

Advent 3 (Series B)

“Hark! A Thrilling Voice Is Sounding” (*Lutheran Service Book* #345)

If you have something important to communicate to someone, you first need to get their attention. And if you need to get someone’s attention quickly, there are a number of approaches you could take. Yes, there’s the always red exclamation point attached to the email, or the all-caps text message. But what about when you’re within sight or shouting distance of the people who need to know the news you need to share? To get their attention, perhaps you whistle, wave your arms, or yell something.

There’s a lot of attention-getting that happens during the season of Advent, and a lot of it is carried out by John the Baptizer. While his choice of clothing and eating habits may have gained him attention, we remember him, of course, not only for who he was, but for whom he was the attention-getter. As John the Baptizer says in John the Evangelist’s gospel, in the pericope for this Sunday, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.” (John 1:23 ESV) Throughout the season of Advent, our attention is turned to look for the coming Christ, and as our attention is turned, so are our lives are turned in repentance to receive the gifts that Christ brings. We “cast away the works of darkness” and “haste, with tears of sorrow” and receive the “pardon,” “mercy,” and “words of love” of our coming Savior.

Whoever was the 6th-or-7th-century-or-so writer of this hymn was also an attention-getter. The archaic “Hark!” which begins this hymn—and which always reminds me of that one Brady bunch episode, right?—is a translation of the original Latin *ecce*, which seems to be the go-to attention-getting word in that language. It can also be translated as “Lo!” or “Here!” or “Behold!” or “Look!” or “See!” It’s no accident that there are quite a few Advent and Christmas hymns that begin with these words. There is important news to share both in anticipation of and in response to “that birth forever blessed” (to quote another Latin hymn).

But just as John’s attention-getting dress and diet was not the point of it all but rather a way of pointing to his message and the point of his message, so the hymn-writer’s attention-getting “Hark!” serves as an opening to a hymn that is full of messages for us—images and ideas taken fairly directly from scripture. Hymnal companion commentaries on this hymn¹ point out that almost every line of the Latin hymn is related to a passage from scripture.

Consider the following connections between hymn and scripture and allow them to lead you in prayer and meditation, being assured that “Christ is near.”

Hark! A thrilling voice is sounding!

“Christ is near,” we hear it say.

“Cast away the works of darkness,

Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. (Romans 13:11-12)

All you children of the day!"

"I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star." (Revelation 22:16)

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

Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.
For behold, darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the LORD will arise upon you,
and his glory will be seen upon you.
And nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your rising. (Isaiah 60:1-3)

See, the Lamb, so long expected,

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! (John 1:29)

Comes with pardon down from heav'n.

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. (Romans 3:23-24)

*Let us haste, with tears of sorrow,
One and all, to be forgiven.*

Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. (James 4:8-9)

*So, when next He comes in glory
And the world is wrapped in fear,*

"And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. (Luke 21:25-27)

*He will shield us with His mercy,
And with words of love draw near.*

He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.
For he knows our frame;

he remembers that we are dust. (Psalm 103:10, 14)

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

P.S. Here is a link to a performance of my favorite arrangement of this hymn:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZyCZ2TFbDqk>. It is composed by Richard Webster and published by Advent Press: <http://www.advent-press.com/index.php/hymn-arrangements-with-brass/92-merton>.

¹ Joseph Herl and Morgan Simmons, "Hark! A thrilling voice is sounding," *The Hymnal 1982 Companion*, vol. 3A (1994); Paul Westermeyer, "Hark! A Thrilling Voice Is Sounding," *Hymnal Companion to Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (2010).

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