

Matthew 25:1-13 The Season before the Season

Have you started to think about your getting all your Christmas cards sent? I'm sure you can think about those letters you receive with all annual reports from family and friends about what they did this past year. How they will tell you about what is happening while increasing your excitement for the coming of Christmas. Some of those cards even will encourage you to observe the days before Christmas carefully. Use them these days so they aren't lost in the season that is to come.

Advent has that warning attached to it. When the days of Advent roll around every year, remember that appeal, "Observe them carefully." Advent, you see, is the season before the season. There's no question that the season coming is Christmas. Emotionally, it's one of the biggest celebrations we engage in as Christians. Then, too, Christmas is the celebration that can make or break us economically, whether as customers or merchants. It's simply the biggest day around for almost everyone. We put a lot of stock in Christmas!

Because of this, it's good advice to observe carefully the days that lead up to Christmas. It would be a shame to prepare poorly, or lightly, for this great festival. More sadly, it would be a total shame if we missed the whole point of Christmas, hence the warning, "Observe them carefully!" For this reason we have this season before the season. Advent is the time to observe carefully the great season of Christmas.

This Advent we will look at four Scripture lessons that serve as the basis for four Advent hymns. Today, one of those jubilant Advent hymns will help us and guide us.

The hymn "Wake, Awake, for Night is Flying" was written by a German Lutheran pastor, Philipp Nicolai, who lived shortly after Martin Luther. It is based on Matthew 25:1-13.

“Wake, Awake, for Night is Flying” leads us down the two main tracks of thought that are also found in the lesson. The first stanza of the hymn starts us down the first track. “Wake, Awake, for Night is Flying”//The watchmen on the height are crying.”// “Awake, Jerusalem, arise!”//Midnight hears the welcome voices//And at the trilling cry rejoices:// “Oh, where are all you virgins wise? // The Bridegroom comes—awake! // Your lamps with gladness take! // Alleluia! // With bridal care // Yourselves prepare // To meet the bridegroom who is near.”*

In these words, we find the Advent parable that Jesus once told, the parable of the sleeping maidens. Hear Matthew 25:1-13 “**At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom.**² Five of them were foolish and five were wise.³ The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them.⁴ The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps.⁵ The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.⁶ “At midnight the cry rang out: ‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’⁷ “Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps.⁸ The foolish ones said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.’⁹ “‘No,’ they replied, ‘there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.’¹⁰ “But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.¹¹ “Later the others also came. ‘Sir! Sir!’ they said. ‘Open the door for us!’¹² “But he replied, ‘I tell you the truth, I don’t know you.’¹³ “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour. (NIV 1984)

Like Christmas cards serve as a warning, the message of this charming parable and the hymn is a warning. Wake, awake! Observe carefully these days before Christmas. Watch what you are doing. Be aware of what is happening.

For all the gravity of this message, the parable relates a rather lighthearted occasion, almost a game. In Jesus’ day people liked to inject into the wedding scene some playful, surprising elements, similar to our practice of throwing bird seed over the newlyweds or tying a clump of empty tin cans to the rear bumper of the honeymoon car or tractor.

One of these surprising elements included the bridegroom's arrival at the bride's home before the wedding ceremony in order to claim her and her attendants. At this point he would take them—and the families and wedding guests—to the wedding hall for the ceremony, the reception, and the honeymoon. These events together could last seven days or more! The playful part of it all was the challenge to the bridegroom to arrive at the bride's home at the moment that would catch her and her maidens unprepared. What better time to pull off such a surprise than some hour during the middle of the night? That's the scene the hymn describes.

Christmas is coming soon, and this season before the season bids us to watch, wake, be ready, prepare, and observe these days carefully. What is it that we are to be so careful about during this season before the season?

Let me put it this way (and you will have to follow closely). During this season of Advent, we are to become aware of the coming season, Christmas, is never complete in itself. The Christmas season only has a fully productive meaning for us as we sense and experience its fulfillment during the seasons of Lent and Easter. To put it in visual terms, Advent calls us to see the cross of Jesus hovering over the manger. The joy of the Christmas season comes to its fullness after repentance over our sins and trust in the forgiveness of the cross and the victory of the open tomb. As we gaze into the quiet skies of a Christmas silent night, we need to discern a triumphant, risen Savior coming toward us in Last Day victory.

You see, the second track of thought of the hymn writer leads us down is the vision of the resplendent, overflowing joy that comes as we receive the Christ of Judgment Day and enter into the heavenly home. Zion hears the watchmen singing, // And all her heart with joy is springing; // She wakes, she rises from her gloom, // For her Lord comes down all-glorious, // The strong in grace, in truth victorious; // Her Star is ris'n, her Light is come. // "Now come, O Blessed One, // Christ Jesus, God's own Son. // Hail! Hosanna! // The joyful call // We answer all // And follow to the wedding hall."* This season of Advent calls us to discern very carefully and precisely what it is about the coming season of Christmas that can bring us to such unbounded and genuine inner joy, as these words of the hymn describe it for us so lavishly.

This is all another way of asking, “What really is the Gospel of Christmas?” For some, a kind of gospel during the coming week will be the Christmas spirit charmingly presented in irresistible characters such as the Grinch, Scrooge, the Little Match Girl, or, in ultimate fashion, Santa Claus himself. Or, as this age becomes increasingly one in which we create unrealistic images of life, the gospel of the season may come in the form of family tradition. Magazines and craft shows and recipe books show us how to create illusions of softness and the glow of yesteryear in our homes. These shimmering holiday images become a kind of gospel that covers over serious family tensions and dysfunction. That covers over the sins that should be handled with repentance and forgiveness. After Christmas, sad to say, this false gospel leaves us as soon as we take down all the decorations. Then we are left in the glare of the same troubled relationships that burdened us before including the troubled relationship we have with our Lord.

For still others, the gospel of the coming season will arrive in the form of “baby Jesus.” Parents will openly talk about him. Even distinguished entertainers will touchingly share with us the songs and poetry about this little stranger. It is as though during an encounter with baby Jesus we will be magically transformed. Somehow cold hearts will be melted. The hard side of our behavior will be softened in response to the appeal, “Come on, it’s Christmas!”

These gospels are all difficult to reject precisely because they feel so right. But the warning of Advent comes to say, “Keep watch, awake!” The profound joy that the hymn writer here speaks of and the five wise virgins springs from a richer and fuller Gospel than Christmas spirit of family tradition or isolated scenes involving baby Jesus; the Gospel that also devastates the other quaint, sentimental Christmas “gospels.” This is THE GOSPEL about the King of kings and Lord of lords. Advent bids us meet the awesome Son of God, who came from the Father in the mystery of virgin birth—Christ Jesus among us in the degradation of a drafty manger; the poor one, pressed to flee the land in tender infancy; the Savior of the world, crucified, died, and risen again, seated at the Father’s right hand until he comes again in glory. This Christ of the Nativity and Lent and Easter brings a joy so full and embracing that the halls of heaven echo with jubilation to proclaim he’s coming. This is the full Christmas Gospel!

This season before the season warns us not to miss any of that! Do not miss the joy that reaches deep—this joy of salvation that changes everything: history, hearts, and homes. Do not miss the Gospel that makes us new people! For it is the cross of Christ that forgives our sin; his blood cleanses our hearts. Raised with him by the power of the Spirit, we are overtaken by the living Easter faith that instills in us a joyful determination to live as the people of God. Now let all the

heav'ns adore you; // Let saints and angels sing before you // with harp and cymbal's clearest tone. // Of one pearl each shining portal, // Where, dwelling with the choir immortal, // We gather round your radiant throne. // No vision ever brought, // No ear has ever caught // Such great glory; // Therefore will we // In victory // Sing hymns of praise eternally.*

Can we sing of this joy that comes our way in Jesus Christ, as the hymn writer penned it? Yes! We can sing it! Wide awake. Make ready this season before the season to greet the Savior when he comes.

*The three stanzas of “Wake, Awake for Night is Flying” were copied from *Christians Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal*.