



Hark, a Thrilling Voice is Sounding

Text: Unknown, c. 900

Tune: William H. Monk (1823-1889)

As Advent continues and we consider the preparation of our hearts and minds for Christ's coming, our thoughts naturally turn to John the Baptizer. Many of our Advent hymns summarize his preaching of repentance and his God-given office as prophet and forerunner of the Messiah. He is as, as Jesus says, "more than a prophet. For this is he of whom it is written: 'Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way before You' (Mt. 11:10). His preparation for the Messiah is not just fear, but a promise that One is coming who will lighten our darkness and shield us with His mercy.

One of the best hymns summarizing John the Baptizer is "Hark, a Thrilling Voice is Sounding." This hymn is of ancient origins. While many date it to the tenth century, it could be from as early as the fifth. It was originally the hymn for the Office of Lauds during the season of Advent. Lauds is part of the Liturgy of the Hours, the ancient prayer offices that occurred during the day. There were eight times for prayer:

- ✘ Matins, at midnight
- ✘ Lauds, at 3:00 a.m.
- ✘ Prime, at 6:00 a.m.
- ✘ Terce, at 9:00 a.m.
- ✘ Sext, at 12:00 noon
- ✘ None, at 3:00 p.m.
- ✘ Vespers, at 6:00 p.m.
- ✘ Compline, at 9:00 p.m.

Lutheran usage has retained Matins, Vespers, and Compline, with Matins becoming a general morning prayer, Vespers as an afternoon or evening office, and Compline being prayed at bedtime. Many

Lutheran hymnals contain at least Matins and Vespers, with most newer hymnals also including Compline.

There is a great deal of depth to this hymn. The Latin of stanza one has wonderful plays on words. The voice that is sounding is a clear (*clara*) voice that rebukes whatever is obscure (*obscura*); dreams (what we have translated as "works of darkness;" *somnia*) are to be put to flight for Christ is springing forth (*promicat*) from heaven (in our hymnal that line is translated as "O ye children of the day."). The Eternal Word and Light of the world, Jesus Christ, makes clear all things. Without the Light, sin, the "works of darkness" cannot be put away.

The second stanza has a deeper meaning. A person awakens from a deep sleep at the sound of a loud voice and the appearance of bright light. We awaken groggy in the morning. Remember, this hymn was originally sung in the deep darkness of early morning during Advent, when the days are at their shortest and those singing it were cold and numb, waiting for the days to warm and lengthen. But there is more to it than this. These first two stanzas are about the examination of the conscience, the act of repentance and conversion, all in light of the end of the world and second Advent of Jesus.

The "voice" of this hymn is rightly understood as John the Baptizer. Stanza three repeats his confession of Jesus Christ as the long-expected Lamb of God who comes with pardon, taking away the sin of the world by His Blood. We come to Him in repentance knowing that He will give us the forgiveness He won for us (stanza three).

Because we have been recipients of His forgiveness when He returns in glory to judge the quick and the dead, we will not be wrapped in fear like the rest of the world because we are already shielded with His mercy. "With words of love" He will draw us near: "Well done, good and faithful servant" (stanza four).

Our salvation, a work of the Holy Trinity, is lauded. The glorious Godhead receives honor, glory, might, and dominion while eternal ages run because He has brought us out of darkness and into His marvelous light.