

THE COMFORTING TRUTH
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And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. Luke 2:6-7

One of my earliest Christmas memories is singing *Away in a Manger* at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Round Lake, Illinois. I was a student in the day school – in the first or second grade. We memorized the hymn and sang it at the Day School Christmas Service.

One legend has it that the 16th Century Reformer Martin Luther wrote the words and music, that he used it as a lullaby to his children. However, this is unlikely as there are no references to this story or song before the American Civil War.

It was James R. Murray who is credited with bringing the text, and the tune it is sung to most often, to the American public. During the Civil War he enlisted as an Army Musician in the Union Army. While serving he began to write songs based on his experiences in the war.

After the war he worked in Chicago and then Cincinnati for music publishers. While in Cincinnati he came across a copy of *Away in a Manger* in a song book published by the General Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in North America. Murray apparently started the legend that Luther himself wrote the song based on his finding it in a Lutheran song book.

The truth is no one really knows who wrote the song or the tune it is most often sung to. But no matter who wrote lyrics or tune, the message of this song is what is important and has made it so enduring.

It is the Christmas story so familiar to us from St. Luke's Gospel. Jesus is born of the Virgin Mary in a stable in Bethlehem. His first bed is a feeding trough. Humble beginnings for the Savior of mankind, who would grow up to be a humble man, but powerful and willing to lay down his life to save us from our sins.

The third stanza combines Matthew 28 and Mark 10 to comfort us with the message of eternal nearness to all who believe in him as Savior.

This Christmas Eve is an excellent time to sing this hymn, perhaps even using it as a lullaby for small children.