

Advent 1 ~ DECEMBER 2, 2007

Isaiah 2: 1-5; Psalm 122; **Romans 13: 11-14**; Matthew 24: 36-44

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. [NRSV]

“Seriously, it’s time to wake up!”

The scripture lessons for beginning the season of Advent call us to make peace and to live peaceably – living towards an end known only to God. In remembering and celebrating the birth of Jesus, we are invited to worship the One who was welcomed as the sign of God’s peace on earth, and who will return to gather up all things into that peace. Each of the readings turns us toward the future without neglecting the present. I plan to look at Paul’s message to the Romans about how the impending future propels them – propels us – into Christian living today. Hope for the future recreates the present.

In our house we are all up until midnight most days – often later. We are night owls, I suppose, so sometimes getting up in the morning is a challenge. Both Tristan and Ian have alarm clocks as do Steve and I. Not only that we have two dogs that want out at a respectable time. Often it is Tristan’s alarm that wakes me – from downstairs, through several closed doors the sounds travels and pierces my sleep. If I get up and go downstairs I can walk right up to either of my children and shake their shoulder to wake them – it has more power than both alarms put together. “Seriously,” I tell them, “it’s time to wake up! People down the street can hear those alarms!”

Despite all this, according to Paul, as Christians we are all “morning people.” The time is just before dawn, the sky is brightening, the alarm is ringing, and day is at hand. It is time to rouse our minds from slumber, to be alert to what God is doing in the world, and to live in accordance with God’s coming salvation.

Paul is concerned about the way the Romans relate to one another. This wake up call comes in the midst of teaching about mutual love and acceptance in the community of faith. In particular he emphasizes love as the basis for relationships and has, in preceding verses, alluded to the fact that where such love exists all that matters in the law is fulfilled. Paul reminds his hearers of their common hope in the clear and revealing light of God’s coming salvation – the approaching day.

The images of waking up from sleep or coming from death to life or from darkness to light and of changing one’s clothes are well-known and easy to relate to. They express major change, re-orientation, repentance, but with a strong sense that one

is turning to something which is far better than what is left behind. Paul can expect the Romans to warm to his message and approve because it sounds familiar and expresses values they share. Paul wants to soften people up, to prepare them, for the real message. That real message is about taking love seriously.

I wondered when I read Isaiah's announcement about weapons being transformed into tools and the end of war, I wondered if we would be able to take it seriously. I have no sword, I thought, nothing to beat into useful submission. I don't carry a spear and wouldn't know the first thing about engaging in battle. Does this passage have any words for me? And what about Paul's words to the Romans... how do we take seriously exhortations against wild living when it is a struggle for some of us to get up and get dressed each day? What does it mean to take love seriously?

Paul's urgings not to engage in immorality of various kinds are sincere ones that express concerns Paul shares with Christians and Jews of his time. They targeted the evils of drunkenness and sexual immorality in the pagan world. But notice that the list ends with jealousy and quarrelsome behaviour – what my mother, and another translation I read call "bickering". That is much closer to home for the Romans, and for us. It underlies what Paul is most worried about.

Amidst the bitter divisions eroding our churches today, both local and global, Paul's words bring much needed perspective. In the wonderfully countercultural season of Advent, he gives us a way to name the present situation – it is still dark, still night. We still indulge in quarreling and jealousy. Paul intends to give us *night vision* to see and name this division – this bickering – as *darkness*.

How well is your night vision working? Sometimes mine is too acute – I see and hear things I wish I did not. I hear someone in a congregation speak rudely to someone else because their favorite seat is not available. I perceive grumbling about announcements that take too long despite their value. I see mean-spirited glances at noisy, fidgety children and youth. I notice that someone is told not to move to the music or clap or shout, "amen!" as the spirit moves them because, "We don't do that here." I wonder at someone being criticized for speaking from the pulpit rather than the lectern as if our Lord Jesus Christ would care about such petty things. Sometimes these dark words and bitter comments feel like the swords and spears of violence that we are called to set aside as we walk in the light of the Lord.

Paul's understanding of living flowed not from commandments or rules, but from the love which he saw expressed in Christ. What would our present community be if our living flowed from love – if we allowed the promises of God to transform our lives today? Seriously, it's time to wake up!

When we wake up, we get dressed. Paul tells us what to wear: *put on the armor of light – put on the Lord Jesus Christ...* The image tells us that we're in the middle of conflict; instead of fighting each other, we need to unite against a common enemy – not a foe of flesh and blood but the destructive powers that enslave and divide us. Enemies like a history of mistrust and injustice, addictions, thirst for revenge, prejudice, fear, greed, or just feeling entitled to our own way. Paul calls these the works of darkness, and identifies them with the desires of the flesh. It is often the petty manifestations of these powers that erode our fellowship and our witness.

Paul sees life in the spirit as something active and expressive of compassion. He sees it as affecting the way we live together. It is focused on relationships and caring – taking love seriously.

We are the body of Christ. It is Christ's being of love which needs to encompass us and from which will flow loving behaviour. Paul's listeners will surely agree that they should not be giving reign to selfish human lusts. Some of the Romans, like some of us, will think especially of sexual immorality when we hear this text because it was and is such a common theme. But that is only half Paul's intent – he goes on to expose that selfish human desire has a very respectable way of tearing communities apart when people stop treating each other as people and that this happens within the community of the faithful. Paul's concern is to see compassion working itself out in all that we do and not in narrow-minded strife. We don't live for ourselves – love is bigger than all our familiar observances – bigger than all the forms and rules with which we have become comfortable.

This extraordinary text tells us what it means to be *morning people* in the darkness before the dawn. We are given night vision to name the ways we and our world are still in darkness – to see the sure hope of God's salvation. We are summoned to battle, not with one another, but with the forces of destruction that enslave and divide humanity through hatred and fear. We *put on* Christ, living the life given to us in baptism and sharing his destiny, just as in the incarnation Christ took human flesh and lived among us. We live out our hope by welcoming and embracing one another as Christ has embraced each one of us. **Amen.**



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