

The First Sunday in Advent

Romans 13:11-14: "Always Going Back to Your Beginning"

Nov. 30/Dec. 1, 2019 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

### In Nomine Iesu

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Wake us, faithful Lord Jesus. Wake those who are spiritually dead, that they may repent. Lord, wake them that they may not dream themselves into eternal death. Wake Your faithful people, and give us zeal, courage, and hopefulness in the battle. Let our holiness increase and our progress be apparent in all things. Give us faithfulness to the end, and give us the crown of life. Amen. (Laache, *Book of Family Prayer*, p. 21)

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)*

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*The sermon text for today is taken from the thirteenth chapter of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:*

Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. <sup>(ESV)</sup>

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*These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)*

In Christ Jesus, who through holy Baptism, "called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1Pe. 2:9), dear fellow redeemed:

We all appreciate a good "rags to riches" story. Jesus' story is kind of like that, at least culminating in today's Gospel reading. He went from the son of a poor woman with a manger for a bed to being welcomed into Jerusalem as a King! Of course there's much more to the story. Jesus did not come to Jerusalem for the riches; He did not come for the throne. He came to give up His life for us. "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich" (2Co. 8:9).

Because of what Jesus did, our story is a true "rags to riches" one. Being joined to Him, the rags of our sinfulness are replaced by the robes of His righteousness. Our spiritual bankruptcy has become a spiritual windfall. We are no longer lost in the darkness but walk in His wondrous light. When exactly did all this happen for us? It happened at our Baptism.

In Baptism, everything that Jesus accomplished through His death and resurrection is applied to the sinner. His payment for sin is our payment for sin. His death is our death. His resurrection is our resurrection. His victory is our victory. St. Paul writes: "We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4).

Baptism gives us a “new lease on life” – not just the certainty of eternal life in heaven, but a new life here on earth. We are not today what we started out to be. The waters of Baptism changed us and changed us for the better. But we do not always act like we are. We do not always show by our thoughts, words, and deeds that we are in Christ.

This is why Paul was compelled to write the warning of today’s text. He was writing to the church in Rome, the capital of the Roman Empire. Rome is the place where Paul and Peter are said to have died on the same day when persecution broke out against the Christians. Rome was a lot like the metropolitan areas we visit today. It could boast of impressive buildings, appealing locales, and vibrant commerce. It also offered opportunities for every vice and indulgence a person could imagine.

A pagan culture is a difficult place for a Christian to be, especially for a Christian who once joined the pagans in their sinful activities. When someone becomes a Christian, he is the one who changes. Now he is at odds with the world. Now he walks closer to his Lord but further from his unbelieving neighbors. They notice, and they don’t always like what they see. Many Christians have endured the painful loss of friends and family who do not appreciate their changed values and outlook on life. Many are told that they just aren’t any fun to be around anymore.

This separation is hard for Christians. They struggle not only with the loss of friends, but with the constant coaxing and tugging of old desires. They remember the enjoyment of drug and alcohol abuse, the excitement and pleasure of a sexually promiscuous lifestyle, the egocentric satisfaction of putting self before God and neighbor. Those memories and desires don’t go away just because someone has been baptized. Along with the sinful flesh, the devil and the world don’t stop trying to pull the Christian back into the darkness of unbelief.

So Paul writes that *“the hour has come for you to wake from sleep.”* The time is here for us to open our eyes and recognize the temptations around us. Baptism removes the blindfold. It focuses our eyes on Jesus. With our eyes on Him, everything gets brighter and clearer – both the path to heaven and all the deviant paths that wind toward hell.

Imagine if you were lost in the countryside on a dark night. Looking around, you spot a yard light far in the distance. The closer you get to the light, the more it illuminates the ground. The closer you get, the less you trip and fall, and the more sure you are of your steps. But if you were to walk away from the light, you would have no idea where you were going and what dangers could lie ahead. Looking to Jesus and ever pushing forward to Him, our path ahead brightens and the dark shadows of the world recede. But whenever we look away from Jesus and go in the other direction, the light fades, and we stumble.

Now is not the time to go wandering. *“For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed,”* says Paul. *“The night is far gone; the day is at hand.”* He is reminding us that Jesus’ return is imminent. He could come at any time. This is one of the things we learn in the season of Advent, not only that Jesus has come, but that He will also come again. And when He comes again, all people will be judged by Him. Those who are lost in the darkness will be cast into *“the outer darkness”* of torment in hell (Mat. 8:12). And those who are in the light by faith will enter the eternal light of heaven (Rev. 22:5).

His return in glory is nothing to take lightly. We might be able to fake a Christian confession here, but we can't fake it before God. So each of us must be diligent to *"cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light."* How do we do that? Paul explains that this means walking properly *"as in the daytime."* This is to live according to God's Commandments. It is to live as if everyone is always watching what we do and listening to what we say.

This is a good way to sharpen your conscience: ask yourself if you would do or say a certain thing if your parents were there, or your spouse, or your kids, or your pastor, or a respected member of the congregation. If you would not want to be found sinning in their presence, remember that the Lord Himself knows and sees all things. Nothing is *"hidden from his sight"* (Heb. 4:13).

We don't want to be found behaving like unbelievers, because we are not unbelievers. This is why we watch what we eat and drink, unlike the unbelievers who see little wrong with carousing and drunkenness. This is why we live a *"chaste and decent life"* (Small Catechism, 6<sup>th</sup> Commandment), unlike the unbelievers who engage in sexual immorality and sensuality. This is why we speak kindly to each other, unlike the unbelievers who love to quarrel. This is why we practice contentment and thankfulness, unlike the unbelievers who are full of jealousy.

We are a people set apart by God. He claimed us as His own children in Baptism. He wants us to *"set [our] minds on things that are above"* (Col. 3:2) and not to get too comfortable in the world. But this is not always how we have lived. Sometimes we have done what God commands. Sometimes we have *"cast off the words of darkness."* But other times, we have gladly engaged in the things God condemns.

We know very well how we have sinned. We feel the burden of past wrongs. We have given in to peer pressure and joined the crowd in doing evil. We have even planned out our wickedness step by step before carrying it out. Some of our sins are known to others, and some are known only to ourselves. What does that make us? How will we be judged when Jesus returns?

In his First Letter to the Christians in Corinth, Paul wrote that some of them were guilty of sins like sexual immorality, greed, and drunkenness. *"But,"* he said, *"you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God"* (6:11). The first thing he reminded them is that they were *"washed."* They were baptized.

You are baptized too. In Baptism, you were washed clean of all your sins – not just the ones you had committed before then, but also the ones you would commit later on. In Baptism, you were clothed in the righteousness of Jesus, who lived a perfect life on your behalf. Your Baptism joined you to Jesus, your Savior. Your Baptism into Him is your present status before God and will remain so as long as you believe His Word. Jesus said, *"Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved"* (Mar. 16:16).

Now believing in Jesus means that you acknowledge your sins. It means you recognize that your thoughts, words, and deeds of darkness are the reason Jesus had to die on the cross. If you were not a sinner, Jesus would not have come. But He did come to save you and all people, because all have sinned.

By repenting of sin and trusting in forgiveness through Jesus, you return regularly to your Baptism. This is where you *“put on the armor of light,”* where you *“put on the Lord Jesus Christ.”* *“For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ”* (Gal. 3:27). Baptism is how God set you apart from the world. It was your blessed beginning as a member of the body of Christ and an heir of His kingdom. It was where your rags of sin and death were replaced with the riches of Jesus’ righteousness and eternal life.

And so every day you can gladly and confidently return to your Baptism—**Always Going Back to Your Beginning.** Jesus was there at your Baptism to free you from the kingdom of darkness. He has been with you ever since to heal and strengthen you through His Word and Sacraments. And He is the bright Light that will guide you home to heaven.

*Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.*

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