



Wake, Awake, for Night is Flying

Text and Tune: Philipp Nicolai (1556-1608)

The music of the Rev. Philipp Nicolai is some of the best music, both in text and tune, which the Church has. He is the author of both the “King of Chorales,” “Wake, Awake, for Night is Flying,” and the “Queen of Chorales,” “How Lovely Shines the Morning Star.” In the midst of great distress and grief, Nicolai gives us a glimpse into heaven, strengthening us for the strife because of our confidence in the joy awaiting us.



Philipp Nicolai was born to a Lutheran Pastor in 1556 in the town of Mengerlinghausen. He studied at both the Universities of Erfurt and Wittenberg, receiving his Doctor of Divinity from Wittenberg in 1594. He was Ordained in 1583 and served initially in Herdecke. He later became the Court Preacher for Countess Margareta of Waldeck. While in Waldeck he took part in the Sacramentarian controversy, upholding the Scriptural teaching of the presence of Christ’s Body and Blood in the Sacrament. By 1596 he had received a Call to Unna in Westphalia. During his time in Westphalia, the town was struck by two devastating events. The invasion of the Spaniards took many lives, and then the Black Death plague struck the town. In one of the worst years, Nicolai buried over 500 members, several of whom were his own family members. In that year, it was not uncommon to have almost 30 burials a day.

In the midst of this great devastation, Nicolai wrote *Freuden-Spiegel*, “Mirror of Joy.” On why he wrote it, he said: “There seemed to me nothing more sweet, delightful, and agreeable than the contemplation of the noble, sublime doctrine of Eternal Life obtained through the Blood of Christ.” Nicolai’s faith in the atonement of Christ and His love and care for us, despite temporal circumstances, preserved him in the worst times of his life.

Nicolai’s tune, WACHET AUF, was written for this text. Both appeared together in a 1599 appendix to his *Freuden-Spiegel*. It was entitled “Of the Voice at Midnight and the Wise Virgins who Meet Their Heavenly Bridegroom. Matthew 25.” It was written to pair with the historic Gospel reading for the 27th Sunday after Trinity, the Parable of the Ten Virgins (Mt. 25:1-13). The text and tune of “Wake, Awake, for Night is Flying” were so widely known and loved that several composers from Nicolai’s time on composed great works on them. One of the most loved works on this text and tune are Johann Sebastian Bach’s Cantata 140. Bach wrote this Cantata for the 27th Sunday after Trinity, 1731 while serving in Leipzig.

The text of this hymn is one that perfectly captures the message of the end of the Church Year. As we hear of the end of the world and its judgment, the watchmen, which are the Pastors who proclaim Holy Scripture, cry out that night is flying, calling sinners to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. The skies, the angels and archangels, also call out, calling us to prepare to meet the Bridegroom, Christ, who is near.

The second stanza illustrates the Faithful preparing themselves for Christ’s return. We wake and rise from our gloom, leaving behind our sin and looking for Christ’s return and the resurrection of the dead. The Church responds in great joy, calling for her Lord to come. The translation of the second stanza does not fully depict the great language Nicolai originally used. Where the English text says we “follow to the nuptial hall,” the German used there is *und halten mit das Abendmahl*, or, “We hold onto the Lord’s Supper.” Nicolai teaches us that the way we best wait for Christ is by regular attendance at the Divine Service and receiving Our Lord when He comes to us in His Body and Blood. Here Christ keeps us in the true Faith and preserves us until He calls us to Himself.

Finally, the third stanza proclaims the joyful songs that burst forth at Christ’s return and forever in eternity. At this great Day, men and angels sing of Christ’s great work of salvation, singing a joyful new song extolling His great goodness. Until that day, we sing this hymn, eagerly awaiting the day when we “eternally sing hymns of praise and joy to Thee.”

