

## The Epiphany of Our Lord

“O Morning Star, How Fair and Bright” (*Lutheran Service Book*, #395)

This is Philipp Nicolai’s crowning hymn, sometimes known as the “Queen of Chorales”. He also wrote the words and tune to “Wake, Awake, for Night Is Flying”, known as the “King of Chorales”. Philip Nicolai (1556-1608) was a Lutheran pastor and hymn writer of the Meistersinger tradition, one of the last. In his writings he focuses on the joy of the grace and mercy of God.

The melody (WIE SCHOEN LEUCHTET) and the text of this Epiphany hymn each capture that spirit of Nicolai’s life. In his other writings as a pastor you will find the same glow in God’s ‘grace and mercy’ as you find in stanza one. It is the kind of glow that Christmas brings to many but is forgotten by the time Epiphany is celebrated in the Church Year. This hymn serves as a reminder that the ‘tinsel’ of Christmas can last throughout the year.

The lasting message of the hymn has inspired great composers such as Johann Sebastian Bach to write musical works based on this hymn. Each of the seven stanzas (the original number of stanzas) captures the joy of the “Morning Star”. For early risers the planet, Venus, is one of the morning stars. It also can refer to the star, Sirius, which appears in the sky just before sunrise during ‘dog days’, the summer sky. Less frequently it refers to the planet, Mercury, when it appears in the east before sunrise. In any event it is the earthly beauty which reminds us of the heavenly beauty that is portrayed in this hymn.

Consider the reason for this beauty that Nicolai portrays in stanza three when he says, “Lord, when you look on us in love, at once there falls from God above a ray of purest pleasure”. Isn’t that the source of pleasure...because of God’s ‘looking on us with Love’? Again consider the ‘pleasure’ that we feel at Christmas...but is it motivated by the presents we receive or the ‘heavenly present’ of Love himself?

What is our reaction to this gift of Love? How about stanza five...“O let the harps break forth in sound! (are there any ‘harps’ left to celebrate Epiphany?) Our joy be all with music crowned. Our voices gladly blending (Does our choir sing joyfully at Epiphany?) For Christ goes with us all the way—today, tomorrow, ev’ry day! His love is never ending! Sing out! Ring out! Jubilation! Exaltation! Tell the story! Great is He, the King of Glory!”

So how about a ‘Lessons and Carols’ for Epiphany? How about an Epiphany Eve Candlelight Service!? How about a greeting ‘Blessed Epiphany’? Philipp Nicolai would promote all of the above. As leaders of music and worship, let’s not put Epiphany in second place to Christmas. The hymn, “O Morning Star, How Fair and Bright” doesn’t let us. Sing it with pleasure with all the ‘harps’ present in next year’s Epiphany Celebration!

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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!

Come, heav'nly Bridegroom, Light divine,  
and deep within our hearts now shine;  
there light a flame undying!  
In Your one body let us be  
as living branches of a tree,  
Your life our lives supplying.  
    Now, though daily  
    earth's deep sadness may perplex us and distress us,  
yet with heav'nly joy You bless us.

Lord, when You look on us in love,  
at once there falls from God above  
a ray of purest pleasure.  
Your Word and Spirit, flesh and blood  
refresh our souls with heav'nly food.  
You are our dearest treasure!  
    Let Your mercy  
    warm and cheer us! O draw near us! For You teach us  
God's own love through You has reached us.

Almighty Father, in Your Son  
You loved us when not yet begun  
was this old earth's foundation!  
Your Son has ransomed us in love

to live in Him here and above:  
this is Your great salvation.

Alleluia!

Christ the living, to us giving life forever,  
Keeps us Yours and fails us never!

O let the harps break forth in sound!  
Our joy be all with music crowned,  
our voices gladly blending!  
For Christ goes with us all the way—  
today, tomorrow, ev'ry day!  
His love is never ending!

Sing out! Ring out!

Jubilation! Exultation! Tell the story!  
Great is He, the King of Glory!

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 years and sinning!

Amen! Amen!

Come, Lord Jesus! Crown of gladness!  
We are yearning for the day of Your returning!

[This devotion was prepared for the website of the Center for Church Music. It may be downloaded and duplicated for local use.]