

Sermon – November 28, 2021
“Wake up, O sleeper!”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Romans 13:11-12

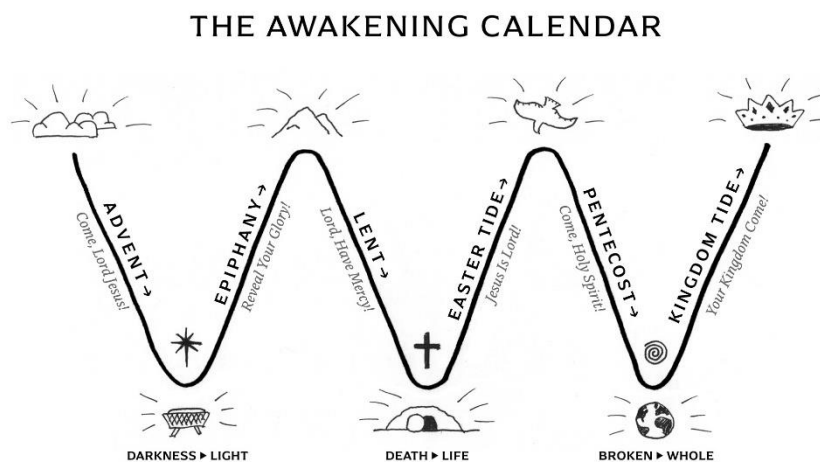
Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

Good morning and welcome to Advent! I want to thank everyone who braved the cold this morning to watch the sun rise on this first day of the Christian New Year. I hope that everyone had a blessed Thanksgiving and is ready to move into the season of Advent, the time when we anticipate the coming of Christ. Before we move into Advent, let me stop and give anyone who would like an opportunity to share how they were provoked in love or how they provoked another in love this past week. It is okay to share our attempts even if we might not have been fully successful, as we are all trying to learn to provoke one another in love. Remember, our ground rules for sharing are not to embarrass anyone and not to break confidence. Does anyone have something they would like to share this morning? I would like to share one moment when I was provoked to love this week. I went with Sam Kieve to look at a house in the county that needs some repairs. As Sam and I looked over the challenges and developed materials lists for the various repairs, I would stick my head into the back bedroom where a young mother was with two of her four young children. On one of those trips, I got the most beautiful smile from one of her children and I was definitely provoked to love. That little

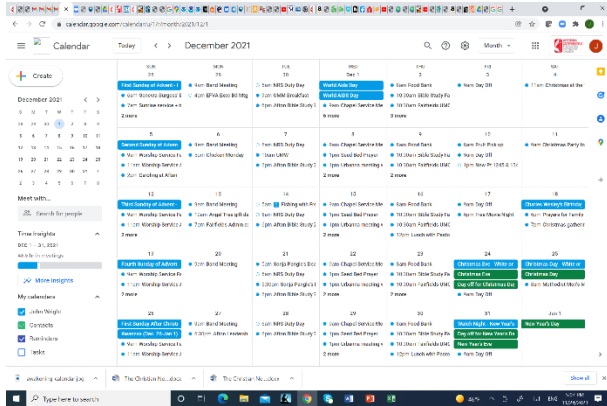
boy's smile, there in a place of great need, provoked forth all kinds of love within me. I am still provoked to love by his act and was greatly blessed by his love-provoking action. Would anyone else like to share this morning?

A good example of the multiple calendars that are in use in our culture came to light when the words "Happy New Year" went up on the sign at Afton earlier this week. Within a few minutes, there was a call to the person putting up the message wanting to know if we skipped Christmas. I thought it was a great question, a question filled with possibilities to talk with people about the Christian calendar. All right, does anyone have their calendar with them this morning? If you can retrieve your calendar, go ahead and get it out so that you have it open to December. We will need our calendars later in the service. For our calendar discussion this morning, most are familiar with the Roman calendar as the means used to keep track of the days of the year. And if you check your calendar, you will find New Year's Day is on the first day of January. However, the rising of the sun this morning marked the beginning of Advent and the start of another year on the Christian calendar. This is New Year's Day on that calendar and it is why some of us gathered this morning to watch the sun rise. Most of us are very familiar with the Roman calendar that we carry, but let me share with you a graphic of the Christian calendar. This graphic was put together by the people at Seedbed and is shared with their permission. Let me quickly explain the idea. Advent begins today and moves us toward the arrival of the Christ child, a time when darkness is overcome by light. Then comes the season of Epiphany, and on

Ash Wednesday we will move into the season of Lent that will end with Easter and the movement from death to life. Eastertide, the season following Easter, ends with Pentecost and the arrival of the

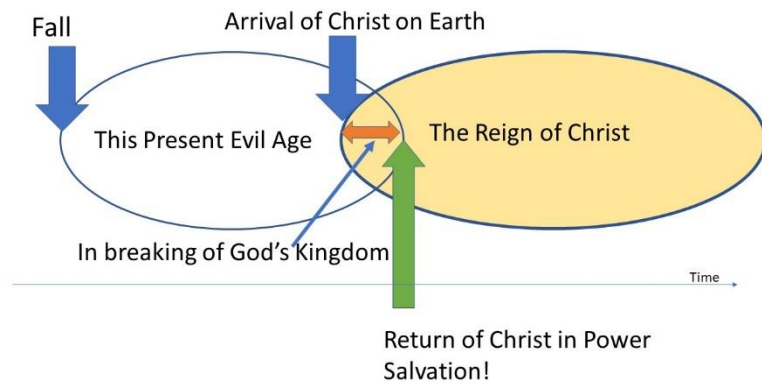


Holy Spirit. The season of Pentecost ends the time of a broken relationship with God and moves us into a new in-breaking kingdom of God or the season of Kingdomtide, which ends with Christ the King Sunday which we celebrated last week. This is the flow of the Christian seasons of the year, and yes, we lay those dates and seasons on the Roman calendar and that does make for some poor fits. As an example, we don't start singing Christmas carols until the season of Epiphany, which is after Christmas, a time when you will be challenged to hear a Christmas carol as the world is tired of those songs and wants to move on.



For those who have their calendars with you this morning, could you hold them up? If you use an electronic calendar, then you can hold up your phone. Great, keep them out as we will use them again. Let me share with you a page from my calendar. It will not take long for you to realize that this is the month of December and it is a very busy month. Let me ask us

another question, what time is it? And in response, you might look at your calendar, or watch, or phone and get the date of this day and the time. And we might also remember that today is the beginning of Advent and the start of another Christian new year.



We are a society that keeps accurate track of time. We have atomic clocks that are approaching the size of a deck of cards, the internet gives us very accurate time, and GPS signals enable us to know the time very accurately anywhere in the world. Anyone remember calling up the time on your phone and waiting for the time announcement to set your watch? So, when I asked what time is it, we might have looked at our watch to be able to answer that today is November 28th and it is 9:45 am in the year of 2021. Let me give us another answer that Paul points us to in this morning's scripture. An answer to my time question is that we are in the intersection of two very different ages: the present evil age and the reign of Christ. Let me show you a graphic and see if I can explain this idea of what time it is with that graphic. On your left of this graphic, you will

see an arrow that marks the Fall, when Adam and Eve disobeyed God and sin entered into humanity. The age that act ushered in is called the present evil age. I think we understand this as the age in which sinful humanity is struggling to live and rule. The next downward arrow marks the arrival of Christ at the end of Advent when, with the arrival of the Christ child, light breaks into the world. At some time in the future, another event will occur, the return of Christ in power, and at that point we will enter a new age, the reign of Christ, which is represented by the golden oval. Now the age we actually live in, the time of today from a Christian perspective, is the intersection of these two ages. This is the time of the in-breaking of God's kingdom. It is a time when the Kingdom of God has begun to grow and multiply but is not yet fully in place. It is a time when we look forward to salvation or the time of Christ's return in power and the end of the present evil age and the beginning of Christ's reign in power for eternity. We live in the now that is the intersection of these two ages. Let me apologize to anyone who might at this moment be having flashbacks to those terrible moments in math class and the learning of intersection, union, and other set combination expressions.

This morning, many of us watched the sun rise on this first day of the Christian year. Let's move now to this morning's scripture from Paul's letter to the Romans to get a better idea of what time it is. Paul's first statement is that it is the moment for us to wake up from sleep. Paul writes this letter in the first century a short time after Christ had been crucified, resurrected, and ascended into heaven. It is a time when we look back and think of Christ's followers as being near to those events, filled with the Spirit and walking with Christ, and yet Paul tells them to wake up. It is as if they, even with all of their closeness to Christ, have lost some aspect of what it means to walk with Christ. If these early Christians have begun to fall asleep, to lose the alertness of those who knew Jesus in the flesh and how to walk with Jesus, what happens to us all of these years later who are seeking to live in the intersection of the present evil age and the in-breaking of God's kingdom? Are we also asleep and in need of awakening?

Paul tells us our salvation is nearer now than when we became believers. Let's look at Paul's use of the word salvation here, as our current use of this word can be different than what Paul is telling us. For Paul, salvation was an event yet to come. Salvation marked the return of Christ in power. It is the upward green arrow on my graphic and marks the end of this present evil age. Paul separates belief in Christ and salvation, reserving salvation for Christ's return in power, an event yet to occur in Paul's day and yet to occur in ours. As we live in this time of the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God, we look forward to the return of Christ in power, a time

when every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. And as Paul notes, the arrival of this day is closer now than when we accepted Christ as our Savior. Paul does not tell us when this day will arrive, but that its arrival grows nearer each day and that we do not want to be caught asleep when the day comes. Let's give John Wesley the last word on the coming salvation. In his notes on this passage in Romans, he describes this coming salvation as "Final salvation, glory, is nearer to us now, than when we first believed—It is continually advancing, flying forward upon the swiftest wings of time. And that which remains between the present hour and eternity is comparatively but a moment."ⁱ

Paul goes on to use the imagery of night and the day as well. He makes the point that night, the time of darkness, the evil age, is far gone and the day draws near. Paul does not refer to a new day or just a day, but here the day is connected with the idea of salvation. He speaks to the day that is near. The "day of the Lord" is a phrase that is found often in the Old Testament referring to a coming time when God will act to redeem and judge people. As an example, in Obadiah 15, we read, "For the day of the LORD is near against all the nations. As you have done, it shall be done to you; your deeds shall return on your own head."ⁱⁱ In other places, we will find shortened versions of this text such as "in that day."ⁱⁱⁱ And as the first century Christians began to grasp more deeply an understanding of Christ's pending return, they would add their new knowledge of Christ into this coming time by changing "the day" to "the day of our Lord Jesus Christ."^{iv} These references help us to understand that Paul in his letter to the Romans is pointing to "the day," the return of Christ in power, the arrival of God's final movement and the ending of the overlap of two kingdoms as Christ comes to rule in power as King of kings. Paul does not tell us that the end is coming at a certain time, but that we are to always be ready and not fall asleep, never ceasing to walk with Christ and be caught unaware and unprepared for Christ's arrival.

When we think about falling asleep, we need to understand sleep not as taking a nap, but as our being lured by the world back into a lifestyle consistent with this present evil age, back into a life that adopts characteristics of the evil age. Falling asleep happens as we make small decisions to adopt into our walk with Christ characteristics of the current evil age that are inconsistent with a life of a believer in Christ. As we make these seemingly harmless concessions to the world, we fall asleep and stop walking with Christ. Our response to Paul's words from Romans is first to wake up, realize that our salvation is closer now than it has ever been and that we are in more risk than the believers in the first century of being found asleep and not walking

with Christ. We have more opportunity to adopt what the world is offering as time from Christ's earthly life grows longer. If we are not diligent, we will cease walking with Christ more than our brothers and sisters in Rome whom Paul accused of being asleep. Our goal should be to be those found by Christ at his return who are fully awake, walking with Christ, living out the commands of Jesus right here right now.

So, what is our response to awakening on this first Sunday of Advent? Let me suggest that we take a couple of actions. First, ask Jesus in prayer to send the Holy Spirit to help us identify those things in our lives we have adopted that are making us sleepy and not ready for the day of the Lord. Ask the Holy Spirit for help identifying the things of the present evil age that we have allowed to slip into our walk with Christ and as a result have put us to sleep. And then wake up to the life that Christ is calling us to live, a life that reflects Christ. Next, take time this week to read the Advent devotion for each day. Stop now and take your calendar and mark a time each day when we are going to be reading the devotion. Plan when we will read each day and if possible, invite one or two others into your planned time of reading. If you want to get together daily and read with each other, that would be a great way to provoke one another to love this coming week. Inviting another to read with us, even over the phone, will help us to remember to make time daily to read God's Word and to anticipate more fully the coming of Christ during this Advent season. Finally, if you want to go one step more, as we are singing the closing hymn, I invite you to bring your calendar and place it on the altar and surrender your time to Christ that all of the time we have may become Jesus' time, a time for us to wake up and be preparing for the coming of Christ.

Pray with me: Lord Jesus, shine your light on me and wake me up from one who has adopted too much from this evil age and is now asleep to your coming. Jesus, I offer you again all of me. Have me, Lord Jesus, and lead me to be one who is fully awake and anticipating the coming of the day. Amen

ⁱ Wesley's comments on the New Testament

ⁱⁱ Harper Bibles. NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (Kindle Locations 55943-55957). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱⁱ Moo, Douglas J.. Romans (The NIV Application Commentary Book 6) (p. 442). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

^{iv} *ibid*