

December 1, 2013 / First Sunday of Advent / David L. Edwards

### **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 that helps us get our spiritual bearings. The cultural and commercial, even some 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.

Advent means “arrival” or “coming”, and Bernard says there are three advents. The first advent was Jesus' earthly life—birth, life, death, resurrection. The third advent has to do with the ultimate fulfilling of God's purposes for the world, what the early Christian community expected as the return of Christ(the *parousia*). God promises and wills *shalom*, universal peace and well being for the whole of the creation, as expressed in Isaiah's vision and embodied in Jesus' life and teachings.

The second or middle advent is where we are--the here and now where we live as Jesus' followers and community. For our community, the second advent is about living out our commitments to the journey of faith in its inward and outward dimensions, within a community of commitment and devotion. The spirituality of Advent is this: what God has accomplished in Jesus—peace with us and the world—is moving toward fulfillment, and we are called to live out of that reality and that hope each moment and day of our lives. Advent is about being fully awake to our life in God here and now.

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 are, so much of the time, 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, not seeing or participating in 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. 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.

Kaye and I were on the Amtrak train for New York City a couple of weeks ago. As we got closer to the city, we passed through one city after another: Baltimore, Wilmington, Philadelphia, Trenton, Newark, then in the distance, the skylines of Midtown and Lower Manhattan rising into view. Though I have made that journey many times, it never fails to excite me, as the sights outside the windows multiply, and I try to see each thing. Then I looked around me in the train, and there were people, young and older, their faces in their I-pads or I-phones, their ears plugged with earphones, their eyes shut. Life going on all around them, and they were somewhere else. I was at the city market Saturday morning a week ago, having breakfast. At the table in front of me sat a father and his daughter, about 4 or 5 years old. She was eating and, at the same time, watching everything around her, the way small children do. He was on his I-phone, not responding even when his daughter repeatedly patted him on the arm to get his attention.

Do you know what I now understand? Love is not really about emotions. It is not about having affections for this person or that thing. Love is not, as the apostle Paul said, "giving our bodies to be burned" in some great cause. Love is paying attention. Love is being aware. Love is seeing, really seeing, what and who is around us, as well as what is within us. And if we are doing that, if we are loving in that way, we will gain all the understanding we need to know what to do and what not to do in each situation, with each person. We try to fix people and situations, including ourselves, all the time without understanding, because we have not been aware, because we have not really SEEN.

The opposite of loving, the opposite of living, is distractedness. Lost in our thoughts, our emotions, 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, inside us and outside of us. This is not LIVING! The spiritual life is about living, really being 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 major spiritual traditions. *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 will move 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), and because of the kind of life God wills for the world God created (third advent). Our spiritual work is to wake up to it so we can be part of it.

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! We think that everything depends on us. God’s kingdom, the full dawning of God’s order of things, 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! We become over-stressed activists, 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. The dawning of that day is moving toward full daylight. When we commit ourselves to following Jesus and being his community, we are in partnership with what God has done, is doing, and will do. We are harmonizing our lives with the deepest, essential nature of life.

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, and put on the Lord Jesus Christ*, says Paul. 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 in

understanding of our own spirits, we are touching that peace of God. We lay aside things in ourselves that cause unhappiness not by doing battle with them, not by turning our inner life into a battlefield. We lay them aside by *seeing through* them, understanding why certain ways of acting or thinking or perceiving are based on illusions. When we understand and see through them, we drop them. We lay them aside. It takes inner work and patience with ourselves, but we can do it. In this way, 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 our lives become expressions 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 stand for all the numbing and dulling things that 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 that is rooted in and shaped by God's 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 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 means for us an ongoing process of putting off or laying aside the things that keep us in the dark. When this is happening, we are liberated to give ourselves more freely to the things to which we feel God has called us and the gifts we find that God has given us, that is, the outward journey of service.

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. As we awaken to that Light, we become part of it. Didn't Jesus say just that very thing, in the Sermon on the Mount, when he spoke to the crowd? You are the light of the world.