

One lighted candle on the Advent Wreath. Today is the beginning of Advent. And the beginning of Advent is always the beginning of the New Church year. So, Happy New Year.

Advent is a word that means, "coming." Thus, the season of Advent is a time of preparation for the coming of Jesus Christ. Actually, Advent is a time of double preparation. We have two major themes in our scripture lessons during the season of Advent.

#1 We prepare for the celebration of the first advent, the first coming of Jesus Christ as a baby in a manger. This first Advent theme is one we readily latch onto this time of year. Getting ready for Christmas. This is a meaning our secular culture latches onto as well. Shopping. Decorating. Partying. And that's all well and good.

But there's also Advent theme #2. And this is one we don't like to deal with. Yet it's vitally important that we do so. Our second Advent theme is preparing for Jesus' second advent, his Second Coming, his return in glory to judge the living and the dead. And this second Advent theme is one we often try to ignore.

So this morning on the first Sunday of Advent, I want to focus on this second Advent theme. I want to explore the Advent message from Jesus in our Gospel lesson this morning: "Keep awake. Be ready. I'm coming at an unexpected hour."

But how do we do that? What does that mean in our day to day lives? What does it mean to be awake? What does it mean to be ready for Jesus' return? To answer that, I want to turn to our Epistle lesson from Romans ch13. Paul tells us what it really means to get serious about living the Christian life.

In the preceding section of Romans, Paul talks about loving your neighbor as yourself. That's always good advice. But then he picks up with our reading this morning. "Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep."¹

First of all, to live the Christian life, Paul is saying, you've got to know what time it is. You've all probably had the experience of lying comfortably in bed, and then sleepily looking at your clock. The you realize, "AAGH. I've overslept. I'm late. I've got to get going." And then the morning becomes a frantic 'flight of the bumblebee' rush as you scramble to get ready and get out the door.

That is not the way to live the Christian life: 'The day has begun but I haven't.' Instead, when it's time to wake up, wake up.

We also need to be careful not to go through our Christian lives like we're on groggy auto pilot. Renee and I have learned not to try to have meaningful conversations at 10:00 at night, because she's not a night owl like I am. After 10:00 pm, she's on groggy auto pilot. {{Oh yeah, sure, whatever.}}

¹ Rom 13:11

We also know not to try to have meaningful conversations before 8:00 in the morning because I'm not a morning person. In the morning, I'm on groggy auto pilot {{Oh yeah, sure, whatever.}}

That's not the way to live as Christians. Wake up! Get some spiritual caffeine in your system. Do some spiritual deep knee bends. Don't go through life in a daze.

That's one of the great dangers for us. It is possible to go through our Christian lives on groggy auto pilot. We can also go through our worship on groggy auto pilot.

But living the Christian life is much more than showing up on church Sunday mornings and going through the motions. It is a matter of trying to love God with all our being, all our heart, all our soul, all our mind. Being asleep is no good. Being groggy is not much better. 'Wake up!' Romans is telling us.

Then Paul continues, "For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers."²

This is also important for us to hear. Because we often don't worry about Jesus' return. After all, it's been 2,000 years, and Jesus hasn't come back yet.

So, we act as if it's no big deal. Jesus' return? Who knows? It may be tomorrow. It may be next year. It may be decades or centuries from now. We don't know the exact time. So, we tend to lackadaisical about the Second Coming. This is especially the case for mainline Christians. When it comes to thinking about the Second Coming, Jesus' Second Advent, we tend to blow it off.

In a lot of ways, we Christians are often like the people in Southern California who live along the San Andreas Fault. "Well, the big earthquake hasn't happened yet. So, there's nothing to worry about."

Well, the reality is, each day that passes does not decrease the likelihood of "The Big One." In fact, the chances go up. Each day that passes along the San Andreas fault brings the people there one day closer to the inevitable and certain next earthquake.

That's the way it is with the Second Coming. Each day, each year that passes brings us that much closer to Jesus' Second Coming, his second Advent.

And even if it's not in our lifetimes, our own lives will end, and we will meet Jesus face to face. Every day we're one day closer.

"Salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers." God's new dawn is about to come. Look forward to it with joyful anticipation. Don't blow it off.

² Rom 13:11

Paul continues: "The night is far gone, the day is near."³

It's a marvelous image for us, especially during December, when the nights are dark and long. A new light is coming. The night is almost gone. The new dawn of Jesus Christ is near. So wake up from your old life.

Paul continues:

"Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light."⁴

It's a natural image. When you get up, you need to get dressed. If you're a Christian getting up in the darkness, you need to get dressed in God's armor of light.

The new day of Jesus Christ has not dawned quite yet. The forces of darkness still operate in our world. So, in the midst of evil and darkness, you need protection. You need armor of light.

Elsewhere, in Ephesians, Paul describes this armor. Its purpose is to help a Christian stand against the cosmic powers of darkness. And he talks about each piece of armor in detail. The full suit of armor is made up of righteousness, truth, faith, salvation, peace, and the Word of God.

In the midst of darkness, we need to put on all these things. That's what it'll take for us to be awake, dressed, and ready for action. Put on God's armor of light now, even in the midst of darkness.

Paul then says, "Let us live honorably as in the day."⁵

In the midst of darkness, live "as in the day." Live as God would have you live. Don't live in the old way. Don't be trapped in the darkness of your old life. Start to live a life in the light now, even in the midst of darkness.

Think of a New Year's Eve party. When do you start celebrating the New Year? Do you walk into the party right at the stroke of midnight when the New Year actually begins? No. You start earlier. You begin to celebrate the New Year in the last few hours of the Old Year. By the time you count down to midnight, you've already been partying for a while.

That's our calling as Christians. Jesus is coming. When he does come, he will usher in a new era. We don't know when that's going to be. But for now, live as if it's New Year's Eve. Start the celebration of the new era, even at the end the old era. Live as people of light, even in the waning darkness.

³ Rom 13:12

⁴ Rom 13:12

⁵ Rom 13:13

Finally, Paul says, "Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires."⁶

In other words, if you're going to claim to be a Christian, then start living like a Christian. Take on Jesus' nature. Act like he would act. Clothe yourself in him. Strive to be more and more like him. Ask, "What would Jesus do?" Then do it.

This is Paul's Advent advice to us: Now is the moment to wake from sleep. Get up. Get dressed. Be ready for action. Put on Christ. Put on the armor of light. Start living differently in the world.

And do it NOW. Don't wait. Put on the armor of light even while it's dark all around you.

Wake up, and be dressed to greet the new dawn. Start celebrating the new era, even as the old era is drawing to a close.

The dawn from on high will break upon you. God's new day is coming. Wake up. Get dressed. And live as people of light.

⁶ Rom 13:14