Waking the Sleeping Giant
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Romans 13:8, 11-14

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. . . And do this, understanding the present time. The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

Philippians 3:17-21

Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you. For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

Let me begin by wishing each of you a happy new year!

That may sound odd, since it’s not 2015 yet, and not even Christmas. But, as you know, traditionally the church has observed the Sundays leading up to Christmas as the season called Advent. The church calendar, sometimes called the “liturgical year,” is a sort of teaching aid that grew up before most people could read. It provided a way to observe the different events of the Gospel story. I think, even in churches that don’t fully observe the liturgical year, we can appreciate the value of having some kind of structure by which to organize our worship — especially if it leads to a greater appreciation of how the Gospel unfolds in the life and ministry of Jesus and the coming of his Holy Spirit.

The church year starts with the preparation for the birth of Jesus, and with Israel’s anticipation of the Messiah. So the first Sunday of Advent — which was last Sunday — is the church’s special “new year’s day.” Today and the next two Sundays we’re in the season of Advent. During this time we want to take a look at ourselves and ask, “Are we prepared — am I prepared — for Christ’s coming into our lives with renewed power and authority and love?” During Advent we want to ask, “What’s God going to do in me to make me ready to receive and serve his Messiah?” Our prayer is found in the words of that old carol, “O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel” — come, Lord! Save us, heal us, set us free!

There’s a traditional prayer used as the Advent season approaches, and it goes like this:

Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people; that they, plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works, may by thee be plenteously rewarded; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

We have a fireplace in our living room, and on a cool evening we sometimes like to build a fire. It will blaze away for a time, then after a while it starts to die back to glowing embers. But if you stir up the embers to give them more air, the fire will blaze once again. “Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people.” Regardless of the season of the year, that’s always a timely petition, because it’s so easy to fall into a complacent, ho-hum sort of Christian experience, just rocking along with business as usual. We like to think of ourselves as good Christians, but if some ministry requires too much commitment, count us out. If some task seems too hard for us,
maybe somebody else will do it. We may need the air, the breath of the Holy Spirit, to stir us up for the work of God.

The Lord is coming—he’s always coming to his people in their worship, in their prayers, in the reading of his Word, in the witness of his dedicated saints, in the opportunity to serve others in his name, in the events of history through which he moves to work out his will. We may need to be stirred up to vigilance lest we miss the signs of his presence. So we don’t want to be found just sleepwalking through the Christian life, just kind of staggering along like a sort of churchified zombie. In the Bible, sleep is sometimes a symbol for death. When we fall asleep—we fail to bestir ourselves—we could be missing out on the salvation God has for us both as a church and as individual believers.

That was one of Paul’s concerns when he wrote to the church in Rome, in the passage from Romans 13. “Understand what time it is,” he says. “The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here” (Romans 13:11-12). Paul was concerned that his brothers and sisters in the faith might miss out on God’s action if they failed to see the urgency of the hour and just kept slumbering away.

But what was so urgent about the hour when Paul wrote these words? And how could Paul say to them, “Our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed”—as if he could see a progression of events leading to the deliverance of his readers, when he wrote to these Roman Christians around the year 56? We should recall that almost all the earliest Christians were Jews. The world of the New Testament was a Jewish world within the larger framework of the Roman Empire, and these were turbulent times in that religious world. All Jews looked to Jerusalem as their spiritual home, where Herod’s beautiful Temple was still under construction; it wouldn’t be finished for another decade.

But tensions were mounting in the Judean community. Revolutionary movements were on the rise, seeking to throw off Roman domination. Jesus saw all this coming—for he understood the “signs of the times”—and had warned his disciples about it. He taught them to pray, “Lead us not into testing,” that time of violence that was sure to come if his people rejected his preaching of the kingdom of God and sought, instead, an earthly realm of Jewish independence. He told them that when they saw Jerusalem surrounded by armies, they should flee to the mountains (Luke 21:20-21). And only a decade or so after Paul wrote to the Romans, a Jewish revolt broke out. When the Romans had crushed it in the year 70, Jerusalem and its temple lay in ruins. The cry of the Christian martyrs, “How long, O Lord?” was answered in the destruction of the city and its religious institutions that had persecuted the saints.

So Paul saw God on the move in his time; he saw the advent of God’s justice, the “days of vengeance” of which Jesus had spoken. He saw deliverance coming for God’s people who had come to faith in Messiah Jesus. As he wrote in Romans 16:20, “the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.” It was an urgent time, a time not to slumber but a time to wake up. “The night is nearly over; the day is almost here.” That word still rings across the ages, and nineteen centuries later we hear it afresh: “The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.” The advent of the Lord is as relevant in our time as it was for Paul and his readers. As the Letter to the Hebrews says, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever” (Hebrews 13:8). He has come to us, he comes to us, he will come to us. Therefore it’s always time to bestir ourselves, to awaken from our slumber, to be ready to meet him and to answer his call.

However, in many ways the church today is a “sleeping giant,” and the faith of many Christians is a “sleeping giant.” The image of the “sleeping giant” may hearken back to Jonathan Swift’s famous tale, Gulliver’s Travels. On one of his voyages, Gulliver was shipwrecked near an island. After making his way to shore he fell asleep, and
when he finally awoke he found himself a giant in a land of tiny people. The expression *sleeping giant* may have originated in the 1970s movie about the Pearl Harbor attack (which was 73 years ago today). In *Tora, Tora, Tora* a Japanese admiral says, “I fear all we have done is to awaken a sleeping giant and fill him with a terrible resolve.” Now the expression has become common to describe any force or entity that doesn’t realize its full potential. And, friends, that really describes the church of Jesus Christ today. We are the “sleeping giant.” We are witnesses to the Lordship of the risen Jesus Christ over all creation. We have no idea how much power and influence our witness might have, if we could awaken from our slumber.

Christianity is the dominant religion in this nation of ours. But the church of Jesus Christ has been asleep all across our nation while the enemies of faith have been on the move through the courts, the schools, the media and other institutions. As a result, public expressions of belief in God, and Biblical values for life and conduct, have been suppressed. The sleeping giant has turned inward. The church has ceased to be a public advocate for God’s dominion over all things. Today it’s become a service organization, just trying to meet the spiritual needs and wants of its members, or seeking to build up megachurch empires for certain leaders. But God is on the move, upholding his universe, establishing his kingdom, working out his purposes in history, creating life, validating truth. The sleeping giant needs to wake up and greet the Advent of the Lord, and rise up with a new witness to his truth.

Here in Hamilton and surrounding area, it’s no secret that the churches have been in decline. When Shirley and I moved back to Hamilton in 2009, we ended up worshipping in a church in Keokuk, where we were married in 2001. But about a year and a half ago I decided it was time to get involved in the churches over here, so I began to attend the meetings of the Hamilton Ministerial Alliance. At one of the first meetings I went to, another pastor voiced his concerns. His church wasn’t growing — in any way except growing older! His congregation included few, if any, younger people. “What’s going to happen to my church,” he asked, “when all those older people are gone?” I’ve attended worship, at one time or another, in at least nine churches in this community, and in most of them the situation isn’t much different from the one that pastor was describing. There are 3,100 people in Hamilton (if you can believe the signs on the highway) and many of them may not even know this church exists. Do we hear the apostle Paul saying to us, “The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber”?

The church *organization* isn’t the only sleeping giant. You and I are sitting on the sleeping giant of our faith in Christ. I suspect each one of us acknowledges far more faith in the Lord than we dare to put into actual practice. We may say, “I can do all things in Christ who strengthens me,” but how much do we actually do? I suspect that if every person on this church’s membership rolls who lives in or near this community would even do as much as just come to this house of God to worship him each week, there might be 100 or more people here every Sunday to lift their hearts and hands and voices in his praise. And from such a gathering in the presence of Christ, we would all receive the empowerment of his Holy Spirit to do the works of God in a new and greater way. “Stir up, we beseech
thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people!” Let the sleeping giant of our faith awaken to greet the coming of the Lord!

I’m sure some of you are thinking, “Dr. Leonard, you don’t understand. I’ve put in my time serving the Lord and his church, I’ve been as faithful as possible, but I’m older now and I’m not able to do what I used to do.” Friends, I do understand. I turn 76 two days from now. But age has never been an obstacle when God calls you to be his witness; Scripture makes that clear. Abraham was about a hundred years old, and Sarah wasn’t much younger, when they had their first child (Romans 4:19). Caleb was 85 when he took possession of the land Moses had promised him; “My strength now is as my strength was then,” he told Joshua.

But recent history, too, is full of examples of people who achieved great things in their later years. Benjamin Franklin was 70 when he signed the Declaration of Independence. If you’ve ever done any literary work, you’ve used Roget’s Thesaurus; Peter Mark Roget was 73 when he published the first edition of it. Laura Ingalls Wilder was 64 when she published her first book, which became the basis for the TV series “Little House on the Prairie.” Mahatma Gandhi was 61 when he began the movement that led to India’s independence from Britain. At age 85, the composer Ralph Vaughan Williams wrote his ninth symphony. Ray Kroc was 60 when he took over McDonald’s and began to build it into the familiar fast-food chain. At age 76, Grandma Moses took up painting after her hands became too arthritic to continue doing embroidery. Colonel Sanders was 65 when he started Kentucky Fried Chicken. You get the idea!

To get more personal, I built my first web site at age 59, and composed my first piece of band music at age 74. Shirley Anne was 61 when she earned her certificate in desktop publishing from Carl Sandburg College; she was 64 when she took over as editor of a respected poetry magazine, and since then has published five books of her own poetry. All I am saying is that ability and initiative don’t have age limits. Imagine what could be done if each of us turned our abilities toward serving the Lord in some new and creative way!

We don’t have to do something grand and glorious. We can start with some simple things. Visit someone in a nursing home, or who doesn’t get out too much, to encourage them — somebody you know but who might not normally expect you. Add one more person to your daily prayers. Send an extra $25.00 to an organization that’s making a difference for good, like Focus on the Family or World Relief. If you’re not already doing so, give to support the Hamilton Food Pantry that Ray manages, right here in this building — or volunteer to help on days when it’s open. Show someone honor by complimenting them, recognizing the good they’re doing in their job or in the community. Write a letter to the editor of the Daily Gate City or the Journal Pilot stating the Christian view on some matter of national policy. If you’re not already doing some of these things — and I suspect many of you are — why not try them as part of your wake-up routine. Get those Christian “juices” flowing again.

Psalm 115 states, “The highest heavens belong to the LORD, but the earth he has given to man” (Psalm 115:16). Jesus declared, “I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours”
(Mark 11:24). Let’s take God at his word! There’s a “sleeping giant” in the faith we profess, and when that faith awakens afresh we can reach out to meet the Lord who comes to us, and who calls us to whatever witness is appropriate for each one of us.

When Paul wrote to the Romans, he told them, “Let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.” He offered a catalog of the “works of darkness” — orgies, drunkenness, and so on. The church was young then; people hadn’t yet absorbed some of the implications of the gospel for how we’re supposed to live our lives. Nineteen centuries later, our catalog of “works of darkness” might be a little different, and I think discouragement and indifference could head the list. But God’s Advent is here, he’s coming to us, “our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.” It’s time to get out of bed, cast off our nightwear, and “clothe ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ.” The words of the prophet Isaiah ring across the centuries and speak directly to us: “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn” (Isaiah 60:1-3)

Paul wrote an Advent admonition to the Christians of Philippi, and we’ll close with that. He said, “I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things.” If I’m too preoccupied with how I can be comfortable, and not bothered by too many commitments, do I become an “enemy of the cross”? Is my faith only a sleeping giant; is my church but a slumbering hulk? Just asking! I offer this word not by way of criticism — please understand — but by way of encouragement.

We don’t belong in bed with this world, says Paul. We don’t belong in that place where we can doze away in oblivion while God does his great work someplace else. That house of somnolent slumber is not our home, says Paul. “Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (Philippians 3:20-21). To the Romans he wrote, “Our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.” While we await that salvation, that transformation, there’s work to do now. As Paul wrote to Timothy, “Stir up the gift of God, which is in you” (2 Timothy 1:6).

“Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people.” And so the sleeping giant wakes, to hail the glorious Advent of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

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