

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

Sleepers, wake! Those who have hidden in the darkness, wake. All you who have tossed about in surreal dreams, wake. Those who have slept peacefully unaware, wake. For midnight's peace has been broken, not by some artificial alarm, not by some bell which regularly tolls the hour, but by a summons, a call, a voice of angels, a voice of prophets. Sleepers, wake! Jerusalem, arise. Jerusalem is an image of God's Church, by the way. The whole holy church of God is called to arise, to wake up and experience the dawning, to see the early eastern glow in the sky, to begin preparing for the dawn. Awake and stretch. Awake and cleanse yourself. Awake and become fully present in mind and body, for the day is surely coming, as the Lord has said. Gather the day's workers together, for the sky continues to brighten and it shouldn't be long now. Gather the church together, for the work of Christ, the works of Love, are never finished. They are never finished, and they are never a burden. The day's toil will be graceful and exciting. The day's toil will be challenging and adventurous. And the coming toil will be in the name and the presence of the Lord. So, sleepers, wake!

To remind itself of its mission and ministry, the Christian church presumes to take on the identity and purpose of ancient Jerusalem, the city at the crest of Mount Zion, the city of temple and witness, the city of courageous David and Solomon the wise. As Elisha took up the prophetic mantle of Elijah to continue his holy work, so we, as the church, take up the faithful praise and witness of that ancient, iconic city. Jerusalem, arise now! Isaiah, as we heard this morning, lived with the hope that all people would stream to this highest spiritual mountain, that they would set aside their differences as they enthusiastically made that ascent, that pilgrimage, and beat their swords into implements of industry rather than war. That they would all wake up to the love and purpose of God, encouraging each other with the words "Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!" And for the Christian church, this time of Advent is a time when the eastern sky reveals the first glow of day, and we are each called to arise and walk as a child of the light, with Alleluia on our lips.

The Psalmist sings that Jerusalem is a city at unity with itself, as we said together this morning. And so the Christian church has the advent hope that it will be at unity with itself to greet the Lord. That our differences of theology and policy might be set aside as the sky brightens and the dawn approaches. We all celebrate Christmas, and we all wait upon the Lord. We all greet the dawn with Alleluia, and we are all glad when we hear the call "Let us go into the house of the Lord". We all hope that our feet will be standing within the gates of that metaphorical Jerusalem when the day dawns. Despite our differences, there is always hope that we will come together in our praise and worship of Christ the King, that God's Holy Spirit will turn our hearts to unity and peace. The HOPE of Advent, the hope of a new day, the hope that we might embrace each and all with the love of Christ. The hope that grace, God's unconditional love, will triumph in the difficult work of unification. That sleepers will wake, called by the voice of God's intent. As Psalm 122 says, "May peace be within your walls, and quietness in your towers."

Perhaps shaking his finger at us a little, St. Paul writes: You know what time it is, how it is

now the moment for you to wake from sleep. The night is far gone, the day is near.” And then he, the great teacher and apostle, gives us an assignment: “lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.” Be on your best behavior, be your best self! And don’t delay, for it looks like the sun is about to rise, and it is time to prepare ourselves for the Lord’s Day, to prepare for the ministries we will be called to do. Get dressed and put on the armor that Christ has prepared for you, that it might be your defense against all manner of darkness and evil, that it may save you from delusion and emptiness, from the agitation of hatred and the obsession of revenge, that this armor of light may save you forever from the forces which presume to rebel against God’s intent. That you may be whole. That you may be spiritually healthy. That when we gather, each surrounded by the protection and the incentive of the light, we may glow together warmly like the eastern sky as dawn approaches. That together we may be an increasing brightness, witnessing to the light which shines in the darkness, the light that can never be overcome.

In today’s gospel lesson from Matthew, Jesus reminds us that new days are coming, and that we cannot know just what the future may bring. He can’t reveal much about that coming hour, about that coming day. In fact, he says “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” Noah didn’t know when the flood would come, but he worked faithfully and industriously just the same. He didn’t procrastinate, and it turned out that was a good thing. And the people of his time, who could have been saved from destruction if they had just woken up and become their best selves, continued in the folly of their daydreams, and it turned out that was a bad thing. “Keep awake therefore,” teaches Jesus, “for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.” You cannot know if you will be around to continue God’s work, God’s ministry and mission, or if you will be suddenly called away. Some will be challenged to till the metaphorical soil of the kingdom and others to grind the meal for spiritual nourishment. And still others will be called away, apparently, for some other task. But not knowing, the best thing to do then, implies Jesus, is to keep on faithfully. To do the work God has given us to do. To stay awake. To prepare, not for the worst, but for the best, continually asking the question, “What’s the faithful thing to do now??”

So Advent, dear friends, is like that pre-dawn brightening of the sky. As we mark each of the four Sundays, as we light additional candles on our decorative wreath, the light intensifies, as do the moments each day before dawn. God’s creation promises us a new sunrise each morning; it is a reminder of God’s reliability. Our HOPE each morning is that the coming day will be fruitful, joyful, and full of new opportunities created by God’s loving intent. And as the glow in the eastern sky grows, often painting patches of cloud with stunning reds, purples, and shades of violet, we anticipate the coming dawn. So it is with Advent: we anticipate with joy the celebration of Jesus’ birth, knowing that his presence among us is as reliable as the sunrise, as faithful as clockwork. And knowing that the light he brings into our lives, the divine light of God himself, will bathe us with hope, fortifying us with stamina to greet an often surprising future. But in this time of growing glow, in this time of dissipating gloom, it is vital that we be together. Together as a family, together as a parish, together as the Christian church, together with all the people of God, that we might all hear the summons together. “Awake, my soul, stretch every nerve, and press with vigor on...”. Together we long for Christ. Together we receive Christ. And together we come with HOPE to greet the dawn once again. Amen.