

## RISE AND SHINE

In these last few weeks, I have felt my faith really shaken. Not my faith in God, but primarily my faith in my fellow Americans, faith in my fellow Christians, faith in the reasonableness of extended family, faith in the media that it will not feed false news to the masses, faith in people's ability to be kind, and rational, and see multiple sides of complex issues facing our world, faith in humanity's willingness and ability to truly listen to one another's perspective, faith that our American society, no, faith that our global society is slowly on a trajectory toward greater understanding, mutuality, bilateral awareness of self and one another.

My faith in all these things that I just mentioned provided a really firm foundation from which I function happily every day, it allowed to me to have joy and hope as I move through my work and family life each day. I had no idea how much my sense of inner peace came from a belief in these things, particularly the optimistic faith that hate and fear are fading and love and peace are winning.

Maybe its not our current socio-political crisis that has shaken you recently, but rather health concerns of yourself or a loved one, or troubles on the job or at school, or in relationships, or with finances. Something that had provided a level of security or happiness or comfort that was abruptly taken away. What happens when the things we have our faith in are quickly ripped out from under us? When we lose our faith in these things that we trusted in, doesn't joy quickly fade as well, followed by peace quickly fading as well?

So some healing for me has come actually through preparing this sermon. It has invited me into a little self-reflection: why do I feel like I've been punched in the gut when I wake up every morning? Its invited me to look at Christ through the Scriptures, to be reminded of certain realities that are beyond the realities of this current crisis.

This is the first Sunday of advent. Advent means "coming" and it's the first Sunday of the Church calendar. So, Happy New Year, church family! It's a time when we begin to prepare our hearts, our lives and our homes for the coming of Christ. Every year in our faith, regardless of what's swirling around us, regardless of what is threatening our safety and the safety of our friends, neighbors and colleagues, we are invited to read our lives through the lens of advent, through the lens of Jesus' first coming as a vulnerable Middle Eastern immigrant family, through the lens of welcoming Jesus to come again and dwell among us.

So as we move through advent this year, we do not need to set aside the Nativity in order to focus on the crisis that we are living through. And this advent we do not need to set aside our current crisis and dwell on the spiritual messages of the incarnation. Let us with God's help, set neither aside, but hold onto both the hell of the current crisis that screams for our attention and the Whisper of advent. Let us commit to entering fully into advent this year, despite our lack of Joy, lack of Peace, frustration with fellow Christians, with fellow Americans, with members of our own family. Our Advent theme is "Joy of the Journey" this year, and I confess to feeling much more the "frustration of the Journey" the "Discouragement of the Journey" and the "Cynicism of the Journey" as I prepared

to speak today. But I think the whisper of advent invites us to prepare for Christ in the midst of this current crisis that screams for our constant attention, our cynicism and discouragement. There is no place for forced Joy or false peace on this Advent Journey, we bring our very human selves in the context of our very human political and social reality on this Advent journey.

In fact, it is very fitting that the lectionary readings of the first week of advent are traditionally apocalyptic texts, texts about everything in the social and political and environmental order falling apart. We just heard one portion of Matt 24, but if we had read the whole thing, I can bet you your blood pressure would have risen a little kind of like when you read the news each day in our times. Matthew 24 is Jesus' apocalyptic warning that All the things we rely on socio-politically, environmentally, will be destroyed and damaged and pulled away.

Why do we traditionally read apocalyptic texts as we usher in advent each year? In fact, since advent is the re-setting of the church calendar, the first Sunday of the church year, why begin by painting this scene of all that we rely on hanging in the balance?

Because in the timelessness of God's time, a time which is not linear but eternal, we wait with longing for the eternal 2<sup>nd</sup> coming, or plural 2<sup>nd</sup> coming**S** of Christ our Messiah and God. The eternal now of the current crisis meets the eternal now of Christ coming among us in a manner always surprising. We start the church year and this season of being on the lookout for the coming of Christ that we call advent, with a hope that Christ the Messiah and Lord will

break in, like a thief into the darkness and doubt of OUR time.

If any of your religious upbringing was like mine, these apocalyptic passages and even the movies based on them were used to frighten you into praying the sinner's prayer and "getting saved" so that you wouldn't go to hell if you died tomorrow. And then these passages were used to urge you that the most compassionate and worthwhile thing you could do in your life was to proselytize. In fact, these passages were key in holding up the theology that some of us were raised on. And then these passages were also used to justify disregard for the environment -- because if the end times was near one didn't need to inconvenience oneself with recycling, or decreasing one's carbon footprint in one's business, energy consumption, or transportation practices. Christ was about to create a new heaven and a new earth. Environmental sustainability was for the unbelievers.

But rather than reading this through a linear view of time, where the sinner's prayer is once and for all and so is the "end times", and so is Christ's 2<sup>nd</sup> coming, I believe a more faithful reading is through the timelessness of God's time, waiting for the eternal now of Christ the Messiah's coming into the eternal now of our current crisis. Staying alert for Christ's coming begins to look different in the timelessness of God's time. It's not about ignoring the environment and the physical, embodied world and focusing solely on spiritual things as the only thing that matters. Its realizing that both the end times and the coming of the resurrected Christ is ALL time, is NOW. Perhaps it's not looking to convert the woman next to you grinding at the mill or the man next to you working in the field, but prayerfully seeing

Christ in that person and loving them which may mean standing with them if they are targeted, singled out, taken away by the powers that be in a flash because of their race, religion, or sexuality. As I read the passage these past weeks, I got stuck on that very real and tragic scene that plays out currently- of one of our colleagues being singled out and targeted, perhaps taken away in the midst of daily work. What does it mean to stay alert in our workplaces and neighborhoods? And what does it mean to wait for Christ coming in our current crisis?

I am now going to switch gears and turn now to our Romans passage because I find an answer to these questions there.

I like to buy books that my friends write, and one friend, a theologian Daniel Kirk who used to live here in West Philly with his family, published a book called “Unlocking Romans”, summarizing his doctoral work. Luckily Kirk’s work gives us an important key to understanding our lectionary passage this morning. Kirk convinces me that the key to making sense of the many themes of work, salvation, grace, law, and righteousness in Romans is Christ’s Resurrection, a theme Paul has woven through every chapter of Romans. Kirk argues that Paul’s task in writing Romans to his particular readers is to vindicate a God who made promises that don’t appear to have been fulfilled, to vindicate the martyrs who died for their faith, seemingly in vain, and he vindicates both through fleshing out what the resurrection of Christ really means.

So let’s bring that to our Romans passage for the day, Romans 13:8-14, we are told that Love fulfills and sums up All the commandments. Paul repeats this twice within a

couple of verses: Love is the fulfillment of the requirements of God's law, therefore Paul is emphasizing this, and here lies our focus, Loving one another and loving our neighbor is URGENT. We may have to do lists, for today or this week or a five-year plan of life goals, but Loving one another is urgent. Loving our neighbor is urgent.

When Paul says "wake up from your slumber!" here, he is making a connection to Christ "waking up" in the resurrection. In other words, "Christ is not sleeping and neither should you. Christ has been dead and is resurrected, and so, my friends, are you. You have died to your old way of living, to your cynicism and despair and living for your own comfort. You have been raised with Christ. Therefore, with the help of the resurrected Christ, Rise, and Love your neighbor.

What is it like when you or I are awakened from an actual sleep? Each school day morning I hobble half asleep into my two younger boys' bedrooms, possibly shake them a little, sometimes even pull their blankets off and say, cheerfully, "Rise and Shine!"

If someone were to come into your room and say, "Rise and Shine!" what is your actual experience of waking up? For most it involves a feeling of reluctance and discomfort. My bed is warm, the room is ... not as warm as my bed, so there is physical discomfort in waking from our slumber. There is also emotional or psychological reluctance to waking up: In my sleep, I am all that exists, my dreams may be surreal, but I am the master of them, as my subconscious mind works out my worries, anxieties and wishes. So waking up means I am no longer the center of and master of my world. There is also the social reluctance

to waking from our slumber, for those of us who have some measure of introversion: we have to face other people in the waking world. Some days, many of us can have some reluctance to that. So I think that this “sleep and waking” analogy is the perfect way to illustrate what we are called to do when we are called to Rise and live the love of the resurrected Christ urgently in this real world, instead of living for ourselves, wrapped up in our own dreams, narcissism, and comfort. Matthew tells us to Prepare to be surprised by the manner of Christ’s timeless coming and re-entering our current crisis, but in the meantime Romans urges us: rise with the resurrected Christ and shine his love to your neighbor, now more than ever!

So, my dear friends, people of God, we were dead, but we are resurrected with Christ. So as we welcome in a new church year, Let’s together Rise, Clothe ourselves in Christ; take off the garments of the night. And Shine, Living the love of Christ is more urgent now than it ever was. AMEN

~ Lynn Wetherbee  
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