

Matthew 24:36-44

Romans 13:11-14

November 27, 2022

First Sunday of Advent

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

THIS IS YOUR WAKE-UP CALL

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

When I was a senior at Davidson College, I lived with twelve other guys in Grey House, across Main Street from the college president's house. My roommate, Jay, and I had a room upstairs. We built lofts for our beds so we would have more living space down below. One quarter, Jay had an 8:00 a.m. class, but my first class wasn't until 11:00 a.m. Jay bought one of those old-fashioned alarm clocks with the two big bells on top with the clapper in between. At night, he would set it for an early hour, wind it up, and put it on his desk down below. Of course, when it went off in the morning like a fire alarm, Jay would sleep right through it. Guess who had to climb down and turn it off! Guess who couldn't go back to sleep! Of course, Jay also taught me his childhood morning wake-up song, "Good morning to you! Good morning to you! We're all in our places with bright shining faces! Good morning to you!" Guess how irritating it was to hear that when I was trying to sleep in!

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Of course, when Paul wrote this advice and encouragement to the believers at Rome, he thought Christ’s second Advent could be just around the corner, at any moment, in the twinkling of an eye. But, by the end of the 1st century A.D., just fifty or sixty years after Jesus’s death and resurrection and only twenty or thirty years after Paul wrote to the Roman Christians, there were already scoffers and doubters about the promised return of Christ. 2 Peter 3:3-4, 8-9 says, “First of all you must understand this, that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and indulging their own lusts, and saying, ‘Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!’ . . . But do not ignore this fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.”

That’s what people were saying after just one generation. What about now, 2,000 years later? On the one hand, Paul’s urgent timetable still applies -- Christ’s second Advent could be just around the corner, at any moment, in the twinkling of an eye. Today’s gospel lesson from Matthew says the same thing: “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father . . . Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.” (Matthew 24:36, 44) On the other hand, it has been **2,000 years** and Christ hasn’t returned yet. That can make you wonder if God’s promises are true and if the future holds any hope.

That’s why it is so important for us to hear the Advent message, even while our Christmas preparations are in full swing. Advent looks back to the birth of Jesus and looks ahead to his promised return. Both events come to bear on how we live in the present as faithful followers of Jesus Christ. Here’s how one New Testament scholar expresses the meaning of Paul’s exhortations and the Advent message for you and me in our day-to-day living: “The preacher’s task is to refocus the church on the need to embrace Christ daily, even moment by moment. Otherwise, the powers of darkness and evil either look more and more appealing or become less and less obvious, so that we are seduced by them as if we were half-asleep. The Greek word for sleep is *hypnos*, and while we cannot attribute the notion of being ‘hypnotized’ to Paul himself here, it is

nonetheless true that Christians as well as others can become so accustomed to the normalcy of evil that we live under its spell, as if hypnotized by a power outside ourselves that we cannot discern or dislodge.”¹

Have you seen the bumper sticker that says, “Jesus is coming. Look busy!”? That’s pretty funny, but not very good theology. That bumper sticker thought is really based on fear or guilt or self-interest. It seems to suggest that the only time you need to live the kind of life God calls you to live is when you get some kind of “two-minute warning” before Christ’s return. Instead, Paul encourages the Christian believers in Rome to be busy with God’s work all the time, putting on the armor of light, living honorably as in the day, and putting on the Lord Jesus Christ. Another writer puts it this way: “The fact that the light has already begun to shine, that Christ has already been born, that Christ has already enacted our salvation, should not be ignored in this season. On the contrary! Paul here says that to live properly in this season of dawning light is to ‘put on the Lord Jesus Christ.’ The season between the first and second Advent of Christ is one in which Christ’s advent to the throne at God’s right hand offers us the possibility of living now as creatures of the new creation yet to come. . . So, we wait for Christ’s coming by becoming the Christ people: putting off the deeds that mark the world not subjected to Christ’s reign of peace and justice. We wait for Christ’s coming by becoming that future ahead of his arrival, so that when he arrives he will behold his own as though looking in a mirror. This is why Paul says at the beginning to ‘waken from sleep.’ It is a summons to start faithfully living out the resurrection-life of Christ.”²

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That’s the tension of Advent in a nutshell – the hope for Christ’s return to make things right; the danger of being hypnotized by the “same old, same old” which can blind us to God’s work that needs doing right now; and the difficulty of waiting patiently and faithfully for God’s promises to be fulfilled. What Paul said to the Christians in Rome in the mid-1st-century A.D. – “You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep” – is the message we need to hear again as we begin the

Advent season and light candles each week to remember how the light of Christ throws off the darkness in this world, not just out there in the future someday, but in our lives today.

There’s another wake-up call worth hearing about this morning. Sometime during next few weeks, you might hear J.S. Bach’s *Sleepers Awake* on the radio or TV or CD or at a concert. Bach based his cantata on a hymn written one hundred years earlier by the German Lutheran pastor Philipp Nicolai. Nicolai had just finished his

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In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and in the midst of all of the darkness this world presents as the ultimate reality, we need an Advent wake-up call of hope and trust so we can live faithfully and confidently as God's people. As I read the words of Rev. Nicolai's wake-up call, ask yourself, "How can I be a lamp shining for other people in my Christian walk of faith?"

*"Sleepers, wake!" A voice astounds us,
the shout of rampart-guards surrounds us:
"Awake, Jerusalem, arise!"
Midnight's peace their cry has broken,
Their urgent summons clearly spoken:
"The time has come, O maidens wise!
Rise up, and give us light;
The Bridegroom is in sight. Alleluia!
Your lamps prepare and hasten there,
That you the wedding feast may share."*

*Zion hears the watchman singing;
Her heart with joyful hope is springing,
She wakes and hurries through the night.
Forth he comes, her bridegroom glorious
In strength of grace, in truth victorious:
Her star is risen, her light grows bright.
Now come, most worthy Lord,
God's Son, Incarnate Word, Alleluia!
We follow all and heed your call
To come into the banquet hall.*

Lamb of God, the heavens adore you;

*Let saints and angels sing before you,
As harps and cymbals swell the sound.
Twelve great pearls, the city's portals;
Through them we stream to join the immortals
As we with joy your throne surround.
No eye has known the sight,
No ear heard such delight: Alleluia!
Therefore we sing to greet our King;
For ever let our praises ring.*

Wake up – don't sleep your life away!

Let us pray: Merciful God, cleanse our hearts and minds of all that hinders us from loving you and loving our neighbor, so that our lives radiate faith active in love, as we watch and wait for your breaking into our world once more in the person of Jesus Christ. Amen.

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"Awake, Jerusalem, arise!"
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"The time has come, O maidens wise!
Rise up, and give us light;
The Bridegroom is in sight. Alleluia!
Your lamps prepare and hasten there,
That you the wedding feast may share."*

*Zion hears the watchman singing;
Her heart with joyful hope is springing,
She wakes and hurries through the night.
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In strength of grace, in truth victorious:
Her star is risen, her light grows bright.
Now come, most worthy Lord,
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We follow all and heed your call
To come into the banquet hall.*

Lamb of God, the heavens adore you;

*Let saints and angels sing before you,
As harps and cymbals swell the sound.
Twelve great pearls, the city's portals;
Through them we stream to join the immortals
As we with joy your throne surround.
No eye has known the sight,
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¹Michael J. Gorman, "Romans 13:8-14," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, April 2008 (Volume 62, No. 2), p. 171.

²J. R. Daniel Kirk, "Commentary on Romans 13:11-14," at www.workingpreacher.org.

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Matthew 24:36-44

Romans 13:11-14

November 27, 2022

First Sunday of Advent

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

THIS IS YOUR WAKE-UP CALL

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

When I was a senior at Davidson College, I lived with twelve other guys in Grey House, across Main Street from the college president's house. My roommate, Jay, and I had a room upstairs. We built lofts for our beds so we would have more living space down below. One quarter, Jay had an 8:00 a.m. class, but my first class wasn't until 11:00 a.m. Jay bought one of those old-fashioned alarm clocks with the two big bells on top with the clapper in between. At night, he would set it for an early hour, wind it up, and put it on his desk down below. Of course, when it went off in the morning like a fire alarm, Jay would sleep right through it. Guess who had to climb down and turn it off! Guess who couldn't go back to sleep! Of course, Jay also taught me his childhood morning wake-up song, "Good morning to you! Good morning to you! We're all in our places with bright shining faces! Good morning to you!" Guess how irritating it was to hear that when I was trying to sleep in!

When we first got married, Nancy greeted me one morning with, "Wakey, wakey, eggs and bakey!" I had never heard that one before. Our dog, Holden, has his own wake up call. He tiptoes around to **my** side of the bed and, very quietly but loud enough for me to hear, whimpers a little bit. It is quite effective at 3:45 in the morning! And then there's the old camp song, "Rise and shine and give God the glory, glory! Rise and shine and give God the glory, glory! Rise and shine and (clap) give God the glory, glory! Children of the Lord!"

But, this may be the best wake-up call ever. Some of you who went on the West Virginia Mountain Adventure trips back in the day will remember waking up to this beside Second Creek (play the cow alarm – "Wake up . . . don't sleep your life away!" in a voice that sounds amazingly like Arnold Schwarzenegger).

Before the advent of cell phones and smart phones with their built-in alarm clocks, folks used to request a wake-up call from the hotel's front desk. Apparently, those calls are making a comeback in some hotels that are offering services such as a second call back to make sure you're awake or a knock on the door and a cup of freshly brewed coffee.

The term "wake-up call" has come to mean any kind of event that gets your attention and makes you realize a change is needed. Here are some descriptions of a "wake-up call" – "an alert someone may receive regarding the consequences of negative circumstances or dangerous behavior . . . If something that happens is a wake-up call, it

should make you realize that you need to take action to change a situation . . . a portentous event, report, or situation that brings an issue to immediate attention.”

That certainly sounds like the apostle Paul’s “wake-up call” to the Christian believers in Rome: “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.” (Romans 13:11) You know how tempting it is to reach over and hit the snooze button on that alarm clock. Well, in a sense, that’s what Paul is warning the believers not to do in their daily lives as they wait for the promised return of Jesus Christ. Along with that warning, Paul also gives encouragement about how to live as Christian believers between the first advent of Jesus in Bethlehem and his second advent when God will keep his promise and fulfill his purpose for his people, for the world, and for all creation.

Of course, when Paul wrote this advice and encouragement to the believers at Rome, he thought Christ’s second Advent could be just around the corner, at any moment, in the twinkling of an eye. But, by the end of the 1st century A.D., just fifty or sixty years after Jesus’s death and resurrection and only twenty or thirty years after Paul wrote to the Roman Christians, there were already scoffers and doubters about the promised return of Christ. 2 Peter 3:3-4, 8-9 says, “First of all you must understand this, that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and indulging their own lusts, and saying, ‘Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!’ . . . But do not ignore this fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.”

That’s what people were saying after just one generation. What about now, 2,000 years later? On the one hand, Paul’s urgent timetable still applies -- Christ’s second Advent could be just around the corner, at any moment, in the twinkling of an eye. Today’s gospel lesson from Matthew says the same thing: “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father . . . Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.” (Matthew 24:36, 44) On the other hand, it has been **2,000 years** and Christ hasn’t returned yet. That can make you wonder if God’s promises are true and if the future holds any hope.

That’s why it is so important for us to hear the Advent message, even while our Christmas preparations are in full swing. Advent looks back to the birth of Jesus and looks ahead to his promised return. Both events come to bear on how we live in the present as faithful followers of Jesus Christ. Here’s how one New Testament scholar expresses the meaning of Paul’s exhortations and the Advent message for you and me in our day-to-day living: “The preacher’s task is to refocus the church on the need to embrace Christ daily, even moment by moment. Otherwise, the powers of darkness and evil either look more and more appealing or become less and less obvious, so that we are seduced by them as if we were half-asleep. The Greek word for sleep is *hypnos*, and while we cannot attribute the notion of being ‘hypnotized’ to Paul himself here, it is

nonetheless true that Christians as well as others can become so accustomed to the normalcy of evil that we live under its spell, as if hypnotized by a power outside ourselves that we cannot discern or dislodge.”¹

Have you seen the bumper sticker that says, “Jesus is coming. Look busy!”? That’s pretty funny, but not very good theology. That bumper sticker thought is really based on fear or guilt or self-interest. It seems to suggest that the only time you need to live the kind of life God calls you to live is when you get some kind of “two-minute warning” before Christ’s return. Instead, Paul encourages the Christian believers in Rome to be busy with God’s work all the time, putting on the armor of light, living honorably as in the day, and putting on the Lord Jesus Christ. Another writer puts it this way: “The fact that the light has already begun to shine, that Christ has already been born, that Christ has already enacted our salvation, should not be ignored in this season. On the contrary! Paul here says that to live properly in this season of dawning light is to ‘put on the Lord Jesus Christ.’ The season between the first and second Advent of Christ is one in which Christ’s advent to the throne at God’s right hand offers us the possibility of living now as creatures of the new creation yet to come. . . So, we wait for Christ’s coming by becoming the Christ people: putting off the deeds that mark the world not subjected to Christ’s reign of peace and justice. We wait for Christ’s coming by becoming that future ahead of his arrival, so that when he arrives he will behold his own as though looking in a mirror. This is why Paul says at the beginning to ‘waken from sleep.’ It is a summons to start faithfully living out the resurrection-life of Christ.”²

Time is a funny thing, isn’t it? When I sent worship information to Karla and Vera this week and noted that it was the first Sunday of Advent, Vera replied, “How are we at Advent 1 already?!?!?” along with three emoji faces with shocked looks and eyebrows raised. And yet, two Sunday ago, when Karla and I led an Advent program for the children and youth, I showed them a calendar and said, “Christmas is only six weeks away!” There were audible groans from the kids and one of them said, “That is sooooo long to wait!”

That’s the tension of Advent in a nutshell – the hope for Christ’s return to make things right; the danger of being hypnotized by the “same old, same old” which can blind us to God’s work that needs doing right now; and the difficulty of waiting patiently and faithfully for God’s promises to be fulfilled. What Paul said to the Christians in Rome in the mid-1st-century A.D. – “You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep” – is the message we need to hear again as we begin the

Advent season and light candles each week to remember how the light of Christ throws off the darkness in this world, not just out there in the future someday, but in our lives today.

There’s another wake-up call worth hearing about this morning. Sometime during next few weeks, you might hear J.S. Bach’s *Sleepers Awake* on the radio or TV or CD or at a concert. Bach based his cantata on a hymn written one hundred years earlier by the German Lutheran pastor Philipp Nicolai. Nicolai had just finished his

theological studies and become pastor in the town of Unna, near the German city of Dortmund, when a terrible plague ravaged the town. Almost half of the villagers died. He lived in the parsonage which overlooked the cemetery where he officiated at so many funerals. During this difficult time, Rev. Nicolai wrote a collection of meditations which he called "Mirror of Joy." He wrote in his preface, "Day by day I wrote out my meditations, found myself, thank God, wonderfully well, comforted in heart, joyful in spirit, and truly content; gave to my manuscript the name and title of a Mirror of Joy... to leave behind me (if God should call me from this world) as a token of my peaceful, joyful, Christian departure, or (if God should spare me in health) to comfort other sufferers whom He should also visit with the pestilence." He included two original hymns, one of which he called "Awake, the voice is calling us." As one history of the hymn notes, "Rather than preparing for some new awful thing, the hymn is saying to be prepared for joy by sharing your light. Nicolai's lamp was his faith and his hope for a brighter future, and his hymn was his way of shining that lamp for his congregation."³

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and in the midst of all of the darkness this world presents as the ultimate reality, we need an Advent wake-up call of hope and trust so we can live faithfully and confidently as God's people. As I read the words of Rev. Nicolai's wake-up call, ask yourself, "How can I be a lamp shining for other people in my Christian walk of faith?"

*"Sleepers, wake!" A voice astounds us,
the shout of rampart-guards surrounds us:
"Awake, Jerusalem, arise!"
Midnight's peace their cry has broken,
Their urgent summons clearly spoken:
"The time has come, O maidens wise!
Rise up, and give us light;
The Bridegroom is in sight. Alleluia!
Your lamps prepare and hasten there,
That you the wedding feast may share."*

*Zion hears the watchman singing;
Her heart with joyful hope is springing,
She wakes and hurries through the night.
Forth he comes, her bridegroom glorious
In strength of grace, in truth victorious:
Her star is risen, her light grows bright.
Now come, most worthy Lord,
God's Son, Incarnate Word, Alleluia!
We follow all and heed your call
To come into the banquet hall.*

Lamb of God, the heavens adore you;

*Let saints and angels sing before you,
As harps and cymbals swell the sound.
Twelve great pearls, the city's portals;
Through them we stream to join the immortals
As we with joy your throne surround.
No eye has known the sight,
No ear heard such delight: Alleluia!
Therefore we sing to greet our King;
For ever let our praises ring.*

Wake up – don't sleep your life away!

Let us pray: Merciful God, cleanse our hearts and minds of all that hinders us from loving you and loving our neighbor, so that our lives radiate faith active in love, as we watch and wait for your breaking into our world once more in the person of Jesus Christ. Amen.

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