HYMN INTERPRETATION

HERMAN G. STUEMPFLIE

"The Night Will Soon Be Ending"
Jochen Klepper

Jochen Klepper, whose 100th birth anniversary will arrive in 2003, has been acclaimed as "the most important hymnwriter since Paul Gerhardt." High praise indeed for one whose name is scarcely known outside his native land! "The Night Will Soon Be Ending" is one of 29 texts published in 1933 under the title, Kyrie: geistliche Lieder. His work, fine in poetic quality and profound in theological substance, has only within the last decade begun to appear in any significant way in German hymnals.

The invitation to translate the present text came from Joseph Hertl, a member of the editorial committee for the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod's Hymnal Supplement 98. I am indebted to his unpublished paper, "The Hymns of Jochen Klepper," for the information in the brief biographical sketch that follows.

Klepper was born into a Lutheran parsonage in what was then the German territory of Silesia. In 1922, he began theological studies at the University of Erlangen. To help support his family after his father's death, he left a doctoral program in church history and entered upon a career in journalism. He also wrote religious poetry and novels, the best known of which was entitled Der Vater.

Hitler's rise to power threw Klepper's life into turmoil. Already married to a Jewish widow who had brought with her two daughters, Klepper lived in constant fear for the safety of his family. Efforts to leave Germany were unsuccessful. Finally, in 1942, like the composer Hugo Distler, Klepper, his wife and one stepdaughter chose suicide as their means of escape from a homeland that had become an unbearable prison.

"The Night Will Soon Be Ending," written while darkness was descending over Germany, lies on the borderline between Advent and Christmas. The opening lines, with their echo of Romans 13:12: "... the night is far gone, the day is near," place us in the company of the generations who have waited for the coming of the Messiah. We are among those who, living "in a land of deep darkness" (Is. 9:2), cry out for the light. The first stanza ends with the appearance in the eastern sky of "God's radiant Star," heralding the dawn.

Stanzas two and three draw us closer to that moment in history when "the Word became flesh and pitched its tent among us" (Jn. 1:14). The appearance of the Morning Star signals the birth of a child. But this child is like, yet unlike any other child—one who will bear on his shoulders the weight of the world's guilt and will bring to all humanity the reconciling power of God's grace. We are invited, therefore, to run with the shepherds to Bethlehem "where God's salvation glows in a stable's light."

Stanza three reminds us, if we need such a reminder, that God's light always shines in darkness. Klepper knew in his own tragic experience how "madness all around us may increase" and "rob our hearts of peace." Yet, the light that dawned upon the world in Christ's coming is a "Star that pierces the night" and which "no darkness can overcome" (Jn. 1:5).

Another Johannine theme is touched upon in stanza four, namely, that though "light has come into the world, [we love] darkness rather than light" (Jn. 8:19) and turn away from its exposure of our sins. But just as light can never be conquered by darkness, so grace is stronger than guilt. God seeks and claims us, wherever we flee. Klepper affirms with St. Augustine: "Nothing is far to God."

The question inevitably arises, "With such a powerful affirmation of faith, how could Klepper not find strength to endure even the terrible night of Nazi persecution?" It's finally a question no human can or should answer. One can only say that, though surrounding darkness can never conquer the Light, the circumstances of our lives can overwhelm our fragile faith, even as we proclaim God's faithfulness.

In Hymnal Supplement 98, "The Night Will Soon Be Ending" is set to LLANGILLOFAN. The hymn was originally sung to a marvelous tune written especially for it by Johannes Petzold. Those interested will find it on page 61 of the "Handbook" of Hymnal Supplement 98.

Herman G. Stuempfle lives in retirement in Gettysburg, PA, as President Emeritus of Lutheran Theological Seminary. His hymns have been published by The Hymn Society, G.I.A., Fortress Press, Chantry Press, and Stainer & Bell.
The Night Will Soon Be Ending

1 The night will soon be ending; the dawn can not be far.
    Let songs of praise ascend, and soon bring morning bright.
    So run where God’s salvation leads, and sin in all its sadness end.

2 The One whom angels rota-tion will bring their light.
    Bears all our sins to serve. Our hearts of peace;
    And sing in all its gladness, for the Morning Star shall rise.

3 The earth in sure rotation Will
    Now greet the Morning Star!
    A round as may increase.

4 Yet nights will bring their dawn, a child, to serve; 
    Thus God, the judge of mad-ness, to the world.
    All you whom dark-ness fright-ens With
    Whose

5 God dwells with us in darkness
    And spreads His light abroad;
    But we resist the brightness
    And turn away from God.

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