

WAKE, AWAKE, FOR NIGHT IS FLYING
(Wachet auf)

Advent is a time of waiting, hoping, and expecting. Christians await Christ's coming at Christmas and in the future with the same kind of excitement felt by the people of Israel as they looked for the coming of the Messiah.

The words of this hymn grew out of the Jews' expectation that the Messiah would appear in the temple in Jerusalem (or Zion) in the dead of night. The watchmen on the city walls and surrounding hills would be the first to see and announce his arrival. Christians believe that Jesus is the Messiah awaited by the Jews.

Using the word pictures in Jesus' parable of the wise and foolish virgins in Matthew 25:1-13, we also refer to Jesus as the "Bridegroom" who comes suddenly in the middle of the night, expecting his bride and the wedding party to be ready for the joyful ceremony. The watchmen herald his coming and the need to be waiting and ready.

Remembering Christ's first coming, we await his return (whether in the heart of the believer, or in the Lord's Supper, or in his final victory over evil), not with fear but with joy. It makes sense, then, for us to sing these words to a tune in a bright major key. Wachet auf is printed in most hymnals in the key of C, but Bach's harmonization was originally in the higher key of E flat major.

Wachet auf is a long tune, but its repetitions make it easy to learn. Here is the tune's "meter" showing the number of syllables in each line:

8. 9. 8. 8. 9. 8. 6. 6. 4. 8. 8.
a b _ a _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

Starting with "a", write a different letter under each number whenever a new part of the tune begins. When a part repeats, use the same letter. When you have finished, circle the groups of letters that indicate a whole section of the melody is repeated. Put a check above the numbers of the three lines that have this melody:



A good hymn tune fits the mood of the words. There are many leaps of 3rds and 4ths upward and downward in this melody, as well as ascending and descending scales. Perhaps they suggest our reaching out to greet the coming Savior and God's coming in Christ to meet us.

This hymn tune, known as the "King of Chorales," was harmonized by Johann Sebastian Bach, who also used it as the basis for Cantata No. 140. One of the wonderful things about Bach's music is the bass line. Have someone play the bass line of Wachet auf on a cello, bassoon, or other low instrument, and the fun of singing "Wake, Awake" will be doubled!

(c f e d d b e c q e
8. 8. 4. 6. 6. 8. 9. 8. 8. 6. 8
x x x