

Good King Wenceslas (It's all about Mercy)

A Christmas Program for the Congregation and Its Children

By Bernhard Seter



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OPENING HYMN - "O Come, All Ye Faithful" LSB 379

INVOCATION

Pastor: In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit.

People: Amen.

Pastor: When all was still, and it was midnight,

People: Your almighty Word, O Lord, descended from the royal throne.

Pastor: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (John 1:1).

People: And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

When the Kindness and Generosity of God our Savior appeared He saved us ... according to His mercy (Hebrews 3:4).

CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION

Pastor: The kindness and generosity of God has appeared and He has saved us because He was merciful. He saved us through His gift of light and life. Our Lord Jesus in His great mercy came among us as one of us because we could not find light and life on our own. Let us humble ourselves before our Savior, the child of Bethlehem and Lord of Creation, confess before Him the sin in our hearts and lives, trust in His continued mercy, and ask for God's forgiveness.

(Silence for personal reflection and confession.)

Pastor: Merciful Father,

People: We confess that we have rebelled against You and that often we take Your mercy for granted. We forget about Your great mercy for us and we refuse to be merciful to others. Some of our sin we know about, and some is hidden even to us. We have not loved You with all our heart, nor have we honored You with our lives. We have sinned in our thoughts, words, and actions. Forgive us, we pray, for the sake of Jesus Christ.

Pastor: God has given you a gift — the Gift of His Son — mercy wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. Mercy that went to the cross for you. Mercy that rose from death to life that you might have life. As a called and ordained servant, and at the command and promise of our Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

People: Amen.

Pastor: The peace of the Lord be with you.

People: And also with you.

PRAYER OF THE DAY

Pastor: Let us pray. O God, You make this most holy night to shine with the brightness of the true Light. Grant that as we have known the mysteries of that Light on earth, we may also come to the fullness of His joys in heaven; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

People: Amen.

Pastor: We are going to be led tonight in worship by our young people. The story they will tell is all about mercy, the kindness and generosity of God our Savior that appeared in Christ, the Child of Bethlehem, the Savior of the World.

THE CAROL – “Good King Wenceslas”

(Sung by all)

1. Good King Wenceslas looked out
On the feast of Stephen
When the snow lay round about
Deep and crisp and even
Brightly shone the moon that night
Though the frost was cruel
When a poor man came in sight
Gath'ring winter fuel.

2. “Hither, page, and stand by me
If thou know'st it, telling
Yonder peasant, who is he?
Where and what his dwelling?”
“Sire, he lives a good league hence
Underneath the mountain
Right against the forest fence
By Saint Agnes' fountain.”

3. “Bring me flesh and bring me wine
Bring me pine logs hither
Thou and I will see him dine
When we bear him thither.”
Page and monarch forth they went

Forth they went together
Through the rude wind's wild lament
And the bitter weather.
4. “Sire, the night is darker now
And the wind blows stronger
Fails my heart, I know not how,
I can go no longer.”
“Mark my footsteps, my good page
Tread thou in them boldly
Thou shalt find the winter's rage
Freeze thy blood less coldly.”
5. In his master's steps he trod
Where the snow lay dinted
Heat was in the very sod
Which the Saint had printed
Therefore, Christian men, be sure
Wealth or rank possessing
Ye who now will bless the poor
Shall yourselves find blessing.

GOOD KING WENCESLAS (IT'S ALL ABOUT MERCY) CHRISTMAS PROGRAM

Narrator: Isn't that a great song?

Skeptic: I have issues!

Narrator: This is a children's Christmas program. It's Christmas. How can you have issues?

Skeptic: I am a Lutheran. This is a Lutheran church, and it's supposed to be a Lutheran Sunday school pageant or program or whatever, and the carol is about some king with a strange name and saints? At least two saints that I heard about: Saint Stephen and Saint Agnes. I listened to that song and never heard one word about Jesus or the manger or the angels or Mary and Joseph. I have issues.

Narrator: You have issues with saints?

Skeptic: I told you. I'm a Lutheran. I sometimes discuss with my Catholic friends about saints. Of course, I have trouble with saints, and I really have trouble with the story.

Narrator: Okay, okay. I got it. Let's try and look at your "issues" one at a time, and maybe we can help you get back in the Christmas mood, shall we? First of all, according to the Bible: anyone who trusts in Christ as Savior by the power of the Holy Spirit; anyone who has been transferred from the Kingdom of darkness into God's marvelous light; anyone is a saint — someone set aside by God for a holy use.

Skeptic: So, I'm a saint?

Narrator: If you trust in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit — yes.

Skeptic: Of course, I trust in Christ and want to hear about Him. I especially want to hear about Him in a children's pageant or program or whatever this is, and I heard nothing in that song about Christ except:

"Therefore, Christian men, be sure
wealth or rank possessing
Ye who now will bless the poor
shall yourselves find blessing."

That's pretty weak, and it sounds like work righteousness to me. Lutherans believe that we are saved by grace, not by being kind to the poor.

Narrator: Really?

Skeptic: Yes. Remember the Reformation? We are saved by God's grace alone. We receive it by faith alone. We find out about it through the Scriptures alone.

Narrator: Okay. What about this Scripture?

(A group of children divide up the reading of Matt. 25: 31-46.)

Narrator: I didn't hear anything about grace. I didn't hear anything about faith, and I didn't hear anything about the Bible. I heard a lot about helping poor, unfortunate people. So...

Skeptic: Now you're making me mad.

Narrator: Okay. Let's calm down and sing another hymn, and then we'll talk.

HYMN – "Lord of Glory, You Have Bought Us" LSB 851, verses 1-3

Skeptic: I think you are trying to irritate me.

Narrator: Let's take your issues one at a time. We've covered saints, right? Let's have our young people cover your questions. Kids! Let's help our friend here with his/her questions.

(A group of children comes forward with books that look like dictionaries and read.)

Reader 1: According to my study, the legend of King Wenceslas is an old one, but its power is such that it has persisted for more than 1,000 years. There were six King Wenceslases, all told. One of them ruled under his confirmation name of Charles IV, and his daughter, Anne, married the English King Richard II. I don't want to confuse you, but the numbering starts with Wenceslas I in the 13th century, yet the earliest Wenceslaus — the one we sing about, the patron saint of the Czech nation — was born in AD 907. Some say he was 15 years old when he started to rule.

Reader 2: He was considered a martyr after his death, and four biographies were written about him. These had a powerful influence on the idea of a "righteous king"— that is, a king whose power comes not merely from divine right, but which comes mainly from his concern to do God's will.

Reader 3: One historian writing about Wenceslas says, and I quote, "But his deeds I think you know better than I could tell you; for, as is read in his Passion, no one doubts that, rising every night from his noble bed, with bare feet and only one chamberlain, he went around to God's churches and gave alms generously to widows, orphans, those in prison and afflicted by every difficulty, so much so that he was considered, not a prince, but the father of all the wretched."

Reader 4: You wondered about the saints. I read about Saint Agnes, who had a fountain named after her. She is also called Agnes of Prague, and she was a Czech princess who chose a life of charity over a life of luxury. She spent her years cooking for and serving lepers. Her image is on the Czech 50 crown bank note.

Skeptic: You are not helping. I told you: I am a Lutheran, and I'm German and Norwegian, and I don't care about Saint Agnes or Saint Stephan or any other saint — since we are all saints, right?

Reader 5: Well, as a Lutheran, you should care about the Feast of Stephen, the day the king looked out and saw the poor peasant gathering firewood. According to my studies, Lutherans are the only Christians who recognize December 26th as second Christmas day and the Feast of Saint Stephen. Now, here is something you should find interesting: Saint Stephen was one of those chosen in the early church to help in the feeding of the poor, and he was the first Christian martyr. "Martyr" means witness, and he witnessed to his faith by dying. Remember, Stephen was stoned to death, and the people who threw the stones laid their coats at the feet of a man named Saul, who later became Paul.

Skeptic: Yes, I remember that. But what does it have to do with the baby Jesus lying in a manger?

Reader 6: Did you know that December 27th is the feast of Saint John the Apostle and Evangelist? He was banished to an island called Patmos because of his witness to Jesus. He wrote Revelation, and he was the only apostle who died a natural death. All the rest, like Stephen, were killed because of their faith.

Skeptic: I'm getting more confused.

Reader 7: Well, let me really confuse you. December 28th is the Feast of the Holy Innocents, the babies murdered by Herod around Bethlehem. Lutherans recognize all these feasts and all these saints because they witnessed to us. Stephen and John and even the babies who didn't know Jesus are witnesses. Stephen and the babies gave their lives, and John gave his life in a different way.

Reader 8: Some people say that these three days show the three ways that we can witness or give: in will and deed like Stephen, in will but not deed like John, in deed but not will like the babies. Don't you see that the church, for three days after Christmas, celebrated and recognized people who gave their lives in one way or another for Jesus?

Skeptic: Fine. But we are at a Christmas program or pageant or whatever, and I never heard Jesus mentioned in the song. We have said nothing about Jesus until I started complaining.

Reader 9: You're right. According to my research, "Good King Wenceslaus" is the only so-called Christmas carol that we have that never mentions the birth of Jesus.

Skeptic: So, why are you singing it?

Narrator: Okay. You're getting upset again. Let's sing a hymn, and then we'll talk.

HYMN – "See amid the Winter's Snow" *LSB 373*

- Skeptic:** Now, that's more like it. The story of this King Wenceslas is full of holes. Why not open the castle to all the poor? What about this poor servant who has to follow him through a blizzard and gets warm by following his steps? Why not a holiday for him? How about a government program to take care of the heating bills of poor people? The story was full of holes.
- Narrator:** From life in our day, it may seem silly. But did you hear “teach us to resemble thee in thy great humility”? This story is about mercy. It is all about mercy. We are talking about Good King Wenceslas because he is a symbol of God's mercy. God is the King who saw poor people like us in a horrible situation and came to help us. The days after Christmas are about God's mercy. Stephen was called to be a deacon to show the mercy of God to the early church, and he died telling his killers about that mercy. John's whole life and writing was the story of his reaction to God's mercy. The story of the innocent babies is the story of what happens when evil meets God's mercy. The Christmas story is completely about God's mercy. Listen:
- Reader 10:** From the song of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, Luke 1:68-75. (*Read Luke 1:68-75*)
- Reader 11:** Luke 1:76-79 (*Read Luke 1:76-79.*)
- Reader 12:** The song of Mary in Luke 1. (*Read Luke 1:46-55.*)
- Reader 13:** The Christmas story, according to Luke. (*Read Luke 2:1-20.*)
- Skeptic:** So, it's about mercy. I knew that. What is all this talk about the poor and the needy? I thought Christmas was about what God has done for me in the baby in the manger. That's why it is so important. Jesus came for me.
- Reader 14:** That's right. The baby was born for you, to live for you, to give His life for yours on the cross, and forgive you. But He was born for you so that things could happen to you and through you for others. “Teach us to resemble thee.” Paul talks about that in Titus, chapter 3.
- Skeptic:** That's the story about my baptism.
- Reader 14:** Absolutely, it is about baptism — baptism that saves you. But listen to what baptism should produce in you. (*Read Titus 3:1-8.*)
- Skeptic:** I'm baptized, and by God's grace, I believe that Christ is my Savior, and now I am “to be ready for every good work,” to be “gentle and meek,” to do the things that are “profitable and good for all men.”
- Reader 15:** That's what Christmas is all about: God serving us the good things of life and salvation so that we can serve others like the King in the story. Really, the King is God; and the page, the servant, is you and me. We gain our strength for service by following in His steps.
- Reader 16:** A man by the name of Steven Starke has written words to “Good King Wenceslas” for our church's LCMS World Relief and Human Care ministry. His words say it very well. He based his words on the words of Jesus that made you so upset earlier. Let's all sing it.

ADDITIONAL STANZAS FOR “GOOD KING WENCESLAS”

(Sung by all)

Text: Stephen P. Starke, 2007

Tune: Good King Wenceslas, Meter: 7 6 7 6 D

Matthew 25:34-40

1. May our Lord soon bring that day
He is yet adjourning
And as Judge to us then say
At His bright returning:
“Come ye, by My Father blest,
Take what you inherit;
Enter heaven’s endless rest,
Made for you to share it.
2. “For you heard My hungry cry
And in love you fed Me;
When My throat was parched and dry,
To a drink you led Me;
I, a stranger, nonetheless
In your home you brought Me;
I, in wretched nakedness,
Till you clothing bought Me;
3. “I was sick, in need of care,
To My ills you tended;
When I was imprisoned, there
You My shame befriended.
This I say assuredly:
What you did for others,
Those good things you did for Me
Through My lowly brothers.”
4. Thus, good Christians, one and all,
Let us with compassion
Heed our gen’rous Master’s call
And in zealous fashion
Labor on, through acts of love,
Tender mercy spreading,
Serve our King who reigns above,
In His footsteps treading.

Skeptic: Okay. I apologize for being so upset.

Narrator: No. You are right. Christmas should be all about Christ and His birth and His sacrifice. But it should also be about our response to what He did for us. Next time you see a manger scene and the shepherds and the wise men and Mary and Joseph, think about God looking out at our sinful situation and deciding to come and serve us like King Wenceslas did. Then think of yourself as the page, the servant, boldly following in the Master’s steps, strengthened by His grace and ready to serve, as He served you. It’s all about mercy.

(While the narrator speaks, a manger scene – with children portraying the baby Jesus, Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, angels, and wise men – is set up.)

HYMN – “Silent Night” LSB 363

(Sung by all)