

Wake Up!
Romans 13: 11-14
Matthew 24: 36-44
Jon Frost

Over the last several days, many of us, I'm sure, have enjoyed some time off for Thanksgiving. There's a lot to love about Thanksgiving, but here's what I love - maybe you can relate. I love that there's nowhere to be other than where dinner will be served. That's pretty much the main agenda. Get to where the food is. I also love that my family has gotten to the point where comfy clothes are acceptable attire for Thanksgiving. Really, this is a practical matter because elastic waistbands are crucial to a smooth transition between dinner and dessert. And I love that the night winds down in a turkey and football induced trance where one's body hovers between sleep and wakefulness.

Into that peaceful tranquility of Thanksgiving, the lectionary texts for this first Sunday of Advent issue an abrupt "Wake up!" For as far back as I can remember, I have always hated having the lights suddenly turned on in whatever room I happen to be sleeping. It's so sudden, so cruel. But that's kind of how I felt after reading the texts for today, particularly the gospel text.

I mean, some of us have just started listening to Christmas music, getting into the Spirit of the season, and here comes Jesus in Matthew's Gospel saying, "But about that day and hour no one knows. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming." As if that wasn't ominous enough, he evokes the charming story of Noah and the flood saying the coming of the Son of Man will be kind of like that. Plus there's the business of some people being taken and others left behind. And finally a curious metaphor of a thief in the night, which serves to give one last indication of what Jesus' coming will be like.

So, if we're feeling at least slightly unsettled, that's a good thing because that means that this apocalyptic text is working on us. Apocalypse, meaning "revelation", and apocalyptic texts in the Bible are deliberately provocative and rich in metaphor.

Throughout the history of the church apocalyptic texts have been taken in all kinds of directions, many of which are unhelpful, particularly the ones which try to pinpoint exactly when and how the world will end and exactly who is in and who is out. For our purposes today, it is enough to say that fundamental to apocalyptic literature in the Bible is the urgency in knowing what time it is (in the big sense), and who is the primary agent in the unfolding of God's future.

"Besides this", Paul writes to the Romans, "you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep." "The night is far gone, the day is near." The time

Paul refers to here and elsewhere, is the time between the ages - between the present evil age and the age to come. In Jesus, the powers of the present evil age have been defeated, and his church is called to be a foretaste of the age to come. The decisive battle ensuring victory has been won, but many skirmishes still remain.

We live in the time between the ages. This characterizes the Christian life at all times but it comes into sharp focus in Advent. Episcopal priest and author Fleming Rutledge puts it this way, writing "In a very real sense, the Christian community lives in Advent all the time. It can well be called the Time Between, because the people of God live in the *time between* the first coming of Christ, incognito in the stable in Bethlehem, and his second coming, in glory, to judge the living and the dead...Advent contains within itself the crucial balance of the now and the not-yet that our faith requires."

In Advent, we not only look back to how Jesus came to the world, we also hold out in hope for the future that God will bring when Jesus returns. And so we get ready for that future. We live as people who have caught a glimpse of the glorious new day Christ brings, dispelling all darkness. We live as people defined by the day and not by the night, to borrow Paul's metaphor.

"Let us lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light," he writes, "let us live honorably as in the day." But it isn't just about avoiding the things Paul lists in verse 13 or trying to do the opposite of them. The gospel is never about us proving how good we can be on our own. It is only, as in verse 14, when we put on the Lord Jesus Christ - in other words, when our lives are so closely joined to the life of Christ at work in us by the power of his Spirit, we can't help but live into the glorious light of the day. The flesh, which is the counterpart to the Spirit in Paul's spirituality, is robbed of its power when we put on Christ and more fully live "in Christ," which is how Paul usually sums up this crucial reality.

We live in the Time Between and we put on Christ as we wait for the age to come. We participate, yes, in the work of God's kingdom, but what apocalyptic texts tell us is that God is the primary agent in the unfolding and revealing of God's future. No one knows the day nor the hour, only God the Father. Be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

It is truly an awesome reality to belong to God the creator of all things, and to Jesus Christ who will return to judge the quick and the dead as the creed says. But let us not forget who this judge is. He is the same one who loved sinners and gave his life for them. The one sitting in the judge's seat in the last days is the very one who died on the cross for the sins of the world.

"What comfort does the return of Christ to judge the quick and the dead give you," asks the 52nd question of the Heidelberg Catechism. "That in all affliction and persecution I may await with head held high the very Judge from heaven who has already submitted himself to the judgment of God for me and has removed all curse from me."

Friends, let us wake up and hold our heads high. Christ has come. Christ will come again. Alleluia, amen.

Resources

"Part I: Book of Confessions. Heidelberg Catechism." *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2016.

Rutledge, Fleming. *Advent: the Once and Future Coming of Jesus Christ*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018.