

**December 2, 2007**  
**Isaiah 2:1-5, Romans 13:11-14**  
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**“No Sleeping in Church”**

In Keats’s poem, *Ode to a Nightingale*, the poet has grown weary with “the fever and fret of life.” In his hopeless mood, the poet hears the vibrant, joyful song of a nightingale. The bird’s song stirs his heart and awakens him from his dark thoughts. When the song ends, he wonders which was most real: “the life of sorrow and leaden-eyed despairs” or the joyful song of the nightingale. The poet asks,

“Was it a vision or a waking dream?

Fled is the music: Do I wake or sleep?”

This first Sunday of Advent is like the nightingale’s song. It is a call to wake from the dull complacency of life to the joy and light of Christ. As Paul says in the letter to the Romans, “It is full time now to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.” We may think of December as the last month of the calendar year, but from the point of view of our faith, the first Sunday in Advent is the beginning of the church year. On the first Sunday of the Christian year, we light the candle of hope and long for the unfolding of God’s plan for human history. This is the day to wake from our slumbers, our spiritual lethargy and our moral indifference. We, who are made numb by grief or exhausted by the concerns of the world, are awakened to new life by the song of Christ, our nightingale. There is no sleeping in church today, for “salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.”

In his book, *Surprised by Joy*, C. S. Lewis compares his conversion to faith in Jesus Christ to the experience of waking from sleep. Lewis had been an atheist for many years. About a year before his conversion to Christianity, he had come to a general belief in God. He spoke of that first encounter as the “unrelenting approach of Him I so earnestly desired not to meet.” Although he began to worship and to participate in the life of the church, his faith was not yet fully formed. One day he went on an excursion to the zoo. He describes that day:

“When I set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and when we reached the Zoo I did. Yet, I had not exactly spent the day in thought, nor in great emotion....It was more like when a person, after a long sleep, still lying motionless in bed, becomes aware that he is now awake.” (pp. 211-24)

Like Lewis before his conversion, we may be sleepwalking through life. Advent calls us to wake from our lethargy and our uncertainty to a vital faith in Jesus Christ.

In Advent we wake to hear the song of the one who came at Bethlehem and who will come again to bring peace to the earth and peace to every human heart. As the prophet Isaiah said, “He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come let us walk in the light of the Lord.” (Isaiah 2:4, 5) News like this is enough to wake the dead.

In his charge to the Christians in Rome, Paul makes a contract between two ways of life. In the old way of life, people keep their own desires, passions, petty jealousies, ambitions and self-focused thoughts at the center of everything they do. On this path, people think of time as their own to waste, greatness as something to grasp, people as objects to use and resources as something to hoard. In Galatians, Paul speaks of this way of living as “life according to the flesh.” Such a life is not living at all. It is like sleeping in the darkness, unaware of who God is and what God is doing. It is not life, but death.

Even rock stars, entrepreneurs, politicians, race car drivers and athletes can wake up to see a world that is filled with the light of God. Last season, Coaches Tony Dungy and Lovie Smith demonstrated before and after the Super Bowl that the integrity of their Christian witness was more important than winning a game. Living “honorably in the day” mattered more than setting a record. It is their faith that sustains them in good times and in bad times.

When we live not “according to the flesh” but “according to the Spirit,” we walk in the light of the Lord. We keep our eyes wide open, looking for the places where God is reconciling people, overcoming evil and bringing peace to the nations. In his mind’s eye, Paul sees the faithful rising from their slumbers, getting dressed and preparing for the work of the day. Since our labor is for God, we wear clothes that are appropriate for the work we are called to do. We dress in the armor of light. We put on the Lord Jesus Christ. We are citizens of the kingdom of God. We labor in the fields of the Lord. As Advent people, we are a part of God’s advance team. We go into the places of darkness with the light of Christ.

This past week, I had the privilege of meeting a Presbyterian elder in North Carolina who is a commissioned lay pastor. Sometimes he preaches in small churches that are without pastors. When he is not preaching, he teaches an adult Sunday School class and leads a Bible study for fellow attorneys. He says that these groups help him grow spiritually and keep him accountable before God. He told me that for some time he has served as a mentor to a man named Franco, who grew up in a large family in a rural community. Franco’s father abandoned the family. His mother had severe mental illness and was hospitalized for a period of time. As the oldest child in the house, 12 year old Franco found himself caring for his younger brothers and sisters. As an adult, Franco suffers from severe addictions. He has been in prison and been released. He has had a job and a bank account, but he has lost his job and his small savings. He is currently in jail again. This elder goes to see Franco every week. He doesn’t give him money. He doesn’t try to take over his problems or cure Franco’s addictions. He is a friend to Franco. He doesn’t judge Franco. He listens to him. He loves him. Franco has become one of his best friends. This man told me that his friendship with Franco has changed his life. All this man does is go to visit Franco in the darkness of that jail dressed in the armor of light. It is a relationship bathed in the light of Christ.

The church has often been called a sleeping giant. Today, there will be no sleeping in church. Christ, the nightingale, calls. It is time for us to rise from our slumbers. We witness to the light of Christ. What if each one of us rose from sleep, put on the armor of light, dressed ourselves in the Lord Jesus Christ and walked into the darkness of somebody’s life with the hope of Christ? If we are going to live in God’s world, then our old clothes won’t do, our old tricks won’t play and our old mindset won’t work. In a few moments, we are going to eat breakfast. If you are still sleepy, you may think it is just a bit of bread and wine that we share. If you are awake, you will see that it is the heavenly food of our Lord Jesus Christ that is enough to sustain us in the day.

Go ahead, sleep if you want, but Jesus says it is time to wake up and feast.