

2013_12_04 Midweek Advent 1 | Sermon
Ascension Lutheran Church, Batavia IL
Pastor David Pfeiffer

Midweek Series
Songs that Prepare the Way
Meditations on Hymns of the Advent Season

“Wake, Awake, for Night is Flying”
1599 by Philipp Nicolai, TLH #609
INI

**Let us PRAY: O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall show forth Your praise.
Amen. (Ps. 51:15)**

In Jesus name, dear fellow redeemed,

The season of Advent brings a sort of tension within us. On the one hand there is a joy that fills us in anticipation of Christmas. The decorations that adorn the sanctuary and our homes remind us that this is a special time of year. A time where we honor and rejoice in the gift of a Savior born in Bethlehem. At the same time this joy is being restrained. It is restrained by the fact that we anticipate, but do not yet possess something. We are in a sense, torn – between two worlds, between two realities, between what is now and that which is yet to come. The season of Advent, like life, imposes a tension within us.

For as much as the coming of a Savior rightly brings us joy, we are also mindful of the reason which brought our God to earth. We are mindful of the sin which has invaded this world and our life, which brings us sorrow to the point of death, even the death of our Jesus on the cross. Although this death and resurrection of our Lord is good news for us, it remains something restrained in something hoped for. Our joy is found not in what we possess here and now, but in what is to come. It is a joy reserved in the resurrection. Until that day of our Lord’s return, we continue to witness very real pain from one day to the next, from one event to the next. Still our earthly life remains bound to this fallen world, to the curse of sin. So we are torn. We are torn between our Lord’s first coming and second coming, between the gospel promise now, and the fulness of that good news which is fulfilled when our Lord returns.

This is the experience of the season. It is heard in the readings we consider and the hymns we sing. It is heard especially in the hymn which forms the basis for our evening address today – “Wake, Awake, for Night is Flying.”

Philipp Nicollai was well acquainted with such tension. He knew well this experience of joy in the midst of sorrow. Yet his faith would find purpose in anticipation. He would find joy in that which is to come – eternal life. From the midst of tragedy and death, would emerge a song which call us to hear the watchmen’s cry. We pray God gives us such a mind as we consider how God’s holy promises shaped the life of Philipp Nicollai as expressed in hymn #609 of the Lutheran Hymnal, “Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme” – “Wake, Awake, for Night is Flying.”

Philipp Nicollai lived from 1556 to 1608. His 16th century story began in Westphalia, Germany. He was born the son of a Lutheran pastor. To put this in perspective, he was born just 10 years after Martin Luther died. From his Lutheran father, and education at the University at Wittenberg, Philipp would become well acquainted with the works of Luther, the Lutheran confessions, and a Bible based theology.

He was ordained as a pastor in 1583 and would spend most of his ministry in Unna, German. It was in Unna where he would experience a tension and tribulation which could only be resolved in Christ.

When historians have little medical information on some devastating epidemic of the past, they usually ascribe the ominous title: “the plague.” In October of 1596, the city of Unna was struck with such an epidemic. In the course of just seven months, more than half the population in the city of Unna, some 1300 people, died from this disease. With a parsonage window which overlooked the cemetery, Philipp witnessed as many as 30 funerals a day.

In response to this troublesome time, Philip publishes what he calls his “Freuden Spiegel das ewige Leben” – *A mirror of the joy of eternal life*. This devotional series was filled with Gospel promises as Philipp sought to comfort those mourning their loss. At the end of this devotion book he would include two hymns later be called the “Queen and King of Lutheran chorales:” “Wie schon leuchtet der Morgenstern” – *How Lovely Shines the Morning Star* and “Wachet auf! reuft uns die Stimme,” that is, *Wake, awake, for night is flying*. Nicollai was both the poet and composer of these hymns – a rarity among hymns in our hymnal.

The hymn is based primarily on Matthew 25 – the parable of the wise and foolish virgins. This is our call to meet the Bridegroom, who is Christ. What truly comes

through in this hymn is both the pastoral tone and the hopeful vision that strengthened Philipp's resolve in the midst of such a troubling time. You can almost hear the tension coupled with hope. You can almost hear Philipp and his people torn between the present suffering and future comfort. And so you see how this hymn finds a fitting place in introducing the advent season. In anticipation of our Lord's coming in the flesh, we are really always looking beyond, always seeing something in the distance; that is, we are hopeful of our Lord's final return.

In the preface to his *Freuden Spiegel*, Pastor Nicollai writes: "There seemed to me no thing 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 Scripture as to what it revealed on this matter; read also the sweet treatise of the ancient doctor St. Augustine – "the City of God." ... Then day by day I wrote out my meditations, found myself, thank God! wonderfully well, comforted in heart, joyful in spirit, and truly content; I gave to my manuscript the name and title of a 'Mirror of Joy' and I composed it to leave behind me – if God should call me from this world – as the token of my peaceful, joyful, Christian departure; or – if God should spare me to health – to comfort other sufferers whom He should also visit with the pestilence... Now has the gracious, holy God most mercifully preserved me amid the dying from the dreadful pestilence, and wonderfully spared me beyond all my thoughts and hopes: so that with the prophet David I can say to Him, 'O how great is Thy goodness, which Thou hast laid up for them that fear Thee.'"

Philipp would later reveal a special context behind the scripting of this hymn. He called it reverse acrostic. The first letter in each of the three stanzas has special meaning. He begins the first verse with a "W" – "Wachet" in German, in English "watch." The second with a "Z" – "Zion," the same in English. And the third comes from the German – "Gloria." This reverse acrostic represented a person's initials: "G" "Z" "W". That is: "Graf zu Waldeck" or "the Count at Waldeck." This prince was a student of Philipp's who died at the young age of 15 while under Philipp's spiritual care.

It is in this context that the hymn begins to take on a very personal and pastoral tone. In the midst of the plague and the loss of this student, Philipp turns to his "mirror of joy." There he sees the reflection of Scripture's sure promises and joy awakens in the midst of sorrow.

1. *"Wake, awake, for night is flying,"
The watchmen on the heights are crying;
"Awake, Jerusalem, arise!"*

*Midnight hears the welcome voices
And at the thrilling cry rejoices:
"Oh, where are ye, ye virgins wise?
The Bridegroom comes, awake!
Your lamps with gladness take!
Hallelujah!
With bridal care
Yourselves prepare
To meet the Bridegroom, who is near."*

It is Matthew 25 which sounds this call to readiness. *Matthew 25:1* "Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. We are in a time of preparation. Not just for Christmas. December 25th is really only another day of preparation – God's would prepare us for the final announcement of the watchmen, that we might be ready for the Bridegroom – Christ. It would be easy to grow impatient at the delay; to be lost in the experience of our sins and this fallen world. However, we are reminded that whatever tribulation you might face, there yet remains a reason to lift your lamp; to look up with gladness. The Holy Spirit is even now fueling your lamps, filling it with the light of Christ. "The Bridegroom comes, Awake!"

2. *Zion hears the watchmen singing,
And all her heart with joy is springing,
She wakes, she rises from her gloom;
For her Lord comes down all-glorious,
The strong in grace, in truth victorious,
Her Star is ris'n, her Light is come.
"Now come, Thou Blessed One,
Lord Jesus, God's own Son,
Hail! Hosanna!
The joyful call
We answer all
And follow to the nuptial hall."*

It is a banquet greeting in which we are participating right now. Together with all believers we are Zion – Here as we gather around His Word we receive this awakening song which stills our sorrows, A grace which extinguishes any remembrance of sin. The Lord comes down all glorious. With those same cries of Palm Sunday, we accompany the arrival of the Blessed One with shouts of Hosanna! And we follow. In the original, Nicollai actually expresses it this way: "we follow to the hall of joy; and there together,

we keep the Lord's Supper." What better and more fitting way to meet the Bridegroom than to receive His eternal coming in the feast of His Supper now. Again note the tension between the now and not yet of our Lord's coming.

3. *Now let all the heav'ns adore Thee,
Let men and angels sing before Thee,
With harp and cymbal's clearest tone.
Of one pearl each shining portal,
Where, dwelling with the choir immortal,
We gather round Thy radiant throne.
No vision ever brought,
No ear hath ever caught,
Such great glory;
Therefore will we
Eternally
Sing hymns of praise and joy to Thee.*

In this final verse, the vision moves to the book of Revelation where we join in that heavenly anthem before the throne of God. For someone like Philipp who lost someone so close to him, for someone like you who experiences the reality of sin; the persecution around, the trouble within, this is your "mirror of joy." These present troubles, sickness and even death, cannot rob us of the joy reflected in the promises of the gospel. Truly such words are a reflection of Christ – a mirror of the joy we possess even now by faith.

The season does bring a sort of tension within us. It builds anticipation. But the anticipation is not only to rejoice in the birth of our Savior, it is also for this event. His coming in the flesh has prepared us for His return. In His resurrection He declared your sins forgiven and gave hope to all who suffer; this prepares us; this give us reason to join Philipp in looking beyond. This in a sense, releases us from all tension as we look into our own "mirror of joy" a reflection which shows us the Bridegroom.

We in fact, join all Zion in this. That is, we join all believers of all time, those present and those who have gone before, awakened by the watchmen's song – we wake, we rise from our gloom; for our Lord, comes down all glorious, the strong in grace and in truth victorious, your Star is ris'n, your light has come." May God keep our thoughts ever focused on that "mirror of joy" as each day, we follow Jesus to the banquet hall. Amen.