



Watchman, Tell Us of the Night

Text: John Bowring (1792-1872)

Tune: George J. Elvey (1816-1893)

A major theme of Advent is Christ's third and final Advent, His coming "to judge both the quick and the dead." We know that His final Advent is near because we know the signs. Just as the blossoms on the fig tree indicate the arrival of summer, so do the signs of the end indicate the impending return of Christ. The watchmen—the preachers of the Church—tell not only the signs, but also the promise: "The Prince of Peace, the Son of God is come!"



John Bowring

During those years he became a master linguist, legend recording that he knew 200 languages and was able to converse in 100 of them. He had a second occupation, serving as a translator of public speeches. The country of England quickly heard of his gift with languages and put him to work as an official representative of the country, investigating economic and commercial conditions in English colonies. In 1821, after receiving an honorary doctoral degree from the University of Groningen, Bowring served as England's Commercial Commissioner, traveling to France, Italy, Switzerland, Belgium, and Levant. Upon returning to England, he became an active and prominent member of the House of Lords, serving from 1835-1837 and again from 1841-1848. He was knighted in 1854 and went to China to serve as the third governor of Hong Kong. Throughout his life, Bowring was a prolific writer. His life's writings were published posthumously, in

"Watchman, Tell Us of the Night" was written by John Bowring. Bowring was born in Exeter, England on October 17, 1792. His father was a wool trader. Bowring's early education was overseen by the Pastor of Exeter's Presbyterian church, the Rev. Lant Carpenter. From 1811, however, Bowring was a shop keeper in London.

36 volumes. Though he was also a competent hymnwriter, only two of his hymns are contained in *The Lutheran Hymnal*. They are "Watchman, Tell Us of the Night" and "In the Cross of Christ I Glory." "Watchman, Tell Us of the Night" was originally a poem, and Bowring first heard it sung while deployed to Turkey and heard a group of American missionaries singing it in a service.

When Bowring wrote "Watchman, Tell Us of the Night," he based it on Isaiah 21:11, "He calls to me out of Seir, 'Watchman, what of the night? Watchman, what of the night?'" This is one of the most obscure passages of Scripture. Isaiah 21:11-12 is entirely unrelated to the sections before and after. But its image is easy to picture. It is in the middle of the Babylonian Captivity. A lone watchman is standing in the tower of a city wall, anxiously watching for harm to be done to the city. The enemies lie in wait, and the lone watchman peers into the unlit night, looking for enemies, but also for deliverance. A voice pierces the silence asking, "Watchman, what of the night?" The watchman answers, "The morning comes and also the night."

This hymn is not only a fitting Advent hymn, but it has special significance in our day as a missionary hymn. With skepticism, agnosticism, atheism, and liberalism making inroads into our churches at home and abroad, we need to be aroused to renewed interest and zeal in the cause of sending and bringing the Gospel of the Prince of Peace to those who do not have it or once had it and have lost it. In this way, Christ makes His second Advent, coming in Word and Sacrament, preparing all for His third and final Advent.

"Watchman, Tell Us of the Night" sounds a note of hope. This is the Church's message as we look for Christ's return. Stanza one asks about the rising Star, Our Lord Jesus Christ (Rev. 22:16), and looks at His first Advent, coming as a baby in Bethlehem. His rising foretells hope, the promised day of Israel, the coming of the promised Messiah. The second stanza proclaims that Christ shines over all the earth, as He comes to His creation in Word and Sacrament, bringing with Him "blessedness and light, peace and truth." Finally, "darkness takes its flight" as Christ comes to bring this world to its close and gather His redeemed. Then our wanderings cease as the "Prince of Peace...the Son of God is come" to bring us to His quiet home, our Promised Land.