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“Hark! A Thrilling Voice Is Sounding”

The second hymn we’re looking at this Advent season, as we take “a new look at some old songs,” is *Hark! A Thrilling Voice Is Sounding* (LSB #345). We don’t know who wrote this hymn, some think St. Ambrose, who wrote last week’s hymn - but we’re really not sure. What we do know is that very early on in medieval times, it was regularly sung during the early morning prayer office called “Lauds” during the season of Advent. This hymn would be sung at the start of each new day as a reminder to be watchful for the coming of the Lord, which is what the season of Advent is all about. For us, it has become the traditional Chief Hymn for the Third Sunday of Advent. We begin by singing the first two verses.

*Hark! A thrilling voice is sounding!
“Christ is near,” we hear it say.
“Cast away the works of darkness,
All you children of the day!”*

*Startled at the solemn warning,
Let the earthbound soul arise;
Christ, its sun, all sloth dispelling,
Shines upon the morning skies.*

Hark! A thrilling voice is sounding.

What thrilling voices have you heard in your life? Maybe one was when that certain someone called you on the phone for the first time and your heart started beating faster. Or when you heard: you got into college, or, you got the job. Or, if you were in the military, when you finally heard: the war is over; you’re going home. Thrilling voices.

The thrilling voice our hymn is talking about, however, is the voice of John the Baptist, who came as the forerunner of Christ, as the one to prepare His way, and who said: *Christ is near*. The Saviour of the world is near; almost here. The people of God had been waiting thousands of years to hear that voice and to hear that message, that God was fulfilling His promise to save His people from their sins. Imagine how thrilling the voice must have sounded. *Christ is near!* And the word spread like wildfire. Matthew tells us that **“Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him.”** To prepare. To be ready.

That's what Advent is about for us as well: *Christ is near!* For it is not just our yearly remembrance of Christmas and Jesus' first coming, His birth, that is near - but His second coming is near. Each day one day closer to Jesus' coming again in glory; to that day when the thrilling voice that will sound will be the voice of the angels announcing His coming. Those voices that will be like thunder and that all will hear - even the dead. For on that day they will be roused from the sleep of death and rise to meet the Lord.

Hark! A thrilling voice is sounding! Christ is near!

Christ is near, so don't live as if He's not, Paul says. *Cast off the works of darkness* - your sinful ways, your selfish ways. **Repent**, John says. For if the week before Christmas, when Christmas is near, is one of the busiest shipping and shopping weeks of the year, should not the time when *Christ is near* be the same? Our faith busy in repentance. Our faith busy in good works. Our faith busy listening to the Word of God. To be ready. To be prepared. When that thrilling voice will say NOT Christ is near, but Christ is HERE!

But in fact, that voice is sounding already now. How? We sing the next two verses.

*See, the Lamb, so long expected,
Comes with pardon down from heav'n.
Let us haste, with tears of sorrow,
One and all, to be forgiv'n;*

*So, when next He comes in glory
And the world is wrapped in fear,
He will shield us with His mercy
And with words of love draw near.*

See, the Lamb, so long expected, comes with pardon down from heaven.

That was John the Baptist's message, too. He not only said: **Repent**, he also pointed to Jesus and said "*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world*" (John 1:29). For Jesus had come to be that Lamb, to go to the cross, and take the sin of the world away from the world and put it all on Himself, to bear its shame and punishment and condemnation.

But that is not just John's message. It is the message of the Church today as well. For it is *today* that the Lamb comes down with pardon. In John's day He came down to *be* the sacrifice; *today* He comes down to give the pardon, the forgiveness, He earned on the cross. And that is no more clearly shown than in His Supper, the

Lord's Supper, the Body and Blood of Christ given to you for the forgiveness of your sins. And the Church in her liturgy sings, YES! *O Christ, Thou Lamb of God, who takest away the sin of the world.* Here is the Lamb and His pardon, for me.

But not only there, but also in the message of the Gospel and the Word of Absolution, and in the waters of Holy Baptism, the *Lamb is coming down with pardon*, forgiving the sins of babies, of old and young, of rich and poor, of abled and disabled, of presidents and derelicts, of people of every nation, culture, and language. For there is no one who does not need His forgiveness. We are all sinners. We are all beggars. So as we sang, *Let us haste, with tears of sorrow, One and all, to be forgiv'n.*

And doing that now, we will be ready and well prepared for *when next He comes in glory and the world is wrapped in fear.* The fear that we heard Isaiah describe. But there is no fear for those whose sins are forgiven, for there is nothing to fear. Shielded by His forgiveness now, we will be so also then. Shielded by His mercy now, we will be so also then. And His voice will be one not of condemnation but of love. *A thrilling voice*, calling us to our heavenly home.

And then we will sing . . . just as we sing the last verse of the hymn.

*Honor, glory, might, dominion
To the Father and the Son
With the everlasting Spirit
While eternal ages run!*

Those words are what is called a "doxology" - a verse of praise to the triune God. Words that we can sing because God has told us who He is - the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; and because God has told us what He has done for us - the Father sent the Son to be our Saviour, and the Son sent the Spirit to give us faith by pointing us and leading us to the Son, who then takes us to the Father. The work of God descending to us, and the work of God in bringing us to Himself.

That's Advent. That's what it's all about - God coming to save us then, now, and on the last day. That's His *glory*, that's how He uses His *might* and *dominion* for us, and for that we give Him *honor* and praise. For the work of God is our only hope. Our work, from the beginning, has been darkness. The darkness of sin that covers the world since Adam. But God comes to us in the darkness as the Light of the world.

The Light to take away your fear because the darkness brings fear - you can't see what's there.

The Light to show us the way because in the darkness you can't see where your going.

And the Light to shine upon us the warmth of His love and life because in the dark is the coldness of separation and death.

So now, ***as children of light*** (as Paul said), do we go back to the darkness? *No way!* No way. Sin may get the best of us at times, but don't stay there. Don't wallow in it. ***Walk as children of light.*** Forgiven and forgiving. Loved and loving. Mercied and merciful. That others may see *in* us and even more hear *from* us that thrilling message, that thrilling voice, that *Christ is near!*

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.