

“Watch: The day is near”

Isaiah 2:1-5; Romans 13:11-14; (November 27, 2022)

As children growing up, there are things you do to a little brother which, later in life, you may come to regret. I *do* bear the guilt of some of those things.

Sometimes, what you do to a brother is neither good nor bad, but falls into the category of *experimentation*. Younger siblings afford a great opportunity to try new things, just to see how they work.

And so I found myself, one day, standing in front of my brother with a watch on a string ... Swinging it back and forth in front of him. Telling him to concentrate. And incanting these words with a foreign accent: “You are getting sleepy, very sleepy.”

Nothing seemed to be happening. So I told him he wasn’t concentrating hard enough. After all, this is how it worked on television. “Aren’t you sleepy *yet*?” I asked. If I could hypnotize my brother, I thought, I could plant *all kinds* of suggestions in his mind. But he stubbornly resisted my amateur powers of control and manipulation.



I’m thinking this may not be the best way to introduce a sermon. By suggesting you may be getting sleepy! Or that I may be trying to manipulate you.



So – snap out of that! It’s time to wake up! That’s what Paul says, in our reading from Romans. “The hour has come for you to wake from your slumber, because salvation’s near!”

That’s the message of Advent. Watch! Something’s happening. Someone’s coming! Get ready for it. The time is near, it will happen very soon. Are you ready? Don’t be sleeping now. No, whatever you do, don’t fall asleep. You have to be awake!



Our scripture readings speak of *newness* coming into our world.

Isaiah envisioned a time when all the nations of the earth would stream to God's holy mountain, the place of God's dwelling. They'll come to learn God's word and walk in God's way.

They'll beat their weapons of war into tools of production – swords into ploughshares, spears into pruning hooks. They'll learn a better, more peaceful way of living: God's way of justice and shalom.

The apostle Paul said the night is almost over. So put away the deeds of darkness. Put on the armour of light. And clothe yourselves with Christ. Wake up, he says, and learn to live in God's kingdom way.



You know the problem of preaching this message of Advent hope? It runs up against a world-view that doesn't allow for divine interventions.



Many today imagine the world as a closed system. A little mechanical enclosure, with its own set of laws and procedures. A thing unto itself. There's a kind of a *predictability* in it. The sun rises every day, and sets at night, and does so according to a certain schedule. So we can go to sleep.

But Christians claim that there is a divine presence embedded in the very fabric of creation. A presence that may appear *unexpectedly*, and that changes things. Christians say that *God made* the world, and *loves* the world and, listen to this: *participates in* the world!

This is what the Christmas message of incarnation is all about: God coming to live among us. God being *inseparably* and forever joined to God's creation. The divine Word became human flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.



Something *big* is happening in this season of Advent. Something big and hopeful that will change the world. And potentially change each and every one of our lives. But what kind of change?



In this Advent season, our theme is *restoration*. It's about the work of God who restores us. Who pieces together that which is broken. Who reconciles our divisions. Who causes new life to spring up.

Like this picture we're using on our bulletin. There is a clearing in the foreground of the forest. Maybe the trees there have been harvested for timber. Or maybe they've been damaged by disease.

But look – there is new life shooting up from the forest floor! See the sun streaming through the trees, lighting up the seedlings? There

is green and growing life filling in the empty spaces. The bareness of a logged out section of land is being restored.

It's a sign of hope. And a sure sign of God's activity. Can you see this in *your* life? Can you watch for signs of renewal in the midst of our human decay?



When we speak about hope in the church, we're *not* just talking about a pleasant optimism, that conveniently ignores the realities of sin and death.

Jim Wallis wrote in Sojourners Magazine: “[Hope] is the conscious decision to see the world in a *different way* than most others see it ... to *look* through the eyes of faith ... to know that the present reality will *not* have the last word ... to know that *God* rules.”¹

When we come to church and light a candle on the advent wreath, we do it as an act of *resistance* to the powers of darkness, and a declaration of *loyalty* to God who is Lord of all. And who crept silently, subversively, almost secretly, into the world in Jesus.



He slips in like a thief in the night. When most of us are asleep. Or maybe *hypnotized*, unaware of what is really happening. Our attention is so captivated by other things, and perhaps even controlled by them, that we become distracted. Our eyes glaze over. We don't notice the presence of God.

There's a phrase that's bandied about in some circles these days about “wokism” and being “woke”. And depending on your political point of view, that can be either a good thing or a bad thing. The term originated in the African-American community and pointed to an awareness of racial prejudice. But since then it's been expanded to apply to a multitude of things.

Woke?

Will you mind if I apply it something different again? I want us to be woke to God! Woke from our sleep, from our dim-wittedness blindness. Woke to Jesus, who came to us once as a little child. Will come to us again, at the end of all things. And comes to us, each and every day, in small and almost hidden ways that may go unnoticed.

But not if we follow our scripture's advice to rouse from our slumber. “For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers.” It's nearer all the time. The good work that God began in our lives is drawing closer to completion. The day of God's triumph is at hand.



These scriptures strike a note of urgency. “Wake up!” There's not a moment to lose. *Pray* for God's new world. And *live* as though that new world were *already here*. Beat your swords into ploughshares and your spears into pruning hooks. Let *God's future* shape your present.

¹ Source unknown.

Peter Kuzmic, a Croatian scholar, says: “Hope is the ability to hear the music of the future: faith is having the courage to dance to it today.”² Are you dancing? Put aside the deeds of darkness, put on the armour of light. *Clothe* yourselves with Christ.

That’s a lovely image, isn’t it? Wear Christ like a garment. Clothe yourself in his way of life. Become as little Christs, following in his footsteps, living in his way.

We often speak of having Christ dwell within our hearts. We invite him into our lives, asking him to make his home there. This *inner* transformation is crucial.



But flowing from it comes an *outer* transformation, that is equally crucial. One that shapes our living each day. “Let us lay aside the works of darkness,” says Paul, “and put on the armour of light.”

Dress as soldiers. But not ones that destroy. “Put on the breastplate of *faith and love*, and for a helmet the *hope* of salvation.” (1 Thess. 5:8) There’s that word “hope” again. We live in hope of God’s new day. We live it inwardly. And we live it outwardly. By faith, we have the courage to dance God’s kingdom way.

Frederick Buechner writes: “For Christians, hope is ultimately hope in Christ. The hope that he *really is* what for centuries we have been claiming he is. The hope that despite the fact that sin and death still rule the world, he somehow *conquered* them. The hope that in him and through him all of *us* stand a chance of somehow conquering them too. The hope that at some unforeseeable time and in some unimaginable way he will return with healing in his wings.”³

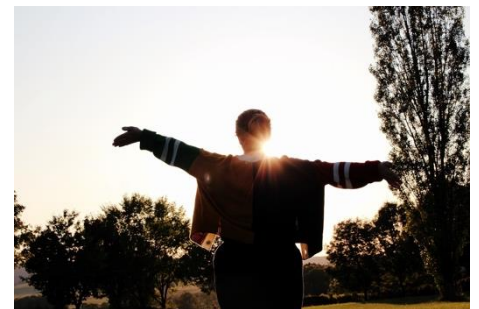


Keep watch. Always be on the lookout for God’s kingdom breaking in. Those glimpses of God’s glory in the ordinary, every day moments of our lives. Watch for what is Spirit-filled and God-infused.

I’d like to close with a little bit of poetry. Every morning, in these dark winter months, Lindsay and I light a candle, pour a cup of coffee. And then she reads me a poem. There is a line from one of these poems, by Mary Oliver, that talks about watching, looking, waiting, seeing.

“I look,” she writes,
“morning to night I am never done with looking.
Looking I mean not just standing around, but standing around
as though with your arms open.
And thinking: maybe something will come ...”⁴

It’s that stance of *openness*, arms stretched wide, ready to welcome the coming day – that’s the stance we need to have in Advent.



² Fred Demaray, Midrash, February 23, 2008.

³ Frederick Buechner, “Hope,” in *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC*, ©1973, 1993 by Frederick Buechner. Published by HarperSanFrancisco, p.47.

⁴ Mary Oliver, “Where Does the Temple Begin, Where Does It End?” from *Why I Wake Early: New Poems* by Mary Oliver, © 2004 by Mary Oliver, Published by Beacon Press, Boston, p.8.

Wake from your sleep. Snap out of your trance. Open your arms to what is coming. Watch for the gift of our loving God. Amen.