

December 1, 2019
Rev. Kerry Smith

Romans 13:11-14 Hopeful Joy
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Isaiah 2: 1-5 (CEB)

“God will judge between the nations, and settle disputes of mighty nations. Then they will beat their swords into iron plows and their spears into pruning tools. Nation will not take up sword against nation; they will no longer learn how to make war. Come, house of Jacob, let’s walk by the Lord’s light.”

Romans 13: 11-14 (The Message)

“... make sure that you don’t get so absorbed and exhausted in taking care of all your day-by-day obligations that you lose track of the time and doze off, oblivious to God. The night is about over, dawn is about to break. Be up and awake to what God is doing! God is putting the finishing touches on the salvation work [God] began when we first believed. We can’t afford to waste a minute, must not squander these precious daylight hours in frivolity and indulgence, in sleeping around and dissipation, in bickering and grabbing everything in sight. Get out of bed and get dressed! Don’t loiter and linger, waiting until the very last minute. Dress yourselves in Christ, and be up and about!”

In December, I can feel the weight of time. There will be many days this month that I wish I could slow down the clock or add another day to the week. I might even want to add an entire extra week. Today is December 1, and we know that Christmas is coming. Before it gets here we have four weeks of Advent. Advent is a church word that comes from the Latin word *adventus* which means coming or arrival. Advent used to be a time of fasting and penitence when you would deny yourself like you do in Lent. It doesn’t look like that anymore. Advent now feels like a train that is going full speed ahead and we can’t get out of the way because we are too busy eating all the cookies or buying one more gift.

Time is a funny thing. We spend our days trying to control it. We try to slow it down when life is moving too quickly, when kids are growing up too fast or when a loved one has been diagnosed with a life-threatening disease and we worry about how much time is left. Or we try to speed time up when we are anxious for a hoped for result, when we know someone is about to announce our promotion, when we can’t wait for a change in leadership, or when we are little kids waiting for Grandma or Grandpa to arrive. We are always dealing with time. Time is like running water. It runs through our fingers and we can’t ever grab onto it.

Did you hear how Paul spoke about time in the Romans passage we read? “The night is about over, dawn is about to break. Be up and awake to what God is doing! We can’t afford to waste a minute, must not squander these precious daylight hours in frivolity and indulgence, in sleeping around and dissipation, in bickering and grabbing everything in sight. Get out of bed and get dressed! Don’t loiter and linger, waiting until the very last minute. Dress yourselves in Christ, and be up and about!”

We are running toward December 25 for the birth of Jesus in his first coming, but our scripture is running toward another time, the time in which all is fulfilled and Christ comes again. Most of us don’t like to think about that time, because we are filled with so much information or misinformation about it, speculation that scares us. I remember reading those *Left Behind* books. There are a lot of *Left Behind* books. In high school I remember reading that Jesus would return like a thief in the night (1 Thessalonians 5:2). Matthew 24 talks about the return of Christ and it says, “concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven” I remember very clearly as a high schooler feeling like I had a lot more living to do and I wasn’t ready for Jesus to come back. So, if no one knew the hour and it would be like a thief in the night, then if I thought that Jesus was coming back, then Jesus couldn’t come back because no one is supposed to know. Like I could outsmart Jesus.

Our scripture forces us to stretch our vision beyond December 25 to a promised time we can't predict and don't quite know how to deal with. It is hard to think about a day promised in the future when supposedly swords will be beat into iron plows and nations will no longer be fighting. Maybe it's because everything we hear in the news seems to be the exact opposite. It's hard to keep hoping for peace and tranquility when we are surrounded by chaos.

Today is about hopeful joy, and we know that there is much work to be done, both to get ready for Christmas when we celebrate Jesus coming the first time and to get ready for when Jesus comes the second time. But you know what? Christmas always comes whether we get it all done or not. All we have to do is stay awake and alert for the signs all around us that God is here, that joy is here. To be mindful of the ways that God is moving.

Advent calls us to be aware and watchful for the signs of God in our world. Imagine this December if every time you see a Christmas tree, you think about the connection between heaven and earth and about how creation is a gift from God. If we open ourselves up to see God at work around us, and then we can see hopeful joy.

There is a great book called the Book of Joy that is a conversation between Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama. They share that one of the pillars of joy is perspective. When we open ourselves to a different perspective, it can bring a sense of hope in the midst of despair. It allows joy to creep in no matter what. Opening up to the perspectives of others can shift our fear to compassion, turning spears into pruning tools. As we read what a family asks for on the Christmas angel tree, we are forced to acknowledge that not all kids have the latest in electronics and toys. Some families are just asking for shoes for their kids. This shift in perspective enables us to rediscover our compassion for others. And with that shift comes the joy of giving.

We can't control time as we would like. But we can be watchful, awake and choose life. We can dress ourselves in Christ. This Advent season, may we be more watchful. Writer Barbara Brown Taylor says "every morning when you wake up, decide to live the life God has given you to live right now. Refuse to live yesterday over and over again. Resist the temptation to save your best self for tomorrow. Live a caught-up life, not a put-off life, so that wherever you are, you are ready for God."¹

One of the things that I love about Christmas is Christmas songs. This year we are celebrating the 300th birthday of one of the best-loved hymns in history, Joy to the World. In 1719 Isaac Watts wrote this beautiful song, and we have been singing it ever since. It is a song that brings so much joy, but what do you do when circumstances and current events are not so happy? A friend told me last week happiness is when your face is smiling and joy is when your heart is smiling.

In the midst of this busy time, I know that the biggest gift we can give to anyone who is grieving or going through a difficult time is giving them our time and presence and letting them have the space to tell their story. When we do that, we see how God is a part of their story. I wish you an Advent journey of waking up, of seeing your story as part of God's story, of figuring out how you might help to hasten the coming of the reign of God to this world. The scripture says salvation is near, when we wake up, when we prepare room in our lives for new light, new insight, new hope to enter. May we rediscover our joy and belief in a future full of hope.

¹Barbara Brown Taylor, "On the Clouds of Heaven," *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew*