

Proper 27 (November 9, 2014) 22nd Sunday after Pentecost
Readings: Amos 5:18-24; Psalm 70; I Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13

“Wake, Awake, for Night Is Flying” (*Lutheran Service Book* #516)

Wake-up Call!

When Phillip Nicolai composed the text and tune for “Wake, Awake, for Night Is Flying” he was inspired by the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins recorded in the twenty-fifth chapter of Book of Matthew. You recall that five wise virgins were prepared for the wedding; their torches were well oiled and they brought along plenty more oil to keep their fires burning throughout the wedding processional. The five foolish virgins brought their torches but didn’t bring any extra oil. Because the bridegroom took a long time to arrive, everyone took a nap. When the wake-up call came, the wise virgins were ready to meet the groom with lamps ablaze while the foolish virgins had to scramble to find oil for their lamps (my guess is that there weren’t any all-night oil emporiums in existence at the time) and were late for the wedding feast. When they finally arrive the door is shut and the bridegroom says that he doesn’t know them. For the foolish virgins it was a disappointing wake-up call; they “missed the boat” and learned, to their great dismay, the consequences of being unprepared.

Nicolai incorporates the bridegroom metaphor in the first stanza of his “King of Chorales” to announce to the coming of *the* Bridegroom - the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. For those who are pure and wise, it is the clarion call that brings a response of “Alleluia!” from the lips of those who have been waiting for the arrival of the Son of God. The pure and wise are those who have been made so through the blood of the Lamb and not through any purity or wisdom that they inherently possess. Because the Bridegroom has gifted His guests with faith, they are ready to take up their lamps with gladness; they are prepared to meet Him.

The second stanza continues the theme of gladness and joy as the inhabitants of Zion wake from the gloom of night and bask in the light that shines from the “blesséd one...Lord Jesus, God’s own Son.” In confidence and elation, those who know the Master of the feast greet Him with shouts of “Hosanna!” (save us now). Knowing full well that He knows them, they joyfully follow the Groom to the wedding hall. Not so with the foolish virgins; when they finally show up they are dismissed because the Groom says: “In truth, I do not know you.”

In the final stanza all heaven erupts in ecstasy as saints and angels sing an everlasting *Gloria* to the victorious Son. All instruments and voices are in perfect tune as the celestial choir gathers around the beaming throne of God to celebrate Christ’s victory with never-ending exclamations “*in dulci júbilo.*”

Philipp Nicolai penned the text of this “King” of hymns in the midst of terrible suffering. Bubonic plague raged throughout Germany in 1597 and killed many of Nicolai’s parishioners. In this context of suffering, terror and uncertainty Nicolai found strength in the hope of the resurrection as he wrote the “King of Chorales” and its “Queenly” companion, *Wie Schön Leuchtet* (O Morning Star, How Fair and Bright – *LSB* #395). The music of these masterpieces and Nicolai’s poetry, translated from the German through the artistry of Katherine Winkworth, both point us to the heavenly bridegroom who, robed resplendently in light, is the source of all

grace, truth and life. How ironic that such an outpouring of joy is to be found amid the graves of those stricken by the horrors of the plague.

But that is the irony of the Gospel; death is swallowed up in victory and for those who are in Christ Jesus there is no condemnation (Romans 8:1). It is one of those great gospel paradoxes; in the midst of life we are in death and *vice versa*. Through the atoning work of Christ we, though racked with sin, are made righteous; in Luther's terms "*simul justus et peccator*" – righteous and sinner at the same time. A blessed paradox.

"The Bridegroom is here! Awake!" cries the watchman. And we, with all saints and angels, can raise our hosannas in the sure hope that our Bridegroom has heard our faithful plea and is coming to take us to the unending celebration in His heavenly hall. We have received our wake-up call in our baptism and through God's grace our lamps are trimmed in readiness for the coming of the King of Kings as we sing the King of the Chorales with Philipp Nicolai and all the company of heaven:

"Now come, O blessed one,
Lord Jesus, God's own Son.
Hail! Hosanna! We enter all
The wedding hall
To eat the Supper at Thy call.

Prayer

Lord of light and life, we have been awakened by your grace, enlightened by your Spirit and blessed by the banquet You have prepared for us that strengthens us in faith for service to You and Your world. Grant that we may remain faithful to You as we keep our lamps trimmed and burning so that their light may serve to lead others to Your banquet hall. O come, Heavenly Bridegroom, bless us with Your presence and leads us into life everlasting. Amen.

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[This devotion was prepared for the website of the Center for Church Music, Concordia University Chicago. It may be downloaded and printed for local use.]

Wake, Awake, for Night Is Flying

"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!
Alleluia! With bridal care
Yourselves prepare,
To meet the bridegroom who is near!"

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, O blessed one,
Lord Jesus, God's own Son.
Hail! Hosanna! We enter all
The wedding hall
To eat the Supper at Thy call.

Now let all the heav'ns adore Thee,
Let saints and angels sing before Thee
With harp and cymbals' clearest tone.
Of one pearl each shining portal,
Where, joining with the choir immortal,
We gather round Thy radiant throne.
No eye has seen that light,
No ear has heard the might
Of your glory; Therefore will we
Eternally,
Sing hymns of praise and joy to Thee!

Text and Tune: Philipp Nicolai, 1556-1608; tr. Catherine Winkworth, 1827-78, alt.
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