

It's Advent, and a reading from Romans 13 prepares the way.

*“Besides this, [Paul says to the church at Rome] you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.” — Romans 13:11–12 (NRSV)*

Advent begins with a whisper, a holy stirring in the dark hours before dawn. The Apostle Paul's words to the Roman church echo across centuries as a summons: *Wake up...*

The time for complacency is over. The light is rising, and we are called to live as people who belong to the day and open our eyes to the movement of the Triune God. The life of God is dynamic love poured out, and Advent invites us to join God's movement. *Wake up...*

Paul's call to “put on the armor of light” is an invitation to engage the movement of God's presence and love alongside humanity suffering in darkness. What would it look like for the people of The United Methodist Church to “put on the armor of light” and allow Christ's presence to clothe our desires, decisions, and daily actions transparently before God and neighbor? *Wake up...*

In Advent, we are not passive spectators waiting for Christmas morning. We are participants in God's unfolding redemption, which guards us against cynicism and despair, and announces to the world that love is stronger than hate, hope blooms in hard soil, and joy breaks out even in shadowed places. *Wake up...*

Advent's call to wakefulness is not a solitary one. The community of believers is invited to embody the gospel through tangible love. I find, as I travel among our 423 United Methodist congregations from Elon to the beach, that most of our people care about those in poverty, experiencing hunger, or terrorized by the broken immigration policies that terrorize our neighbors. The problem, now stay with me, the problem is many of our United Methodists do not actually have a relationship with people impacted by poverty, hunger, or immigration. *Wake up...*

What if comfort and convenience distance us from the very people who may be instruments of God's healing for the church? Think about the conveniences you and I enjoy. If they disappeared, what would your daily rhythms be, and what new relationships might you discover? Let me ask you a few questions. If you answer “No” to

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my question, just wait patiently until the next question. If you answer “Yes,” then let’s reflect on possible practices.

- Do you have a car? If yes, what if during Advent, you rode public transportation if it’s available in your area? Ride public transportation once a week during Advent. Your only goals are to experience the community who rides the bus, learn a few names, and listen to the stories. If you don’t have public transportation in your area, find a gathering place in your community where people may walk or “catch a ride.” Have a conversation with a person about what gives them joy or what’s heavy on their heart. You are not trying to rescue anyone. Simply see what ways God may be rescuing you by engaging this practice. Let’s try another.
- Do you have a washing machine or dryer? If yes, what if we washed our clothes at the laundromat during Advent? Our only goals would be to experience the community who uses the laundromat, learn a few names, and listen to the stories. You are not trying to rescue anyone. Simply see what ways God may be rescuing you by engaging in this practice. Here’s another.
- Are you a citizen of the U.S.? If yes, what if you reached out to pastors serving congregations where English is not that community’s first language and asked if you could share gift cards for groceries for people isolated from terror? Or get trained in how to support the vulnerable folks and experience Christ through their lives. We want violent people off the streets, all violent people, which includes U.S. citizens, immigrants, and some days, border patrol. There is no place for violence. But let’s not be guilty of conflating “undocumented” people with “violent criminals.”

The Triune God—Father, Son, and Spirit—invites us into this pattern of life: a rhythm of bold love, joyful service, and courageous leadership that participates in divine light. Be clear. We are not riding buses or going to laundromats or buying groceries to rescue anyone. We are going as those who need to be transformed.

What if? What if the future vitality of the church is centered in the lives of those who ride public transportation, wash clothes at laundromats, or don’t speak English? What if the church has been so distracted by who could be included that the church inadvertently excluded herself from the salvation and wholeness God desires for us all? What if immigrants, refugees, and those in poverty reflect the heart of God in ways that revitalize the church... and Paul’s words “*salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers*” point us toward these new places to connect with new people? And what if we miss it because we aren’t in real relationships with our sisters and brothers because of comfort and convenience? *Wake up...*

The night is still deep in many places—violence, loneliness, injustice—but the dawn has already begun. Each act of love, each word of hope, each courageous choice to listen and serve becomes a reflection of the One who is Peace, Jesus, the presence of God with us *now*. *Wake up...*

As Advent unfolds, we are called to live as those who have been changed by the radiance of the Christ. I pray we can disrupt comfort and convenience and seek the radiance of the Christ in new places in our new rhythms. And so, as the church waits, watches, and works, Paul's words echo again: "*The day is near.*" Let us awaken to that nearness by joining Christ's peace building, as we *Love Boldly, Serve Joyfully, and Lead Courageously*. *Wake up....*