

Wake, Awake, for Night Is Flying

Lutheran Service Book 516 | study by Randy Wurschmidt

Introduction

We all tend to be fascinated with the end times, what will happen on the Last Day. Every pastor knows that he will be asked to teach a class on Revelation at some point. Piles of books and movies fantasize about mayhem and destruction: obliteration by asteroid or earthquake, or maybe being left behind in a doomed airliner. The apostles were fascinated by this, too, so they asked Jesus, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (Matt. 24:3).

Our Lord is clear on this, and so at Augsburg in 1530, the reformers were able to state from Scripture, “Our churches teach that at the end of the world Christ will appear for judgment and will raise all the dead. He will give the godly and elect eternal life and everlasting joys, but He will

condemn ungodly people and the devils to be tormented without end” (AC XVII 1–3, 40).

Death and judgment weigh on the minds of almost all people; the hymn we will study focuses primarily on the joy and comfort that Christians look forward to, even in the face of catastrophe. For we hope in things to come, rather than in things present.

- From your experience in talking to others, what are some different beliefs that people have about death and judgment on the Last Day?
- Have you ever known anyone whose faith and calm in the face of death was an inspiration to you?

Exploring the Scriptures

The Gospel for the Last Sunday of the Church Year is a familiar parable, one taught in the context of what is sometimes called the Little Apocalypse. For two whole chapters, Jesus answers the question the apostles asked above. Read Matt. 25:1–13.

- Who are the two groups of virgins and what makes some of them foolish?
- Verses 11 and 12 might sound harsh to our modern ears. But many times throughout the Bible, God’s judgment

is shown as being final and complete. What are some examples you can think of?

The parable is told in the context of a wedding: the ten virgins are waiting for the bridegroom to lead them to the banquet. Read Rev. 19:6–9.

- What does it mean that the Bride “has made herself ready”? See verse 8.
- How should you respond to the invitation to the marriage supper of the Lamb?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Philipp Nicolai (1556–1608) was a pastor in the town of Unna, Westphalia, in the western part of Germany. From July 1597 until January 1598, plague raged through the town, taking 1300 of his parishioners. During this terrible time, Pastor Nicolai presided over as many as thirty burials a day; in one particularly awful week, 170 perished. From the window of his parsonage, overlooking the church cemetery, Nicolai wrote a series of meditations for the comfort of the congregation. He called the collection *Freudenspiegel des Ewigen Lebens* (*Mirror of Joy of Eternal Life*), saying,

“There seemed to me to be nothing more sweet, delightful and agreeable than the contemplation of the noble, sublime doctrine of Eternal Life obtained through the Blood of Christ. This I allowed to dwell in my heart day

and night, and searched the Scriptures as to what they revealed on this matter.”⁴

He took this tragedy, and rather than preaching the Law to them, he gave them the Gospel. Surely they were scared — so was he — and he preached the comfort of Christ crucified for their sins and the promise of eternal life in heaven.

Along with the meditations, Nicolai wrote the two hymns for which he is most remembered, this one, and “O Morning Star, How Fair and Bright” (*LSB* 395). He appended them to the end of the collection, and they have remained in not only the Lutheran church since then, but also in the hymnals of many other denominations.

⁴ “Philipp Nicolai,” Hymnary.org, accessed June 28, 2018, hymnary.org/person/Nicolai_P.

- Consider how such a disaster would affect this congregation. What resources would you turn to in such a time?

Text

Prepare. Watch. Expect. The full title of the hymn reads: “Wake, Awake: Of the voice at Midnight and the Wise Virgins who meet their Heavenly Bridegroom.” Nicolai’s hymn is only about the wise virgins, the ones prepared with flasks of oil, the ones who, despite the delay of the Bridegroom, remained steadfast at their post and waited diligently for His arrival. At midnight came the voice at last, “The Bridegroom comes, awake!” (st. 1). Nicolai keeps his focus on this hope rather than on the fate of the foolish virgins who wandered off for more oil at precisely the wrong time. Read or sing the first two stanzas and consider the following:

- To whom are the watchmen calling?
- Who is meant by “Jerusalem”? Who is meant by “Zion”?

In *Lutheran Worship* 177, the last lines of the second stanza are translated as:

“We answer all
In joy your call,
We follow to the wedding hall.”

Making the Connection

As we end one Church Year and prepare to begin another, our hymns reflect on both the second coming of our Lord and the first. The hymns for the end of the church year and for Advent are often interchangeable.

As we prepare for Jesus to return in judgment, we also prepare to remember Emmanuel, God born in the flesh to dwell among us. We have come full circle. God has come and He will come again.

In Closing

In the Nicene Creed we confess, “He will come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead” (*LSB*, p. 158). We confess this not out of fear, but out of hope, in order to remember that our Lord has promised to return, to raise our bodies into heaven, to bring us around the throne and be with Him in eternity.

Without the forgiveness of sins, this would not be possible. Without Christ’s death on the cross, this would not be possible. For without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins (Heb. 9:22). And without the forgiveness of sins, there is no life. Thanks be to God that He has given us new life in Holy Baptism, in the Holy Supper and in the forgiveness of sins.

- How does the current translation (which reflects the German much better) change our understanding of this stanza?
- What is the “Supper” we are singing about?

Now sing or read the third stanza. The heavenly imagery in this stanza is especially rich. Read Rev. 7:9–17.

- What is the joy that awaits us in heaven?
- In which part of the Divine Service do we say that heaven and earth meet? How does this relate to the hymn?

Go to Nicolai’s other hymn, *LSB* 395, and scan through the second and third stanzas. Both hymns emphasize the coming of the Lord in glory as the Bridegroom. The two hymns together are often referred to as the King and Queen of the Lutheran chorales. Both in the majesty of their tunes (which were also composed by Pastor Nicolai) and in the comfort of their words, they outline for us the joy that awaits us in eternal life.

- What does this mean for the Christian then? Should we fear death? Why or why not?

- As we wait for Jesus to return, in what ways do we prepare, watch and wait? What is the danger of being unready?
- Even as Jesus is at the right hand of the Father, He is also present among us now. Name some ways in which that is true.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 516.

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, so govern our hearts and minds by Your Holy Spirit that, ever mindful of Your glorious return, we may persevere in both faith and holiness of living; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Proper 29B).