



'Celebrate Messiah: Plan Diligently'

First Sunday in Advent
8:30 & 10:45 am, November 27, 2016
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

[Isaiah 2:1-5](#); [Romans 13:11-14](#); [Matthew 24:36-44](#)

Let's pray: May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Turkey gravy is my nemesis. But since I am assigned the task of hosting our extended family gathering on Thanksgiving, I have to face the turkey gravy head-on. When hosting 14 people for Thanksgiving dinner, there are things you have to do in order to pull it off, and eat at the time you promised. So I enlist Jenny, my sister-in-law, to mash the potatoes. My husband Randy carves the turkey. My mother works on the sweet potatoes, while my sister-in-law Jessica puts relishes in little bowls. My father-in-law and brother-in-law set up the extra tables. My kids and their cousins move food dishes to those tables and pour drinks. It's a well choreographed enterprise.

But ultimately it's the turkey gravy that determines the actual time we eat. If this were a pork roast, gravy would be a snap. Thickens the moment you pour in the flour water. Not so with turkey gravy. You pour the flour water into the broth, you stir, you cook, you stir, you pour in more flour water, YOU SEE LUMPS, you stir....and then it slowly thickens.

Meanwhile, the kids, who for some unexplained reason didn't bother to eat breakfast, have already gotten into the candy dish. The M & M's are now "M" because there's only one left in the bowl. And everyone's stomach is growling. We are waiting, and we are hungry.

The 1st century Christians in Rome to whom Paul was writing were hungry, too. Hungry for God to intervene in their world, and usher in a kingdom where his power and rule would prevail. Hungry for Christ their King to return and be victorious over all present corrupt earthly powers and principalities. Paul writes to a people hungry for God to make his goodness known universally, and establish a justice and peace they certainly weren't experiencing in their present time—a justice and peace they could only read about in the words of Jewish prophets, and dream about in their hearts and minds. They were waiting and hungry.

Perhaps we are waiting and hungry, too. Over this past year, I invited parishioners to join with me in reading each week a different chapter from the book *We Make the Road by Walking* by Brian McLaren. In the introduction to that book, McLaren speaks about that hunger. He believes people yearn for something McLaren terms "aliveness." Here's how he

puts it: "What we all want is pretty simple, really. We want to be alive. To feel alive. Not just to exist but to thrive, to live out loud, walk tall, breathe free. We want to be less lonely, less exhausted, less conflicted or afraid...more awake, more grateful, more energized and purposeful. We capture this kind of mindful, overbrimming life in terms like *well-being*, *shalom*, *blessedness*, *wholeness*, *harmony*, *life to the full*, and *aliveness*." His conclusion about where God fits into this hunger? He writes, "I believe that the Spirit of God works everywhere to bring and restore aliveness..."

If McLaren is correct that you and I are waiting and hungering for that *shalom*, that *aliveness*, and that God is at work bringing and restoring that aliveness, then it is good to be in this season of Advent, for it is this time in the Church year where we articulate that waiting and hunger most clearly, most fervently.

I mentioned that the Christians to whom Paul wrote looked to the Old Testament prophets who described some kind of event or moment where God's kingdom would at last be fully realized. The Old Testament, however, spun a negative thread through it. Prophets prophesied something called the Day of the Lord, an unknown time when God would come and render final judgment upon the world, strip bare our human pretensions, reveal sin for what it was, and only then establish shalom, this kingdom of justice and peace. But Paul, and the people to whom he wrote, took this concept of the Day of the Lord and superimposed the story of the crucified and risen Jesus upon it. Now they understood it would be Jesus Christ himself—the one who died for us out of love for us—who would return to judge the earth and its inhabitants, subdue all worldly powers, and reign victorious in this glorious kingdom to come.

And the earliest Christians were hungry for this to happen. So they asked Paul "When?" His response? "...salvation is nearer to us now than when we first became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near." Perhaps this was a non-answer for some. Akin to my telling my hungry extended family that the turkey gravy is beginning to thicken...sort of.

Actually, Paul and those 1st century Christians thought for sure Jesus Christ would return soon. In their lifetime. Or at least not long after. But the centuries have passed, the waiting drags on, the hunger is unabated, and here are you and I, journeying through a world where the power of sin maintains its fierce grip on us, where one generation teaches war to yet another, where it seems justice and peace cannot be purchased at any price.

Some people have simply given up waiting, haven't they? They've lost hope and begun to despair. Or they've turned to the candy dish of worldly temptations to feel alive. Or they've forgotten what it was they hungered for in the first place, and have accepted the status quo, scaled back their expectations. After all, this is the way the world works, and we might as well just get used to it, just play along.

So, yes, some of us have stopped anticipating the intervention of a mighty God. Stopped hungering and yearning for a world of shalom where we might truly live with one another and the God who made us and loves us. We're drowsing through life, not wakeful to the presence and power of God.

But Jesus warns against that drowsiness in our reading from Matthew today. Jesus tells his disciples to stay alert, or they'll miss the signs of the advent (the coming) of God. He says, "Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming...you must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour." Paul takes up the same mantra when he writes, "...it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep...the night is far gone, the day is near."

You know, sometimes a fellow Christian encourages us through their own wakefulness. They can remind us of this hunger we feel, show us how they stay alert and open to God's working in the world and in them. They rekindle our hope. And sometimes we meet these fellow Christians in surprising places.

Two Sundays ago, a few Trinity volunteers and I led a worship service with male inmates at Dauphin County Prison. It was a small number of men—maybe 20 in all. But several sang with gusto, even bringing in the bass part in the refrain of the hymn "It is Well with My Soul." I preached a more interactive sermon which prompted a lot of discussion among the men. We shared Holy Communion and prayed with them individually. At the end of the worship hour, the men lined up at the door, ready to be escorted back to their cell block. But one young man, named Ivan, came back to the altar where I was clearing the communion elements. He showed me the devotional book he had in his hand. He said he read from it every day. He smiled at me and told me how, for each day, there was a piece of scripture, a little lesson, and a prayer. He said it helped him to read that book, and that one of his cell mates "really knows the bible" and they talk a lot about God. And he thanked us for coming to lead worship, then walked back to stand in line to leave.

Ivan, in the midst of his incarceration and with an uncertain future, has elected to stay awake, to remember what it was he was hungry for. He doesn't know when the gravy is going to thicken, when *shalom* will appear, but he diligently keeps alert. His plans are made up of a dog-eared and tattered devotional book by his side, a cell mate who shares the Good News of God with him, and an occasional hour of worship fellowship where he is reminded that God's pure light will pierce any darkness. And Ivan reminded me of that truth. I could open my eyes and see God at work in him.

"Salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers..." What might have sounded like a non-answer on Paul's part was actually Paul urging us to live like we're expecting Christ's return tomorrow. Paul wants us to continue anticipating that return, and discover how that hunger can actually make us more eager, hope-filled, and ready. A hunger that gets us up on our feet, awake and alert and moving out into this world to live under God's rule and serve in his name. And then we realize we are truly **alive**. Yes, come, Lord Jesus. **AMEN.**

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