

Dear Saints,

Our Hymn of the Season for Epiphany is “O Morning Star” by Philipp Nicolai. As I mentioned before, “O Morning Star” is the “Queen of Chorales.” It is the Hymn of the Day for Epiphany and a fine hymn to repeat during the Epiphany season. Before we talk about the hymn itself, let us consider what Epiphany is.

Epiphany is the season where we celebrate the deity of our Lord Christ shining forth through His humanity. This was originated by the Eastern Church with the celebration of our Lord’s birth and baptism. On a sidenote, this was celebrated in the Eastern Church for a hundred years before the Western Church picked it up. We Lutherans are truly a church that stretch back to the Church in Acts. Our Epiphany celebration has been extended with various miraculous acts of our Lord which culminates with the Transfiguration of our Lord. We especially celebrate during this wonderful season that our God has taken on human flesh and joined us in our suffering here below. And He does not leave us in our suffering but suffered on our behalf to save us from suffering eternally. What joy this stirs in us!

And joy resonates all throughout “O Morning Star.” And this is a joy in the midst of suffering. Philipp Nicolai wrote this hymn while experiencing the effects of the Bubonic Plague. The nickname of this plague when it first appeared in the 14th century was the Black Death. Pastor Nicolai was ministering to people who were dying from this horrible plague. The joy arose from applying the comfort of the Gospel to those who were dying and those who were still living with the uncertainty of another plague.

The plague that we just experienced and that we still live with the uncertainty of “Will it ever go away?” is pale in comparison to the Bubonic Plague. That plague killed many more people. Yet, Covid-19 can still be dangerous to many, especially the elderly. With many governments, including our own, mishandling this disease, we are left with a lot of uncertainty. In the midst of this uncertainty arises the joy of knowing Christ. The first stanza describes well our Morning Star! (Revelation 22:16)

O Morning Star, how fair and bright!
You shine with God’s own truth and light,

Aglow with grace and mercy!
Of Jacob's race, King David's son,
Our Lord and master, You have won
Our hearts to serve You only.
Lowly, holy! Great and glorious,
All victorious, Rich in blessing!
Rule and might o'er all possessing!

What a wonderful description of both the deity and humanity of our Lord! The hymn continues to extol our Lord to bless our hearts with His presence in Word and Sacrament (especially stanza 3). Stanza 4 is especially important because it depicts how Christ won the incredible grace He bestows on us. And then the hymn turns to our future hope. The last stanza is the chant of the church here in the midst of suffering!

What joy to know, when life is past,
The Lord we love is first and last,
The end and the beginning!
He will one day, oh, glorious grace,
Transport us to that happy place
Beyond all tears and sinning!
Amen! Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!
Crown of gladness! We are yearning
For the day of Your returning!

This beautifully, poetically describes the joy of the Christian amidst any suffering in this life. God be praised, our Lord will not leave us in suffering. He joined us in it and will rescue us from it! This should be sung joyfully, but can sometime drag into more of a "funeral dirge" if the tempo becomes slow.

Every word of this incredible hymn is worthy of your memorization and meditation. I pray that it will bless you richly this Epiphany season.

With love in Christ,
Pastor Maggard