

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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First Sunday In Advent, December 3, 2023

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 8, 479:1, 609, 446, 449.

Lessons: Isaiah 2:1–5, Ephesians 5:1-16, Matthew 24:37-44.

Sermon Text: Romans 13:11–14

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

When you are sleeping, you don't know what is happening around you. The Apostle Paul warns us that right now is the time to wake up from sleep.

Beginning with the twelfth chapter of Romans, Paul presents practical, real-life encouragement for Christians. He starts that section of this letter this way: *“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”* (Romans 12:1–2, NIV84)

The words immediately before our sermon text tell us that the Law of God is summarized in the rule of love. We read: *“The commandments, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ ‘Do not murder,’ ‘Do not steal,’ ‘Do not covet,’ and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.”* (Romans 13:9–10, NIV84)

Paul then gives some really timely words, considering that we in December of 2023 are really living in the last days, the time immediately before God’s judgement comes upon the world. It seems that Paul is almost shouting at us:

WAKE UP!

- 1. Because we are living in the last days, we are to wake up!**
- 2. We are to put aside the deeds of darkness, and**
- 3. We are to put on the armor of light,**
- 4. Clothing ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ.**

Can we find a stronger encouragement and admonition to be prepared for the end of our life on earth and for judgment day?

Is there any doubt that we are living in the last days? Our sermon text should make that abundantly clear. Paul wrote those words by inspiration of God nearly two thousand years ago and they are even more important today. We are 2000 years closer to God’s Day of Judgment, which could and will come any day now.

I don’t think that I need to detail what horribly wicked things are happening in the world today. We don’t need to read the newspapers or listen to television or radio news very long to realize how terrible things are in the world right now. Scripture gives us all the warning we need. God will come in judgement at any moment.

You should understand the present time well enough to realize that humans are exceedingly wicked. Lawlessness, disregard of traditional ideas of right and wrong, to say nothing of disregard and rejection of the most basic understanding of the Ten Commandments are obvious in the world around us. We see people without regard for other people. People are deciding for themselves what is right and what is wrong and are doing whatever they want to do. People are throwing away standards of morality, ignoring and even mocking what God teaches.

These are the kinds of things that are happening in our world, country, state, and even in our communities right now.

The time has come to wake up. Even more earnestly Paul writes ***“The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber.”*** ***“The hour has come.”*** Not just the time, not just the week, not just the day, but the hour has come to wake up and be alert.

Scripture tells us that you are to wake up from your slumber, from your sleep. And I think you know that when you are sleeping many things can happen. When you are sleeping you don't know what is going on. When you are sleeping you aren't prepared and ready to do much of anything. It sometimes takes a lot to wake up and make you fully alert. Well, this is such a drastic wake-up call.

The Apostle Paul gives a reason: ***“because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.”*** He uses the word our to show that he, too, has his sleepy sinful flesh clinging to him, wanting to keep him in the dark about his salvation through Jesus Christ.

We must wake up right now because we don't know exactly how close our salvation is. Sometimes even in earthly matters we don't realize how close danger really is. For example, we may know that a severe thunderstorm is coming, but don't always realize how close it is.

He tells us that ***“our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.”*** How long has it been since you first came to faith? How long has it been since you were baptized into Christ's kingdom? A few years? Many years? Many, many years?

You know, time just seems to be rolling on, one day after another, one week from Sunday worship to the next, one year after another. And we sort of expect it will continue that way.

Pastors have been told in seminary that they should preach like a dying man to dying men. That's hard to imagine when you are a 25-year-old pastor.

I personally am at an age that when I finish preaching a sermon I can't help wonder if that may be the last sermon I will write or preach. The older you get, the more you realize that each day is one day closer to the day of your death. And the day of your death is God's judgment day.

“The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.” Paul gives us a very graphic picture. ***“The night is nearly over; the day is almost here.”***

If you ever patiently watched a sunrise, you know that minute follows minute and second follows second and suddenly the sun is above the horizon. As we watch the sun peek above the horizon, we recognize how quickly time passes. During the day or during the night, we don't always recognize that quick passing of time even if we are watching the shadow on a sundial or the shadow of a tree pass us by. Time rolls on.

And because there is no pausing, no stopping of time, Paul says ***“let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.”*** That is the picture of throwing aside, throwing off, throwing away all sin, all the deeds of darkness. Throw away from you, cast aside, put off the deeds, the things that happen in darkness. Get rid of them. Perhaps you have experienced getting really dirty when you are working. This picture is like taking off filthy work-clothes when we've been doing some especially dirty or dusty work.

“The night is nearly over; the day is almost here.” Satan and his allies rule the night. He is the prince of darkness, and the day when Christ comes to judge the living and the dead will be the final day of his having any power on the earth. That day is almost here. The sun is ready to peek above the horizon and shine in all its splendor. But the day isn't just a picture of a sunrise and a new day like we experience here on earth. It is the day of glory, when Christ will welcome all who believe into the light of heaven, where there is no darkness.

And because that day of coming into the light is near, we are to daily ***“put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.”*** Paul uses the picture of armor such as a warrior would wear. And he speaks of ***“the armor of light.”***

This is a picture we also see in Ephesians 6, where Paul writes: ***“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the***

breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.” (Ephesians 6:10–18, NIV84)

God’s light doesn’t just brighten our day and make us feel more cheerful. It is armor to protect us – to keep us safe and preserve us from all the fiery darts of the wicked one – Satan and all his allies.

And when we are wearing God’s armor of light we will *“behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy.”* In this short list of sins, Paul begins with visible, outward deeds of wickedness and includes even the sins not readily visible, sins of the heart, like jealousy.

“Behave decently” he says. Let your behavior, your entire lifestyle, everything you do and say and even think show that you are God’s children, not children of the devil.

In this catalog of sins Paul starts with the crude sins people can see and goes on to the sins that start in the heart and may remain in the heart except when they break out into words – words that cause dissensions. That word *“dissensions”*, means differences, strife, quarreling. Dissensions are the kind of differences that break out of our thoughts and become words of differences, particularly unnecessary differences. Remember that the father of lies, Satan, wants to do all he can to tear us away from the love of God, and to separate us from fellow believers, fellow confessors of Christ.

We see this kind of thing popping up when people stray from the pure truth of the Word of God, and have been influenced by ideas of the world, and twist God’s Word to suit their own opinions and justify their actions and their words and their thoughts. How terrible must be God’s judgment waiting especially for those church leaders who reject the truth of God’s Word and make it to say something else than what it says.

“Rather, [Scripture says,] clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.”

Just as when you take off your filthy work-clothes and wash your body and put on clean clothes, so we are to put off all the deeds, words, and thoughts of sin, and remind ourselves that we have been washed clean in the blood of the Lamb Jesus Christ, and put on Jesus Christ. Let him be your clothing! What an interesting picture! Put such thoughts of sin and evil and darkness out of your mind! Get rid of them! Throw them away!

The Advent season is a beginning, a season looking forward to the celebration of the birth of our Savior, and to a new year. So we should daily renew our lives and begin anew to serve God and our fellow men. We are to daily put off the sinful flesh and put on the new man, as we learned from the Scriptures and from Martin Luther. As we remember our baptism, we remember that it means that our Old Adam with his evil deeds and desires should be drowned by daily contrition and repentance, and die, and that day by day a new man should arise, as from the dead, to live in the presence of God in righteousness and purity now and forever. With the help of God the Holy Ghost we have that kind of power.

With the hymnwriter we pray:

“O God the Father, O Jesus Christ, O Holy Ghost, be our Stay, Oh, let us perish never. Cleanse us from our sins, we pray, And grant us life forever. Keep us from the Evil One; Uphold our faith most holy, Grant us to trust Thee solely With humble hearts and lowly. Let us put God's armor on: With all true Christians running Our heavenly race and shunning The devil's wiles and cunning. Amen, Amen, this be done, So sing we, Hallelujah!” Amen. (Adapted from The Lutheran Hymnal 247)