

People of the Dawn

Romans 13:11-14 *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.*

Matthew 24:33-43 *Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.*

Every breath we take, every step we make, can be filled with peace, joy, and serenity. We need only to be awake, alive in the present moment. --Thich Nhat Hanh, Peace Is Every Step

In his book Seasons of Celebration, Thomas Merton introduces us to an Advent sermon by Bernard of Clairvaux. Each year I find Bernard's words about Advent very helpful in getting my spiritual bearings. The cultural captivity of Christmas is very confusing and we need all the help we can get to touch the real and deep meaning of it all, and to make this a season of our own spiritual renewal.

"Advent" means "coming" or "arrival." Bernard says there are three advents. The first advent is the coming of Jesus in his earthly life—birth, life, death, resurrection. That is what we remember throughout these days when we celebrate the birth of Jesus. The third advent is the final manifestation of God's kingdom, or what Christians have referred to as the "second coming" of Christ. This is hope for the future because of God's promise of universal peace expressed in Isaiah and embodied in Jesus. But there is the second or middle advent. It has to do with the present moment, our lives here and now where we live in and are led by the living Christ, where we nurture the Christ-life in ourselves and our community, making us a people of Christ's love, peace, and compassion. It is the second advent that usually gets lost in this season.

Advent/Christmas is not a nostalgic trip to Bethlehem, re-living what has already happened. It is not a world denying longing for the hereafter or the conjuring up of fearful images of God's destroying the world. That's not where Paul goes as he writes to the Christians in Rome. He is focused on the present moment. That's where we are to be. The spirituality of Advent is this: what God has already accomplished in Christ—peace with us and the world—will be fulfilled in God's future, and we are to live out of that reality and hope each moment of our lives.

The meaning of the spiritual life is "being awake." "Keep awake," says Jesus, "for no one knows when God will finally bring the kingdom, when all this will happen." It is not ours to try and figure out or dwell on. Ours is to be fully awake. This image of the spiritual life common to other religious traditions and practices. *Every breath we take, writes Thich Nhat Hanh, every step we make, can be filled with peace, joy and serenity. We need only to be awake, alive in the present moment. [Peace Is Every Step]* That's what Paul is talking about, too. It means waking up to what is really real, to life as it truly and deeply is.

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 first became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. These words call us to active hope. Paul is convinced that in Jesus Christ, God began something that is moving toward completion. Regardless of how dismal things may look to us at any given time, beneath it all God is bringing about a renewal and renovation of life. The love, peace, compassion, mercy, regard for those most in need—these are the things that will finally overcome everything else. That is where God is, not in our wars, our greed, our consumerism—those things that cause the destruction of people and the earth itself. Salvation is coming nearer all the time, says Paul. Salvation means "healing," "making whole." It doesn't mean the plucking of our "souls" out of this life and depositing them into the next. It is not individualistic. It is social—Us. It is global—the earth. Salvation is the healing of the whole creation, including us. And it is to be lived out now because of what has already happened in Christ..

When Paul says that *the night is far gone, the day is near*, he is talking about what God has done in Christ and will bring to fullness in God's own time. It is a done deal! Here is where we frequently make a wrong turn in our thinking and living as Jesus' community. We think that everything depends on us. God's kingdom, the full dawning of God's order of things, the realm of peace, justice, compassion—all of this we tend to see as an inspiring vision that we are to accomplish through our efforts alone. We

become over-stressed activists filled with anxiety, guilt, and despair because things around us look so bad and it is up to us to change it all. Not so, says Paul. Yes, we are called to a life of ministry and mission, to give ourselves in the service of God's vision for the world, following Christ who calls us to servanthood, using the gifts God has given us. But there is an all-important difference in how we go about it.

It is not all up to us. We don't carry the burden of the salvation of the world. That is already accomplished in Christ, says Paul. That is "the day" that has already dawned. What God has done in Christ's life, death, and resurrection, is to overcome through suffering love all the enmity and violence, all the hostility and fear. God has knit together what was broken, securely bound to himself what was adrift. And that day that has dawned is moving toward full daylight. We who believe in what God has done in Christ, who have given ourselves to following Christ, living in him, and being his community—we can live as those who know the day has dawned. We live in response to what God has already done and is now doing to bring it all about.

So Paul says we are to live as those who know what time it is—dawn that is moving toward full daylight. That's where the second part of Paul's words come in. We are to live as people of the dawn. It may not feel like dawn to us. It may seem more like the twilight of evening than the dawn of day. But it is the dawn and that's the way we can live, says Paul. We are to *put aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light*. We are to *live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy*. *Instead, writes Paul, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.*

We do not bring on the dawn; it has already happened. We do not bring on the daylight; God is already doing that. Our lives are to be a response to what God has done and is doing. Our lives are to be a reflection of the light of God's dawning new day. We can hear these words speaking to the inward journey and the outward journey of the spiritual life. The inward journey is the life of prayer that keeps us centered in and in touch with Christ in whom God has already made peace with us and the world. When we pray, when we make the time each day to sit in quietness and inner listening, reading of scripture and growing understanding of our own spirits, we are touching that peace of God. We are turning our spirits toward the dawn that has already broken and is moving toward full daylight. This is why the inward journey is so crucial. It helps us to see hate, violence, greed, and spiritual confusion not as the falling of night upon the world but as the shadows and darkness that are fleeing before the new day. It helps us experience God's healing, God's salvation in our own lives, moment to moment.

The outward journey then is the way we make our lives instruments of that new day. It is the way we live out of that inward journey of touching the dawn of God's new day. We order our lives according to that deeper reality. That is why Paul lists the various things the Christians at Rome are to refrain from—reveling, drunkenness, debauchery(whatever that might mean to us!), quarreling with each other and letting jealousy eat up our hearts. These things might sound "old fashioned" to us. But they can mean all the numbing and dulling things around us that conspire to keep us distracted from an inner life rooted in Christ, in God, and an outer life of giving ourselves for the enrichment of life around us. Paul is talking about a disciplined life. Not a life of self-centered piety—trying to be "good" people who don't do this or that—but a life of real meaning and hope that is centered in God's triumphant love for us and the world.

Paul places it all under the umbrella of "putting on the armor of light" and "putting on Christ." We put on Christ in our baptisms. We are already, by God's grace, immersed in that new life. But we continue to work with our lives so that they manifest more and more that new life, in all aspects of our living. We become more aware of each aspect of our lives so that everything shines with the light of God's new day. We bring everything under that light in the ongoing illumination and transformation that is our spiritual journey. The anger. The hurts. The grudges we harbor. The conditions we put on our love for others as well as ourselves. The attachments to this thing or that person that keep us always dissatisfied and wanting more. Putting on the armor of light and Christ himself means for us an ongoing process of putting off the things that keep us in the dark.

Advent is a season for waking up. Waking up to what God has done for us in Christ. Waking up to the light of God's abiding and ever-growing love for us and the world. Waking up to greet the dawn of God's new day that has already dawned and is growing into fullness of day. When that fullness of day will come, we don't know and cannot know, says Jesus. It is enough to know that now is the time, now is the moment to awaken to the Light that has already broken upon the world. Hope arises not from the past or the future but from each present moment where we touch the saving, healing love of God.