







What Child is this, who laid to rest,  
 On Mary's lap is sleeping?  
 Whom angels greet with anthems sweet  
 While shepherds watch are keeping?  
 This, this is Christ the king,  
 Whom shepherds guard and angels sing;  
 Haste, haste to bring him laud,  
 The babe, the son of Mary!

(design by Richard Caemmerer)



“This, This . . .”

A Sermon for Christmas Eve  
 (7:30 service), 2010.  
 Bethlehem Lutheran Church.

INI

If you were writing a hymn,  
 you would certainly do your  
 best to match your words to  
 the music.

Say you employed the  
 Common Meter, a stanza with  
 four lines: eight syllables, then  
 six syllables, then eight, then  
 six. Like the old Norwegian  
 Christmas song, [speak] “I am  
 so glad each Christmas Eve/  
 the night of Jesus’ birth!/  
 Then like the sun the star  
 shone forth/ and angels sang  
 on earth.”

Or you could use what we call  
 Long Meter, 8 8 8 8, like  
 “From heaven above to earth I  
 come/ to bear good news to  
 every home! Glad tidings of

great joy I bring/ to all the  
 world, and gladly sing!”

And, of course, it isn’t just the  
 number of syllables that has to  
 match the notes in the tune.  
 You would also want the  
 emphasis in the poem to match  
 the stress in the music. If a  
 syllable was especially  
 meaningful, you would want it  
 to occur on either a high note,  
 or a long one, or the down beat,  
 or a combination of those.  
 Otherwise, it might sound  
 rather off.

For example, if you wrote a  
 poem like [speak] “What child  
 is this, who laid to rest/ on  
 Mary’s lap is sleeping?” You  
 might break that into two lines  
 of 8 syllables and 7, then  
 repeat: Whom angels greet  
 with anthems sweet/ while  
 shepherds guard are keeping?  
 Hmm. Could we locate a  
 tune that would fit our words?

Aha! The meter so far, 8 7 8 7,  
 matches the beginning of a tune  
 we all know and love:  
 Greensleeves, a hit song in the  
 80’s. The 1580’s. Originally, it  
 was a love song about a woman  
 called “Lady Greensleeves.”

But if we are going to match  
 our poem to the tune  
 Greensleeves—and the English,  
 unlike the Germans, did this

sort of thing all the time—we will  
 want to be very careful. We might  
 run afoul of no less a critic  
 than . . . William Shakespeare!  
 Great poet that he was, he knew  
 something about hymnody as  
 well! He mentioned the tune  
 Greensleeves in his play “The  
 Merry Wives of Windsor.”  
 Mistress Ford says, talking about  
 Falstaff:

I would have sworn his  
 disposition  
 would have gone to the  
 truth of his words;  
 but they do no more  
 adhere and keep pace  
 together,  
 than the Hundredth Psalm  
 to the tune of  
 Greensleeves.

[demonstrate by singing to the  
 tune Greensleeves] Make a joyful  
 noise to the Lord, all ye lands---  
 doesn’t work at all. And what a  
 clever analogy Shakespeare offers  
 for hypocrisy: words not matching  
 actions, is like lyrics not fitting the  
 music. Of course, the whole play  
 turns on the deceitfulness of a  
 man named Falstaff.

We want to be careful, then,  
 matching our poem with this 430-  
 year-old tune, because otherwise  
 our hymn will sound false, not  
 true.



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The first four lines ask the question: “Who is this . . . child?” Our fifth line will answer the question: “This is Christ the King!” Except that’s only five syllables, and the tune has six. Maybe we could throw in an extra “This.” “This, this is Christ the king!” That fits better.

Except that the musical line has a powerful stress on those first two notes. Both are high pitches, long, and downbeats! That was the climax in the original poem, so it made sense. “Greensleeves is all my joy . . .” But does it make sense to sing “This! This!” then trail off with “is Christ the King”? Maybe we should sing “Je-sus, is who this is”?

No. “This, this is Christ the King” works perfectly, because that is the emphasis of Christmas. Not on the kingship, but on the unexpected lowliness, the ironically humble point of entry God uses to visit his people. What some theologians refer to as the “scandal” of particularity, when talking about the problem of history and faith.

This, **this** tiny baby. **This** one.

This, **this** first-born of young Mary.

This, **this** one, for whom there was no room, no place to be born.

This, **this** one, whose “guards” are—laughably—shepherds,

. . . is the one whom angels sing: Christ the King.

That is how our carol turned out, with us marveling as we do each Christmas that God has entered this world the same way we did: naked and cold and helpless and needy.

God’s body in the world today is no less remarkable for how humble it is . . . for how humble we are. Can I hold out my hands indicating you who are gathered here this evening, and say, “This, **this** is Christ the King?” And why should I not? Has not Christ himself dictated that we should be, that we are, his body in the world? That we incarnate God’s will for the peace and unity of all? That we are his hands and feet in the midst of a tired and troubled humanity? Has he not specified that those who call him Lord are

united with him and with each other, and that he sends us into the world to work his work?

Surely God can't expect much of us? We're, like, only human, right?

Can this, **this** collection of his people really matter, in the greater scheme?

We have a sign, a token of that similitude or relationship every time we take communion. Two of the most important words in the liturgy of Holy Communion are the two you hear when the pastor recites the Words of Institution. The two words are: "this" . . . and "this." As in "**This** is my body, given for you." And "**This** is my blood, shed for all people for the forgiveness of sin."

Do you think he was joking?

Do you think Jesus was kidding when he said he was with us, and would be in us, to the end of the age? He knew he was not getting the A-team, the all-stars. Just us. This, **this** motley crew of people with a little faith, would do. The world would be astonished, if we ever amounted to anything.

But here we are.

This, **this**—little baby is the Christ, the Son of God

**This** bread, **this** wine—a sacrament linking him to us

This, **this** community of people who are Christ's body today.

Hopefully, matching our lives to his tune. Following his beat, moving to his music, breathing his Spirit, making not just any old difference in the world, but the difference Jesus came to make. It would be a shame if our disposition and our words did not match and keep pace together, like Falstaff. How awful if our disposition did not match the truth in our words, as a community of children of God. But what amazing fruit of love and joy and peace would be brought into the world if we would ignore the drumbeat of the world and suit our lives to the grace we ourselves have received through the one who was born at Bethlehem.

We have not done so well, truth be spoken, matching our disposition to the truth of our words, to the truth of God's word. We are dissonant by habit; we have a taste for *hemiola*. How will we, **we** ever sing God's song of righteousness and peace, in this world?

Only if God should deign to come to our aid, with gifts of reconciliation and harmony.

And this is Christmas. This, **this** child appeared in order to die for us, and to bestow his spirit upon all who love him, so that the Hundredth Psalm (Make a joyful noise to the lord!) might be fitted to every sort of melody, played on every instrument, sung in every tongue, in every land, for the peace of the world.

This, **this** is Christmas. God turning and tuning the world to his ways, by means of a surprising savior and normal people.

Amen.

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No matter how many dots get connected ever so well by national security listening to phone calls, physicians checking our blood work, police interviewing suspects, highway engineers taking core samples, and sociologists, parents, climatologists, dentists, journalists, entomologists, geneticists, pathologists, hog farmers, and insurance adjusters trying to figure out how to solve our problems—no matter how well we analyze all the world's symptoms; the world is not safe until people live not for themselves but for one another. For that, we need to connect to the God who said "Let there be light," who created us for himself in love. To make that connection there is Jesus Christ, who loved us and gave himself for us.

*Marcus Felde*

*Please remember The Crossings Community with a gift this Christmas. An envelope is supplied.*

### The Crossings Community, Inc.

PO Box 7011 + Chesterfield, MO 63006 + 314-576-7357

Marcus Felde, President & Newsletter Editor (317-283-6559) + Lori Cornell, Web Editor (253-839-0344)  
Steven Kuhl, Executive Director (262-642-6303) + Cathy Lessmann, Executive Secretary(314-576-7357)

<http://www.crossings.org> + [info@crossings.org](mailto:info@crossings.org)