

In the name of the Father and of the ✝ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today we enter into the season of Advent. It is a time of reflection, prayer, and preparation as we await the coming of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Here we begin the wait, even as we continue to wait. The wait begins in earnest for the anniversary of the birth of the Christ Child, but we also continue to wait for the return of Christ the King as ruler of heaven and earth. Our lessons this morning help point us to that Second Advent, or Second Coming, of our Savior, even as we prepare to mark the first.

Paul tells the church at Rome—a church he had not yet visited and, for the most part, didn't have many of the issues that faced the churches in Corinth, Ephesus, and elsewhere—that they are walking in the light, and that their salvation is near to them. He tells them to put aside their concerns, stop worrying about issues of the flesh, stop arguing among themselves, and prepare to serve the Lord. Paul tells the Romans what was told to the Corinthians¹ and Ephesians² as well, to “wake up” and be ready for the light of Christ to come upon them.

The use of words like “night” and “day” and “sleep,” especially by Paul, can be confusing, because there are several ways he used the words in his letters. However, when we have an understanding of the usage in the particular circumstances of the letter, we are enlightened and even encouraged when it seems Paul is speaking harshly.

For instance, there are three basic ways in which the word “sleep” is used by Paul. First is the natural way—of being at rest, or to be “asleep in the Lord,” or dead. Both of these are common to our vocabulary today, and in most cases, we can see immediately when Paul is using the word in this manner. The second and third uses of the word are related to each other, but differ from the common usage. In one usage, to “sleep” is to be spiritually asleep, in a good or positive sense. Luther points out in his lectures on Romans examples of this in Song of Solomon, where the bride

¹ 1 Corinthians 15:34

² Ephesians 5:15

says, the bride says: “I slept, but my heart was awake.”³ And again, in Psalm 127, we are reminded that “[God] gives to His beloved sleep.”⁴ That is, there is a time for renewing, life-giving sleep of a spiritual nature, such as the bride received in Song of Solomon.

The other “sleep” is an evil, negative one. For example, Paul tells the Thessalonians⁵, “So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. For those who sleep sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night,”⁶ Here, the word “night” is also used to refer to spiritual darkness and evil. Paul stresses the importance of being spiritually awake and alert at all times, ready for that which has been promised—the return of Christ as King and Savior—while not separating from the greater community of the faithful *and* unfaithful.

Ever since the Ascension, the Christian community has awaited the return of Christ. Countless times over the last 2,000 years people have declared that they have a “special understanding” as to when Christ will return, and the end times will officially begin. Every one of those people has been wrong. Even men like Paul and Luther had their moments where they were convinced the end times were near, but even they didn’t go so far as to say, “Now is that time.” Rather, they called upon their followers to be prepared—to be awake, and not asleep.

As we begin the season of Advent, we are called to be awake as well, and leave our spiritual slumber behind us, and prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ into the world. While we use these next four weeks to prepare to mark the anniversary of the birth of the Christ Child, we are also in a time of preparation for the Second Advent, that time promised by Christ to come, yet only known by the Father as to when it will occur.

As Christians, we are called to be prepared, but not to obsess about, the return of Christ the King. So, we tend to our several vocations and

³ *Luther Works* volume 25, electronic edition

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ 1 Thes. 5:6

⁶ Martin Luther, vol. 25, *Luther's Works, Vol. 25: Lectures on Romans*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald and Helmut T. Lehmann, *Luther's Works*, 25:479 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999, c1972).

avocations, participate in the daily activities of life in this world, and most importantly, live out our baptism daily. We are called to make Christ known to the world, sharing the Good News with everyone whom we meet. In living our baptism, we are to aid in the making of disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ, and see that others who have not come to know Christ as Lord and Savior hear about him and are baptized, receiving God's grace and adoption as His Chosen People. We are called to gather regularly to hear the Word proclaimed and to receive the Eucharist—another sign of God's grace, freely given and wholly undeserved.

So that we might be prepared for our Lord's return, and also to be equipped to share the Good News to others, we should be involved in the regular study of the Holy Scriptures, as well as the writings of the teachers of the church—teachers not only of our present day, but teachers within the tradition of the church—teachers like Athanasius, Clement, Augustine, More, Luther, Lewis, and many more through the centuries. We need to be armed with the Word of God so that we might stand at the ready in the face of the Evil One who seeks to lead us, and others, away from Christ and the love of God.

And, as we do all of these things, we need to remain spiritually awake, always at the ready, refreshed and rejuvenated. To aid us in that task, we take this time at Advent to prepare ourselves, once again, for the joyous celebration of that which has already happened, but for which we await yet again, the birth of the infant Jesus, son of God and child of the blessed Virgin Mary. Amen.