

Evensong: *Lord Support Us All Day Long* (TLSB #884)

 3rd Lent Midweek

In the name of him who is our Lamp in the darkness, dear friends in Christ: When we began this series of meditations on the evening hymns three weeks ago, I mentioned that one of the reasons I chose this theme was to reinforce the idea that closing the day with a time of prayer, praise, and reflection on God's Word is a good Christian discipline that we all would benefit by practicing. And while I truly believe that, I have to confess that I'm more of a morning person than a night owl. I find it much easier to concentrate and remain focused early in the day. That's when I do most of my studying. By the time evening comes around, forget it. My thoughts are muddled. The mind wanders. I easily drift off into sleep. I expect there comes a time of day when that's true for most people. And it's kind of hard to pray thoughtfully in that condition. That's another reason the evening hymns are such a valuable resource. They are brief devotions and prayers already prepared. You can sing them, speak them aloud, or just read them silently alone or with others, and they keep you on the task at hand. They guide the heart and mind to the proper kinds of things to be meditating upon at the close of the day – and I suppose that's why Christians have been writing and using them since the very beginning.

We saw that last week as we turned our attention to a very old hymn, one that dated back over 1300 years, and we saw that it had roots that went back even farther: to about the second or third generation of believers in Jesus. Tonight we're looking at a hymn that's quite a bit more contemporary. As a matter of fact, the fellow who wrote it, Stephen Starke, is very much alive and is serving as an LCMS pastor in Michigan. This is one of 32 of his works that appear in our hymnal. The one you are most familiar with is probably #941, which is his version of the Te Deum that we sometimes sing when we follow the order of Matins. So don't let anyone tell you that everything in our hymnal is at least 200 years old. It's not true.

Anyway, because the hymn before us is of fairly recent origin, I'm guessing that most of you weren't very familiar with it before today. We're fixing that now, I hope. I didn't know it very well either; but it's strange: looking over the lyrics, I had the sense that in some way or another I had seen it before. Then I discovered why. If you turn to page 257 in the hymnal, you'll find the closing prayers for the Compline service. It turns out that what Pastor Starke did was to take these prayers (most of them anyway) and transform them into hymn verses. If you look at the first stanza of the hymn, you'll see that it corresponds to the second prayer on the page. The next two prayers are combined to make verse two of the hymn. The next prayer is verse three. And the last one, at least in summary form, is verse four. Clever of him, don't you think?

Okay, with that introduction, let's get into the hymn itself. At the risk of stating the obvious, the entire hymn is a bedtime prayer – one that begins by asking the Lord for his support, which we want to understand as an all encompassing term. God made us what we are and gives us everything we have and need for this life and for the next. He tends to the needs of our spirits, granting us forgiveness of sin and salvation through faith in Christ, and he gives us what we need to maintain our bodies as well. All of that is included in this petition when we ask for his support. We're recognizing that we are entirely dependent upon him and look to him to fulfill all our needs. We ask for this support "all day long", which might be thought of as all around the clock, that is, every moment of the day; or we might think of it as the long "day" of our entire life spans, as when Jesus told his disciples "We must do the work the Father has given us to do as long as it is day, before the night comes when no one can work" referring to death. It's not clear which is intended by "all day long". I like to think it's both. And in addition to this all inclusive support we ask the Lord to give us guidance, that is, direction for our thoughts that we might walk in his ways; and we ask for strength that we might be enabled to do his will.

The next line gives us the time setting and occasion of the prayer: the sun is low on the horizon, it's approaching nightfall, everything standing casts a shadow in length many times its height. And things in our hectic lives are quieting down. And that's good: we were not made to be nocturnal creatures. It's true that the modern world goes on 24-7; but as individuals we can't. Sometimes we do try, though. We're constantly being pressured to multi-task, burn the midnight oil, push the envelope of endurance, and go all out. Why? To get more done, of course; but there never seems to be enough time to do it all. And it's funny: we've got all kinds of machines, gizmos, and gadgets that are designed to save us time and help us to get things done quicker, and they do; the trouble is that we load the free time we supposedly gained with more tasks that only put us behind again *and* that give us more to worry about.

Though it's a prayer, the hymn practically commands us to stop. The day is over. The work is done for now. Slow down. Take a breather. It's time for rest: for body, for mind, and for the soul. We hand all that has kept us so terribly busy and preoccupied over to the Lord, commending it all to his care while remembering how the psalmist wrote, "He gives to his beloved ones sleep." He gives us sleep precisely so that we can rise again in the morning renewed and refreshed, ready, able and willing to do his will. And commending all things to his care each night is preparation, as the last line goes, for that time when we lie down for the final time, to rest the sleep of death, while our bodies await their final awakening on the Last Day.

In the second verse we pray for the Lord's protection during the hours of darkness. We ask him to be our Light – and so he is. He illumines our hearts and minds with his Word so that we can see the world and what goes on in it with proper understanding. In his light we see that a lot of the things we fret over so much like finances, politics, crime, and the things that go bump in the night aren't really any danger at all: they can't affect us eternally. When we see the goodness and great power of the Lord, the worries these things cause melt away.

But there are other dangers more insidious, which the hymn refers to as "satanic snares". These we ask the Lord to drive away from our dwellings for they are indeed dangerous to the soul. And one of the reasons for that is snares by definition are traps that you step into unaware. What's in mind here? Lots of things. But perhaps chiefly, it's in the quiet time when we're alone with our thoughts that the mind tends to dwell on things that ought to be avoided, like fantasies of illicit relationships or of getting revenge. We refresh in our memories and fan into flame old hurts and wounds, think about the things we should have said to chop down that person who slighted us, and make resolutions to retain anger and hold grudges rather than to forgive. This is a spiritual battlefield. These temptations of thought are the battles. And the hymn rightly identifies the enemy: it's Satan who seeks to destroy you. Thus we ask the Lord to shine his light also on these dangers that we may confess them for the sins they are and seek his forgiveness. Then we can give thanks to him and rest in peace with clear consciences.

The third verse is a prayer for those who work during the night, whose "day" begins as the rest of us are turning in. We ask the Lord to be with them in their vocations of keeping us safe. We're talking about police, fire and rescue specialists, EMTs, medical staffs at hospitals, emergency responders, 911 operators, soldiers on duty, night watchmen and prison guards, those standing by to get the power grid back online should it fail, and so many others who do those thankless jobs we rarely think about but depend upon. I said before that we were not made to be nocturnal. Those who work through the hours of darkness often suffer from light deprivation, and their schedules put strains on them and their families. And so we recognize that their work at night is a form a sacrifice for the good of others. Furthermore, remembering them and what they do is an acknowledgment that we live in a broken and twisted world, and that their jobs often entail dealing with the worst parts of it to protect us. But it's through them

and their labors that the Lord maintains order and security. Thus we ask the Lord to give them courage to face the evils they must on our behalf, and the dedication and skill to do their jobs faithfully and well.

The fourth and final verse begins with praise to the Lord for all his kindness and loving care, and concludes with one of the main themes of the Compline service: commending all things past, present, and future into the Lord's loving hands. It reminds us of how Jesus in his ministry took no thought about the worries of life that so often afflict us. He lived in full reliance on his heavenly Father, and even in the most horrible of circumstances – his agonizing torture and death on the cross – he commended his spirit to his Father's care. It's right that we do the same while awake, when lying down to sleep, and in the hour of our deaths.

And there it is: all in all this hymn is a lovely evening prayer; one to which we can all amend a hearty "amen". In Jesus' name.

Soli Deo Gloria!