishing House, admin, Augsburg Fortress.
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This hymn remains true to much of the nature imagery in the original poetry of “Ode to Joy” but adds in biblical imagery and makes this a hymn of praise for God’s welcoming work.

7. Word of Welcome

In this holy place we gather, claimed through grace by God above;
Heaven’s wings now wrap around us, downy depths of boundless love.
Freed from fears that keep us hidden, for the work that You desire.
Reconciling as we’re bidden, hearts aflame with joyful fire.

Earth in all her verdant beauty sings Your joy made manifest;
Winged and finned and scaled and limbed life; fruitful frenzy, quiet rest.
Rushing wind and rolling waters, green of forest, blue of sky,
Dark of night and dawn of morning, all give praise to You on high.

As by imprint nature offers witness to Your gracious care
So in freedom’s faith we follow after Christ if we but dare.
Rushing wind of Spirit able, blowing from the most to least
From the font and for table, born again and bid to feast.

Word of welcome walk among us, watching as these wineskins burst
Breaking bread and pouring wine for all who hunger, all who thirst.
* Through this time that we’re together, may Your presence here abide
Joy of life and Love of justice, be our Wisdom and our Guide.

* <i>alternate line for use as a sending hymn</i>
Now as we go forth to scatter, may Your presence yet abide
Text: David R. Weiss, b. 1959 © 2008 David R. Weiss
Tune: Ludwig van Beethoven, 1770-1827, Ninth Symphony, 4 th Movement adapt. Hymn to Joy – public domain.
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This hymn reminds us that the kingdom was less the “message” than the very activity of Jesus’ ministry—and that the heart of this activity sought to embody the welcome of God. So I shift “kingdom” to a non-patriarchal and non-hierarchical (and just plain more truthful) “kin-dom.” My words hold up Jesus’ healing miracles as instances of welcome because they restore outcasts to community. As always there are words that make us participants in the work of welcome.

8. Shall we Hearken to the Kin-dom

Shall we hearken to the kin-dom, we who have in darkness trod?
There is light so brightly shining, leading to the home of God. / Refrain

See the lame and leper leaping, hear the mute and deaf rejoice,
See the dead are merely sleeping, waking to his gospel voice. / Refrain

See the blind regain their eyesight, see the outcast sit to feast,
Now the demons take to their flight, Jesus came to save the least. / Refrain

Still the Kin-dom longs to widen, longs to welcome others home,
Holy Winds have yet to heighten, Spirit free to rush, to roam. / Refrain

Refrain:
Yes, we’ll hearken to the Kin-dom, the widening, the welcoming Kin-dom
Hearken with our lives to the Kin-dom that leads to the home of God.

