

First Sunday of Advent
November 27, 2016

Isaiah 2:1-5
Romans 13:11-14

Walk in the Light

Each year, right about this time, I enact a ritual that didn't begin with me, but with Ray Kickliter. For many years, Ray was the chair of the Property Committee. Something like 25 years ago he bought two large Christmas wreaths to hang high on the wall of the sanctuary porch. Right after Thanksgiving, Ray would call me up and remind me that it was time to hang the wreaths. He did this because he knew I had an extension ladder long enough to do the job. All that was necessary was to determine who would climb the ladder to hang the wreaths and who would hold the ladder.

Ray was the holder.

The fact that you see those wreaths hanging up this morning is not a testimony to my love of Christmas decorations. It's a testimony to my love of Ray Kickliter. It was an honor to preside at his funeral and it is an honor to hang those confounded wreaths.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. Advent, as you probably know, means "coming," and refers to the "coming" of Jesus Christ. It's not Christ's *first* coming as the child of Bethlehem, but his *second* coming, his coming as the Judge and Redeemer of the whole creation, that is the principle focus of Advent. Advent is, as some have put it, a "mini-Lent," a time for reflection, repentance, and soul-searching.

Advent is a time to take a deep breath, step away from the frenzy of the so-called "Holiday Season," and get our bearings. It's a time to remember that we are called to walk in the light of the Lord.

The Old Testament texts for the season recount the prophets' dreams for a new age, in which God's justice and peace will reign. Thus in today's Old Testament reading, the prophet Isaiah dreams of the day when the "**mountain of the Lord,**" upon which Jerusalem is built, "**shall be raised above the hills,**" and "**all the nations shall stream to it.**"

When that day comes, wars shall end because the Lord "**will judge between the nations and arbitrate for many peoples.**" The instruments of war will be put to use to feed people and all the ranks of all the world's armies will go home to their families: "**They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into**

pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.”¹

How can we hear those words without longing for those very days to come? The prophet shines a beam of light into the darkness of the present age and beckons us to follow the light. **“O house of Jacob, come let us walk in the light of the Lord!”**

The Epistle lesson ratchets up the tension. Christ has already come into the world. He has already died and been raised to new life. Soon he will return to bring in that very day Isaiah dreamt of. “Wake up!” Paul counsels the Christians in Rome. “Be alert!”

“For salvation is nearer now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.”²

None of this going off to a mountaintop to await Christ’s second coming – not for Paul. You won’t find him walking up and down the street with a sign on a stick that says, “The end is near.” Not Paul. No swigs from the poison cool-aid tub for him and his. He wants the Roman Christians to roll up their sleeves and get to work.

Beer busts and all-night binges, reveling and drunkenness – that kind of thing is all right for Kappa Kappa Kappas and the Lamda Nu Thetas or whoever goes in for that kind of thing in ancient Rome. Christians are called to **“live honorably, as in the day,”** not because they’re better than other folks, but because they have **“put on the Lord Jesus Christ.”** His future is shaping their present, and they, too, are called to **“walk in the light.”**

And, just in case we get too precious with our Advent wreaths and our carefully crafted calendars, the Gospel lesson reminds us that the promised day of the Lord’s return is up to God, not us. It will be like a flash flood, like a thief in the night. **“Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”³**

¹ Isaiah 2:1-5

² Romans 13:11

³ Matthew 24:44

These texts offer a different, more urgent agenda for you and me than getting our orders placed with Amazon.com. Being ready for Christmas is not our first priority. Being ready to welcome our Lord is.

Princeton preacher James F. Kay puts it this way.

If the Gospel is good news, it is not because it predicts a bright, shiny future based on our morality or piety. The Gospel is neither a cocoon that insulates us from the sufferings of this present age nor a pair of ear plugs that shuts out the groaning of creation . . . The Gospel is Good News, not because it *predicts* a future based on our good behavior or other present trends; the Gospel is Good News because it *promises* a future based on God's faithfulness to Jesus Christ. ⁴

You and I are called to rejoice in that promised future, even as we go about the work of that future now.

One of the first families to arrive in Tallahassee after Hurricane Katrina was a family from New Orleans. They showed up at the church just as we were trying to get all the congregations in town organized to offer hospitality to the Katrina refugees. We helped the family find a place to live and to get their kids enrolled in school. The husband in the family worked as delivery agent for United Parcel Service in New Orleans. A few weeks after the storm, he showed up at the church office in his brown uniform with a package to deliver. "Remember me?" he said.

I still see him from time to time. Those UPS guys are always in a hurry, but he took the time to say, "We didn't know where else to go when we got here. And so we came to the church and knocked on the door. We figured, there must be someone there who would help."

“. . . You must also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”⁵

Andra and I have some wonderful friends in the church who give our family a precious gift each Christmas. Each year there's an envelope under the tree which tells us that a beehive has been given in our name to a village in Africa through the

⁴ *The Seasons of Grace*, Eerdmann, 1995, p. 7

⁵ Matthew 24:44

Heifer Project International. Another family gives five pounds of nails in our name to Habitat for Humanity, to help build a house for a family in Tallahassee.

I used to question that kind of gift-giving. Aren't people who do that just celebrating their own generosity? Then I realized that's not the point at all. The point is, they're honoring the coming Lord. They're doing the work of his kingdom now, and when he comes, as he surely will, he's going to find those kind of Christmas gifts a lot more useful than the tie that hangs in the back of my closet or the bottle of wine my brother-in-law gives me every year that corresponds precisely to the bottle of wine I give him every year.

Suppose we reduced the dollar amount of our Christmas gift-giving by half, and gave the other half to the victims of recent hurricanes, or to the homeless shelter at the Kearney Center, or the Preschool scholarship fund. Wouldn't that be a better way to honor the coming Lord?

A friend of mine in seminary went out one weekend to preach at a little church in West Virginia. He and his wife spent Saturday night in a huge old farmhouse not far from the church, guests of an elderly farmer and his wife. After an ample supper, the farmer and the young preacher lingered at the kitchen table while the women washed the dishes (This was a 35 years ago.) At 8:30 on the dot the grandfather clock in the hallway chimed once, and the old farmer got up from the table.

"Well," he said. "It's time for me to go to bed. Young man, you and your wife are welcome to anything you want. Just help yourself. And if there's anything you want and can't find, just wake me up, and I'll come back downstairs and teach you how to live without it."

What do we really need to welcome the Lord? What might we live without?

Advent is the perfect time to decide.