

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. Let us then walk properly, laying aside the works of darkness and putting on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

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Romans 13:11-14

Advent 1 – November 27, 2016

*are you dressed for the season?*

Roy W. Howard

A week ago I heard someone say, “yesterday I’m in short-sleeves, today I’m shivering in full winter gear.” Such an abrupt change is something like the season of Advent. It comes to us at an odd angle – just when people are gearing up - for better or worse - for holiday shopping and festivities. With its minor keys and somber reminders to be alert and always sober, Advent undermines our normal routines and cultural norms. Like the first storm of winter, it’s a season that one is never quite ready for. And, ironically, readiness is very much what Advent is all about. Readiness for the most outrageous and impossible thing of all: the coming of God into our dark lives. In a fit of frenzy, and good humor, one might cry, I’m just trying to get ready for relatives visiting, cranky ones, too; not to mention the gifts and the cooking. *And you want me to get ready for the coming of God? Oi Vey!*

Indeed. That’s Advent. No one is ever ready for it, anymore than we are ready for storms, or Christmas or, for some of us, even the next day. One does not expect perfection, because perfection is a path to despair. And yet, if we are wise we do what we can with the gifts that God gives us for the living of these days. One of those gifts from God, I believe, is this season of Advent. Yet, like nearly everything in our lives, we are privileged with choice. That is to say we can embrace this season, with all it’s minor music, sobering themes, high vision of light bursting the darkness, our deepest desires come true; or choose to set it aside and carry on with the norms of a culture that include frenzy, escapism, anxious worrying and perfection.

No surprise: I recommend embracing Advent in all its fullness even at the cost of setting aside some cultural norms, that in the end kill your spirit.

Over the next three Sundays, we will focus on a series of practices that go with this beautifully odd season. Waiting, Hoping and Watching are the interlocking themes that

we will lift up in scripture, sermon, song and prayer. I call them disciplines of readiness, and our intent is to draw closer to Christ who draws near to us.

In our text for today, Saint Paul reminds us that time is moving toward a greater purpose than we can see. We cannot know the length of our days nor the time that is allocated to the human race. It's pure hubris to think that we can know all things, including the great consummation of God's hidden purposes. Yet, Paul reminds us that the darkness of this world will give way to light and that day may be sooner than we imagine. Who can know? What we can trust is that God is in all of our days, one-by-one; and all of them have a purpose that is part of a larger mystery of God's own design.

And so we wait, with great expectancy; the expectancy of a child who waits upon Christmas day or the expectancy of a pregnant mother, or the expectancy of a beleaguered people waiting for the last bomb to drop, or the expectancy a patient waiting for the fever to break. Waiting is not something many of us do well. But it may help us to know that Paul is not speaking of a passive waiting. While we are waiting for the dawn of light that consumes the darkness, St. Paul encourages us to cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. And to make unmistakably clear what he is urging, he repeats: put on the Lord Jesus.

What are earth does he mean? I think it is as simple as putting on your clothes in the morning. You don't need a full list of the works of darkness to know what must be stripped away and left on the floor. Speech that demeans another is a deed never to be worn again; behavior that violates the dignity of a human being must be abandoned; thoughts that kindle hatred and undermine the human spirit must go.

The grace for which we pray in our waiting is to put on the Lord Jesus day-by-day. How? Surely this is a conscious act of prayer and practice that is within the reach of each of us. Daily, as you dress in the morning – imagine yourself putting on an armor of light, shielded by the very presence of Christ – as you walk into the day that may well be filled with darkness. This is possible by the grace of God. ***Open your life to this grace. Dress well.***

Last week in the Washington Post, columnist Michael Gerson speaking about the post-election days ahead, reminded us of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words from a prison cell. Advent is a season "in which one **waits, hopes**, does various unessential things, and is completely dependent on the fact that the door of freedom has to be opened from the outside."

For believers, Christmas culminates the remarkable story of a God who searches for us. The only adequate responses are stillness, gratitude and trust.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.