

Dear Saints,

One of my favorite poems that I recited with my daughter (as a child) when she was going to bed was “Try, Try Again” in the Children’s Book of Virtues. On a side note, this is a book I would highly recommend for all your grandchildren. This particular poem teaches the virtue of perseverance. As you know, I have tried a hymn of the month to encourage us to become more familiar with great hymns. I would say it has had mixed success. In an effort to “try again,” I am going to switch to a “Hymn of the Season.” This will allow us a little more time with each hymn. Trinitytide will have two or three hymns since it is so long. This will start with Advent and feature LSB 516 Wake, Awake, for Night is Flying. This also happens to be my favorite hymn.

Wake, Awake, for Night Is Flying was written by Reverend Philipp Nicolai (1556-1608). According to “The Companion to the Hymns,” Pastor Nicolai “ranks as one of the most zealous defenders of orthodox Lutheran doctrine in the sixteenth century.” (pg. 471) You are familiar with our doctrinal fight against the Roman Catholics, but the doctrinal fight was just as severe with the Calvinists. The devil really opened the floodgates with the success of the Lutheran Reformation. Calvinists were a group that arose out of the Reformation and were hostile to pure Lutheran doctrine. Pastor Nicolai fought for the pure doctrine even to his own personal cost. In no small way, he was among the group of men responsible for keeping Lutherans Lutheran.

Pastor Nicolai was also an exceptional hymnwriter. His two most famous hymns that we still sing today are “Wake, Awake, for Night Is Flying” and “O Morning Star, How Fair and Bright.” These two hymns are known as the “King and Queen of Chorales,” respectively. Chorales, and congregational singing in general, is one of Lutheran’s gifts to worldwide Christianity. These are tunes meant to be sung by the congregation and have four parts. If our congregation were bigger and had more people in it who could sing well, it would be really fun to sing these two hymns in parts. Even when sung in unison (melody only), they are beautiful hymns. And following Advent, the “Hymn of the Season” for Christmas and Epiphany is “O Morning Star, How Fair and Bright.” Why not start with the King and Queen?

“Wake, Awake, for Night Is Flying” is sung as the hymn of the day, or chief hymn, for the last Sunday of the church year. It is based off the Gospel of the day, Matthew 25:1-13, the parable of the ten virgins. It beautifully sets the picture of our Lord returning. And the reaction of the Christian is joy. Our Lord returning has an element of fear attached to it, to be sure, but the overwhelming emotion of the Christian is joy that our Lord is coming to collect us. He will right all wrongs and wipe away every tear from this sin-stained world! And there is also the joy of being reunited with those who have gone before us. We will truly join with “the choir immortal” to sing God’s praises. This also makes it an excellent hymn for advent.

We have a rich heritage of amazing Lutheran hymns. Far too many Lutherans are enamored with poor or non-Lutheran hymns. These are dangerous because they typically have poor or outright bad doctrine. We especially do not want to sing poor hymns during the Divine Service. That is a time to focus on great hymns rather than mediocre or poor ones. (Our Lutheran Service Book has poor, mediocre, and great hymns.) With the “Hymn of the Season,” I want to encourage us to learn and memorize (through repetition) great Lutheran hymns. Through learning and singing truly great hymns, we will learn to recognize truly great hymns. Like everything else in life, we must be taught what is great and what is not. Whatever time you devote to them will bear fruit in the future. May God richly bless you this Advent season.

In Christ,
Pastor Maggard