

Sermon: As Dawn Approaches

November 27, 2022

Isaiah 2:1-5

Romans 13:11-44

by Eric Anderson

Advent is almost the opposite of Thanksgiving. The Thanksgiving holiday is almost entirely about what's taking place here and now. When we acknowledge the things we are grateful for, it's the things that we have. The practice of giving thanks is, in fact, one of the best ways to ground ourselves in the present. Here I am. These are the things that make me grateful. In this moment, I am thankful.

Advent, on the other hand, has the disconcerting characteristic of looking both forward and backward in time – at the same time. We look ahead to the birth of Jesus. Actually, we look ahead to the celebration of the birth of Jesus, since Jesus has already been born. As we do, we look even further backward to the promises and prophecies of a Savior, a Messiah. As we look backward, however, we find in the Scriptures further promises about a return of Jesus, the Savior, the Messiah. We look back to the birth that has already happened and that brings our eyes ahead to the celebration. We look ahead to the celebration and that brings our eyes back to the promises. The promises cast us ahead to the future again because... because...

Not all the promises have been fulfilled.

That's why this passage from Romans resonates with me today. "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..." As a logical statement, that's impossible to contest. Assuming that salvation is something that lies in the future – and that is a basic presumption of Christian faith – each moment we live is, by necessity, closer to the arrival of salvation. Until science fiction becomes science fact, time still moves in one direction. The future comes closer with each tick of the clock.

The onset of salvation, however, with its world of promise, sits uneasily in the world of the present. As Jennifer Vija Pietz writes at Working Preacher, "Currently, the old era of sin and death clashes with the new, eschatological era of divine life and love that has already come into the world through Christ's death and resurrection. Consequently, the forces of sin and death still assail those who belong to Christ, seeking to draw them into behaviors that do not align with their new identities and seek to destroy the community that is Christ's body (verses 13–14)."

One of Christianity's greatest theological challenges can be stated, "Hallelujah! Jesus is born. So what?"

The salvation of this Savior is a curious salvation. First century Messianic theology had a much clearer idea of what a Savior should do. Overthrow the local usurping monarchs. Defeat and eject the occupying imperial troops from the nation. Reform the religious life of the people, starting (as per usual) with the senior leadership in the Temple. In the words of Nat King Cole and Irving Mills, "Straighten up and fly right."

I have some sympathy with Jesus' choice not to do that. There were attempts later on to do precisely that, and they led to disaster. Jerusalem fell. The Temple was destroyed. The contemporary historian Josephus estimated that 1.2 million civilians died in the seven years of the first Jewish-Roman War. And as you might guess from that name, "First Jewish-Roman War," there were two more.

Disaster.

Jesus insisted upon a very different salvation, one that considered more future than people tend to consider. He urged a salvation that would be complete in a future beyond the boundaries of daily concerns, or even earthly concerns. He announced a salvation that could not be brought by war, but also a salvation that would receive the unhappy victims of war into a life that was not preserved, but resurrected.

That makes Christian living a considerable challenge. Jesus asked us to live for a reality that we can dimly describe, can barely comprehend, and that lies beyond what we have experienced. In the meantime, the world goes right along with all its demands and temptations. The holiday season will, I'm sure, extend some opportunities for reveling and drunkenness. Sexual sins damage relationships with the people we hold dear, as do the quarrels and jealousies we engage in.

It's not easy to be a Christian. It's probably easier being green.

This is where we get the challenge of displaying the "So what?" of Jesus' birth.

"...It is important," writes Valerie Nicolet-Anderson at Working Preacher, "to keep our section (Romans 13:11-14) connected to what comes directly before and directly after. What comes directly before (Romans 13:10) reminds us that this short passage is connected to an ethic of love, completely directed towards one's neighbor. Similarly, what comes directly after (Romans 14:1) exhorts Paul's addressees to welcome those they might be tempted to judge because of their weakness of faith."

The "So what" of Jesus is living lovingly as Christians, as people, as communities.

“The night is far gone, the day is near,” wrote the Apostle Paul. If he meant the return of Jesus, two thousand years later I have to say that the Apostle Paul had an odd notion of the nearness of the day. But I don’t think that’s all that he meant. The Advent of Christ had already occurred. It was done. That meant that the possibilities of living lovingly and righteously had... expanded, if you will. I don’t know if it’s easier – I doubt it – or if it’s more supported by the Holy Spirit – Paul would probably say so – but Jesus and Paul and the other early leaders of the Church spoke with the conviction that it was time to make the effort. “Let us live honorably as in the day,” said Paul, not with a guarantee of success, but with a promise of support and approval and of a new life surpassing the old one beyond.

I wish Christian love were as easy as, say, finding a worm in the grass in the morning. It’s not. As G. K. Chesterton wrote, “The Christian faith has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult, and left untried.” This Advent, perhaps our greatest contribution to our faith, to the entire Christian faith, to the world as a whole, would be to try, really try, that Christian love we see in Jesus and which we see much more dimly in ourselves.

If we love and forgive, if we give generously and protect the vulnerable, if we put on the Lord Jesus Christ, well: Who knows what might happen?

Perhaps we would find ourselves blinking in the growing light as dawn approaches.

Amen.