

Salvation is Near

Romans 13:11-14

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Each year, the lectionary texts on the first Sunday of Advent seem like a kind of a slap in the face.

There is plenty of language of judgment. Things are often presented in blunt and binary terms. There is light and darkness, black and white, and not a lot gray.

The Gospel text, which we did not read, is from Matthew 24, where Jesus urges his followers to be watchful and attentive. It talks about the days of Noah when people were blissfully eating and drinking, living their lives without a clue of the judgment that was coming.

It warns of a time when two will be in the field, one will be taken and one left behind when the Son of Man comes. Jesus urges his followers to be watchful, waiting, and expectant, for the Son of Man will come at an unexpected hour.

The OT reading from Isaiah urges the people of God to walk in the light of the Lord who will ultimately judge between nations.

The Psalm of the day, Psalm 122, speaks of going to the city of the Lord to the “thrones of judgment.”

The language of hope weaves its way through all of this judgment talk. There is the beautiful image of swords into plowshares, and the peace that God promises.

But overall, the texts chosen as for the Sunday we begin our Advent journey can feel like a blast of cold water to the face.

The text from Romans that I chose to focus on this morning continues in this theme.

“Wake up,” Paul says to the church in Rome! “Put aside the deeds of darkness, put on the armour of light. Clothe yourselves with Christ instead of living for selfish gratification. Salvation is near.”

It all sounds so stark, uncompromising, inflexible. Perhaps it conjures up unpleasant memories from your childhood of angry preachers wagging moral fingers and ranting against a specific set of sins to avoid.

We much prefer verses that talk about the grace and mercy and love of God. This all sounds like a rather stern moral lecture and we could do without one of those, thank you very much!

I wonder, though, if we need the occasional wake up call.

Some of you may know that I am back to spending part of my Mondays out at the jail again. I did this before Covid interrupted so many things in our world, but I’m back out there again.

On Monday, I was sitting in a circle of plastic chairs with a group of men who have, in their various ways, hit bottom.

We read a passage from 1 Peter which talked about avoiding sinful desires and living in the light, about having to give an account to the One who will judge the living and the dead.

I can assure you that these verses sound and *feel* very different in the jail than they do in a church sanctuary.

At any rate, as the group was waiting to go back to their cells, a young man struck up a conversation with me. He was maybe in his late 20’s and had been a lively and engaged contributor to our conversation.

He didn’t tell me what he had specifically done to end up where he was, but he spoke of gang involvement, of various things he had done to evade capture, of mistakes made, of a girlfriend and kids outside that he missed very much.

He was going to be out soon, he said, but he hoped to see me next Monday.

And then he said something I didn't expect: "You know, it's been good for me to be in here. I found faith here. This has been a wakeup call for me. I needed it."

*The hour has already come for you to **wake up** from your slumber...*

I told him that I was so glad to hear this. I said a silent prayer for him. I know that wakeup calls in the jail are often hard to translate to the outside world. The cynic would say that "I found Jesus" stories are a dime a dozen in jail.

But are we really so different from the guy I talked to in jail last Monday? Are not our "I found Jesus" moments more likely to come when we're on the bottom than when things are going smoothly.

Those of us who aren't behind bars are no less in need of being awakened to the lives that God has summoned us to.

I think we all need a wakeup call from time to time (even pastors!).

It's easy to sleepwalk through life, putting one foot in front of the other, following rules, moving from task to task to task, perhaps coasting along on the fumes of a faith we embraced once upon a time, but we haven't given a great deal of thought to since.

Our text this morning is meant to jolt us out of our lethargy and to remind us of the astonishing reality that there are traces of God's restoration and redemption all around us, every day—that God is not some remote figure that exists far out there somewhere but is around and within and behind and in front of us every day.

It's also meant to wake us up to the reality that this God has created us for good works—that our lives are meant to align with the future that God is dragging all of creation toward.

Lay aside works of darkness and put on the armour of light!

Live decent and honourable lives. Don't self-medicate with booze or drugs or sex or entertainment or technology or any of the other ways that we evade reality and avoid responsibility for our own lives.

Don't be petty and quarrel in jealousy. Don't scramble after status and affirmation.

Put on the Lord Jesus Christ and his way of being in the world. Emulate his mercy, his forgiveness, his holiness, his love and kindness, his upside-down priorities. Don't make life all about you and your selfish desires.

Wake up!!

And here is the important part for us to remember as another Advent Season dawns.

We seek to do all of these things that Paul is talking about (and others, too) not out of grim duty or because God has some kind of interest in us being miserable or doesn't like to see us having fun or anything like that.

We avoid the things that Paul is talking about because we believe that participating in these things is unworthy of the future to which we have been called and captivated by!

We put on the Lord Jesus Christ because our current clothes don't fit as well as we think they do. We are broken, sinful people whose desires and inclinations are often disordered.

We do all this because Jesus has given us a better target to aim for, a better vision about our purpose and destiny as human beings!

Many people associate the church with rules. Do this. Don't do that. Avoid this. Make sure you do that. Rules, rules, rules...

It seems to me that when the church gives this impression of what the life of faith is about, we have gotten the order wrong.

We have placed "what" before "why."

What if, instead of starting with lists of dos and don't's, we were to say...

We have been given a picture of a God's magnificent future. It is a future of peace and justice for everyone, a vision of love and harmony, and of human beings finally being what we were made to be and to do as God's image bearers, and we can't help but try to do everything we can to make sure our lives match this now!

What if we were to say,

I have been forgiven and redeemed and set free from a life of bondage to selfish and destructive desires and I can't help but reflect this in the choices that I make in daily life!

Our Advent theme is "Restoration is Near." On the First Sunday of Advent, we are reminded that the God who promises to restore all things is also interested in restoring us. Personally. Individually.

We are invited to fully embrace now what we will fully and finally become when Christ comes again.

We are invited to, as one commentator put it,

boldly bring into the light those attitudes and behaviors that are damaging to oneself and the church, trusting God's Spirit to start working new creation in our lives now, even as we await the fullness of this in the future.¹

I'm not sure how carefully you were paying attention during the Scripture reading this morning, but you may have noticed that it kind of felt like joining a conversation mid-stream.

It began with the words: "And do this, understanding the present time..."

The logical question might be, "do what?"

I want to read the words that precede "and do this:

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law.⁹ The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not covet," and **whatever other command there may be**, are summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."¹⁰ Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/first-sunday-of-advent/commentary-on-romans-1311-14-6>

“Love” is the “this” that we are to do, understanding the present time, understanding that salvation is always near.

For the Christian, love is ground zero. Love is the origin and destiny of all of our striving and believing and hoping and doing and longing.

Every command we try to follow, every attempt at self-denial and holiness and purity finds its fulfillment in love.

Love is who God is. Therefore, love is who we are to be as well.

A few years ago, I came across a marvelous quote from the late Michael Spencer who was a prominent theologian and blogger in the early 2000s.

He wrote about as good a summary of the summons to holiness as I have come across, and so I close with his words from a 2009 article called “There is Always a Day Before”:

Live each day as the day that all of the gospel is true. Live this day and be glad in it. Live this day as the day of laying down sin and taking up the glad and good forgiveness of Jesus. Live this day determined to be useful and joyful in Jesus. Live this day in a way that, should all things change tomorrow, you will know that the Lord is your God and this is the day to be satisfied in him.²

Don't sleepwalk through life. Wake up. Salvation is near!

So live expectantly. Live attentively. Live deliberately and thoughtfully. Live lives of generous love and confident hope.

Christ has come. Christ comes to us now. Christ will come again to restore all things.

Amen.



² <https://imonk.blog/2013/03/24/holy-week-there-is-always-a-day-before-imonk-classic/>