

## Advent: Time to Wake Up

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.*

In his book Seasons of Celebration, Thomas Merton introduces us to an Advent sermon by Bernard of Clairvaux. It helps me each year to revisit Merton's essay, to get my spiritual bearings. The cultural and commercial, even religious, distortions of Advent/Christmas distract us from the deeper meanings of the season and keep us from experiencing Advent as a season of real spiritual awakening and deepening.

Bernard says there are three advents. The first advent was the coming of Jesus in his earthly life—birth, life, death, resurrection. The third advent has to do with the future, the ultimate fulfilling of God's purposes for the world, what the early Christian community expected as the return of Christ (the *parousia*). This is hope for the future because of God's promise of and will for *shalom*, universal peace and well being, as expressed in Isaiah's vision and embodied in Jesus' life and teachings.

The second or middle advent is where we are--the present moment, the 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, becoming more and more a people of God's love, peace, and compassion. For our community, the second advent is about our living out our commitments to the journey of faith in its inward and outward dimensions, within a community of faith that supports us on that journey.

Advent/Christmas has to do with remembering the first advent, but is not a nostalgic trip to Bethlehem, as though we are re-living what has already happened. Neither is it a longing for some future that helps us escape from present challenges or difficulties, or joys. The spirituality of Advent is this: what God has accomplished in Jesus—peace with us and the world—is moving toward fulfillment, and we can live out of that reality and hope each moment and day of our lives. Advent is about being fully awake here and now, with our lives open to God's presence and movements in and for us and the world.

Our readings for today call us to stay awake, watch, pay attention. The day of God's realm is near. Let us walk, or live, in its dawning light. It is a call to live fully in the present, wide awake, not distracted. We might miss something. We miss things all the time. We are lost in our thought or memory, or feelings of guilt or anger or regret or fear. We stay attached to the past through the hurts we hold onto or the nostalgia we harbor, and we are not paying attention to what is happening now. Or we are longing for a different life, a different now. Things are hard or painful or dull or whatever, and we conjure up what we think would be a better life, a better world. We start living in that idealized world, the way we want things to be. And the same thing happens. We miss the now. We are dull to what is going on all around us and in us.

A mundane example of how distracted and asleep we often are. When I was in Indianapolis recently, after having dinner one evening with my sisters and brother-in-law, I headed back out to Greenfield, to our daughter's house. I had driven that road for years, know it like the back of my hand. At one point, I enter a roundabout and take the first exit. This time, as I approached the roundabout, I was deep in thought about something or other. Before I knew it, I was totally bewildered and not sure WHERE I was. How did I get on THIS road? With some effort, I shook off my thoughts, re-entered the present moment and place, and realized I had gone around to the second exit out of the circle. Lost in our thoughts, lost in our emotions, lost in our pain or regret or discouragement or whatever it is, we check out of the present, the here and the now. We miss everything that is going on. This is not LIVING! The spiritual life is about living, really being alive, alive to oneself, alive to others, alive to the world around us, alive to God. It is about paying attention. This image of spirituality, by the way, is

shared by 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]*

“Keep awake,” says Jesus, “for no one knows when God will finally bring the kingdom.” It is not ours to try and figure out. We are to be fully awake, alert all the time so that we can perceive God's realm emerging in our own lives, in other people, in the world around us. Paul talks about the same thing. *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 lived out in the present. Paul is convinced that in Jesus, God began something that is moving toward completion. Regardless of how dismal things may seem at any given time, beneath it all God is bringing about a renewal and renovation of life. 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—everything that causes the suffering of people and the earth. Salvation is coming nearer all the time, says Paul. Salvation means “healing”, “making whole”. It doesn't mean plucking our “souls” out of this life and depositing them in the next. It is not individualistic. It is social, communal—Us. It is global—the earth. Salvation is the healing of the whole creation, including us. And it is to be lived out now (second advent) because of what has already happened in Jesus (first advent).

When Paul says that *the night is far gone, the day is near*, he is talking about what God has done in Jesus and will bring to fullness. 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, maybe with God giving us a little help and encouragement! We become over-stressed activists, often driven by anxiety, guilt, or fear. 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 Jesus who calls us to servanthood, using the gifts God has given us. The difference is 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 Jesus, says Paul. That “day” that has already dawned. In Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, God has overcome through suffering love all the enmity and violence, all the hostility and fear. And that day that has dawned is moving toward full daylight. When we commit ourselves to following Jesus, living in him, and being his community, we are in partnership with what God has done, is doing, and will do.

Therefore Paul can write that we are to *lay 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 an expression 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 Jesus in whom God has already made peace with us and the world. When we pray, when we make 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 enables us to see hate, violence, greed, and spiritual confusion not as the falling of night upon the world but as the shadows 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 Jesus, 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 anchored 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.” God has already made us part of the new day, by our faith, by our receiving of the good news of God’s realm dawned and dawning in Jesus. Yet we continue to work with our lives so that they manifest more and more fully that new life. 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 the light of 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 discontent. Putting on the armor of light and Jesus himself means for us an ongoing process of putting off or letting go of 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 Jesus. 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, even when everything looks to us like the deepest night. 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.