

In the name of our Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, dear friends in Christ: For this, the last of our midweek Lenten meditations on the evening hymns, I thought it would be good to fall back on something a bit more familiar. We Lutherans are known for having a fairly low tolerance for newness and innovation. We can take some – and I hope you’ve enjoyed being introduced to a few of the hymns we’ve looked at – but I decided it’s better not push it too far.

Anyway, the hymn before us this evening is probably known to us more on account of its tune rather than its words. There are a couple of reasons for this. First, as you can see from the information at the bottom of the page, its melody is a Welsh folksong that was recorded on paper sometime in the 1700s. It’s probably a lot older than that. That is, people were playing and singing it; but no one bothered to write it down. The tune is called in Welsh “*Ar Hyd y Nos*” (pardon my pronunciation) which translates into English “*All through the night*”. There are numerous secular and sacred sets of lyrics that have been put to it. You’ve probably heard the one that goes, “*Sleep my child and peace attend thee, all through the night. Guardian angels watch are keeping, all through the night.*” Maybe you sang that to your children once upon a time – or perhaps your parents sang it to you. Another reason the tune is familiar, though, is that there are two other entries in our hymnal that use it. One is #894, which is a Thanksgiving themed hymn; and the other is #922, a hymn we sometimes use at close of the service. Whatever the words used with it, it’s a lovely tune that has the benefit of being simple and yet distinctive, and still quite memorable. But what makes it especially nice for an evening hymn is that it conveys a sense of calm and serenity, which is exactly what you want when it’s time to turn back the covers and climb into bed.

Getting into the hymn itself, we see that it is (like almost all of the others we’ve examined in this series) in the form of a bedtime prayer. Its opening line looks like it was pulled directly from the first few verses of Genesis. “God, who made the earth and heaven, Darkness and light” is a pretty good summary of what happened on the first day of creation. Then God who created the heavens and earth spoke forth the light, dividing it from the darkness, calling the light “day” and the darkness “night”. And in addressing God in this way we are reminded that in his almighty hands are all things. His is the power, the wisdom, and the lavish care that went into making us and all creation, and therefore he’s the only one who is in a position to hear and answer our prayers – as indeed he delights in doing.

The next line, “You the day for work have given, for rest the night” speaks of how God not only made all things, but also *ordered* them for our benefit. Built into the fabric of creation is a natural rhythm, daily cycles of work and rest. And this is part of the goodness of the creation. God gives us meaningful labor to keep us occupied in the service of others and he provides time for us to do it, and he also gives us time for rest and relaxation – and not just every day, but also built into larger cycles like the week. Six daily cycles of work and rest, and then a whole day off for rest: the Sabbath. And if you’re familiar with the calendar of ancient Israel, you know that the Lord commanded monthly festivals of rest at the new moon, and annually for various other occasions. They even had a Sabbath year. One in every seven years was to be a time of rest for both the people and the land. It’s interesting: in pagan religions, the gods were always demanding that people serve them. In Israel alone did God command that his people rest. The idea was, “I’ve got it covered. I’ll take care of you. Don’t worry. You rest. I’ve done the work for you.” And it all points, of course, to his great plan of salvation: how in Christ he does all the work so that we can enter into his eternal rest.

The second half of the first verse contains three short petitions. The first, “May your angel guards defend us”, speaks of the armies of unseen hosts that the Lord created to protect us from harm and to serve us on his behalf. They are ever with us; but here we acknowledge their presence and their diligent work for us; how they keep watch while we slumber. We ask the Lord to sustain them in their vigil and keep us mindful of their care. The second petition, “Slumber sweet your mercy send us”, speaks of the profound blessing of deep and regenerative sleep. And I really don’t think anyone can appreciate what a gift it is until they’ve suffered through a few bouts of insomnia or spent the night plagued with worries, tossing and turning troubled by anxious thoughts. If you have, then you know what a precious thing sound sleep is, the kind that refreshes and renews. It’s entirely fitting that we ask the Lord to grant it.

And then the final petition of the first verse is for holy dreams and hopes. I like that. It seems to me that most dreams we have while we are asleep are amalgamated snippets of various thoughts, interactions, conversations, and other things we were exposed to during the day. And usually the stuff that goes into them are the more unpleasant things. I’m not saying every dream is a nightmare (though some certainly are); but how often do you wake up and say, “Wow, that was a really great dream?” Not very often; most of the time it’s more like, “Wow, that was weird”, right? So how very appropriate it is that we ask the Lord to grant to us dreams that are filled with good and godly things.

The second verse of the hymn looks ahead. It contains petitions not for the coming night, but for the following day. After a restful night, we pray for the Lord to grant us the grace to spring up out of bed ready, willing, and able to accomplish what he’s called us to do in our varied vocations. Above all we ask, as we do in the Lord’s Prayer, for the grace to do his will. And rather than think of this as all “do this, do that, and so on”, we remember the words of Jesus. When asked, “What is the work God wants us to do?” Jesus replied, “The work of God is this: to believe in the One he sent.” Faith in Christ is what matters most. Only those who trust in Jesus are equipped to please God and do his will. And with faith in Christ, every job you perform – even the most mundane chore – becomes a holy task.

And while we are accomplishing God’s will for us, again we have three short petitions that round out the verse. We pray, “From the power of evil hide us” requesting that the Lord shelter us from any harm or danger by which the devil may seek to shake our faith or destroy us. We pray “in the narrow pathway guide us” asking that we remain constantly in the way of righteousness Jesus spoke of when he said, “Broad is the path and wide the way that leads to destruction, and many go therein; but the way of life is narrow and few find it.” It’s the path of a complete confession of Jesus and his saving work on our behalf. It’s the way of his Church, because it’s through the ministry of the Word and Sacraments that we remain in the narrow way.

Finally we pray in this verse, “Never be your smile denied us”. This is an allusion to the Aaronic blessing, which goes “The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious unto you” and concludes with the words, “the Lord *lift up his countenance upon you* and give you peace.” You see, there’s no word in Hebrew for smile. Instead someone who looks favorably at you is said to have a lifted countenance [smile], as opposed to a fallen countenance [scowl]. Thus in this petition we’re asking that the gracious favor and blessing of the Lord continue always to rest upon us.

Going to the third verse, the first part should look familiar. It echoes two parts of the Compline Service: the opening line that goes “The Lord Almighty grant us a quiet night and peace at the *last*” (which means when we die), and the antiphon that accompanies the Nunc Dimittus at the close of the service: “Guide us waking, O Lord, and guard us sleeping, that

awake we may watch with Christ and asleep we may rest in peace.” Thus we are asking the Lord to grant us his peace in life and in death. And the biblical idea of peace doesn’t mean just the absence of conflict; it’s much richer than that. This is the Hebrew “Shalom”. It means “Ahhh, everything is as it should be. No worries. No concerns. All is well with the world and my soul.” This is the peace in which we ask to go to bed at night, and the peace in which we pray to die. It’s the peace that comes of resting securely in God’s love and forgiveness in Christ Jesus.

And then we ask the Lord to keep in his care our mortal remains as they lie in their graves awaiting the resurrection on the Last Day, when the trump of the archangel will sound and Christ returns in judgment. It will be a day of fear and dread for many; but we pray that the Lord keep his promise never to leave or forsake us (confident that he will keep it), and that we may stand in the judgment at Christ’s right hand and hear his words, “Come you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” Very nice; and you know, I haven’t ever really considered it, but with themes like this, this and some of the other evening hymns we’ve looked at would actually be very good for us to use at funerals.

And then coming to the last verse, we see that it turns from petition to praise. It’s a Trinitarian doxology to the Holy Father, Holy Son, and Holy Spirit. The thrice “holy” reminds us of the Sanctus: the song of the angels around the throne of God, which appears in Isaiah chapter six. We use it during our Communion services. And the mention of the three persons of the Godhead reminds us of our Baptisms, when the name of God Father, Son, and Holy Spirit was placed upon us. That’s when God’s grace was first freely given to us, when we were washed from sin, and made children and heirs of God in Christ Jesus. And as such we ask for our Triune God’s continued grace and favor from now until we stand with the saints and angels in glory, evermore praising him for all that he is and does. Thus this evening hymn, like so many other good Lutheran hymns, takes us from the troubles and travails of this life by God’s grace through faith in Jesus, and lands us in the last verse squarely in our eternal home. May the God who made the Earth and Heaven bring us all safely there. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!