

WAKE OUT!
© Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine
University Congregational Church
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Reading: Romans 13: 11-14 (NEB)

In all this, remember how critical the moment is. It is time for you to wake out of sleep, for deliverance is nearer to us now than it was when first we believed. It is far on in the night; day is near. Let us therefore throw off the deeds of darkness and put on our armour as soldiers of the light. Let us behave with decency as befits the day: no reveling or drunkenness, no debauchery or vice, no quarrels or jealousies! Let Christ Jesus himself be the armour that you wear; give no more thought to satisfying the bodily appetites.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, the season of expectation. What are we expecting? We are anticipating the birth of the boy who will be called, “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” (Isaiah 9:6)

The truth is that we have been waiting a very long time, nearly three thousand years since this prophecy of Isaiah. Paul wrote to the church at Rome believing that the reign of Christ was imminent. The Kingdom of God would be established soon and at one point Paul suggested that it was so close do not bother to get married unless you absolutely could not wait for reasons of the flesh. We are still waiting.

And while we have been waiting this past week North Korea shelled a small South Korean island and seems ever more poised to develop nuclear warheads. The death rate climbed in Haiti due to the cholera outbreak. Casualties mounted in Afghanistan (eight American soldiers killed this week) and the projected hope is that our combat role might end in 2014. A mother and her three children were murdered in their Tallahassee, Florida home. A police officer and a housing authority officer in Chicago were gunned down in the line of duty this past Friday. Not a stellar week for the much anticipated Prince of Peace.

Yet there is something about hope that human beings cannot deny. It is like the man who approached a little league baseball game one afternoon. He asked a boy in the dugout what the score was. The boy responded, "Eighteen to nothing--we're behind."

"Boy," said the spectator, "I'll bet you're discouraged."

"Why should I be discouraged?" replied the little boy. "We haven't even gotten up to bat yet!" (Source Unknown)

I have watched dozens of parishioners throughout my career who were fighting aggressive forms of cancer of the brain, liver, pancreas, and other vital organs. More often than not they will fly down to the M. D. Anderson Cancer Center in Texas for the latest regimen of clinical trials in the hope that they will find the cure that will save their lives. Despite devastating side effects they will return several times before their bodies scream out, "Enough!" Likewise, I have watched people stay in a marriage that is not only dysfunctional but also violent to one degree or another. They stay because they cling to a vision of what the relationship might be. They stay because they have a dream about a home that nurtures children. Our pacifist friends such as the Quakers, Mennonites, and Amish continue to work for peace and refuse military combat service in the belief that peace is the way of God that will finally usher in the Kingdom of God. They have also been waiting a very long time.

What was it that kept Susan B. Anthony, M. K. Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Cesar Chavez on the dangerous path to human freedom? What is the vision of theologians and philosophers such as Gustavo Gutierrez, Rosemary Radford Ruther,

and Cornell West fixed on the future? Well, in the old American Negro spiritual, each of these can sing:

“Got my hands on the gospel plow,
Wouldn’t take nothin’ for my journey now.
Keep your hands on that plow, hold on.”

Bruce Springsteen’s rendition is, “Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on.” Or consider this Negro slave song that emerged during the Civil War, “Oh, Mary Don’t You Weep:”

If I could I surely would
Stand on the rock where Moses stood.
Pharaoh’s army got drowned,
O Mary don’t you weep.

Mary wore three links of chain,
Every link was Jesus name.
Pharaoh’s army got drowned,
O Mary don’t you weep.

Mary wore three links of chain,
Every link was Freedom’s name.
Pharaoh’s army got drowned,
O Mary don’t you weep.

One of these nights about twelve o’clock
This old world is gonna reel and rock,
Pharaoh’s army got drowned,
O Mary don’t you weep.

Moses stood on the Red Sea shore,
Smotin the water with a two-by-four.
Pharaoh’s army got drowned,
O Mary don’t you weep.

God gave Noah the rainbow sign,
No more water but fire next time.
Pharaoh’s army got drowned,
O Mary don’t you weep.

The Lord told Moses what to do,
 To lead those Hebrew children through.
 Pharaoh's army got drowned,
 O Mary don't you weep.¹

From Isaiah, to Paul, to Martin the message is always the message of the future. It is the Advent message. Deliverance is always closer than we think. The night will break with the morning sun! Hold on! Consider Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech.²

Dr. King reminds people that the Emancipation Proclamation had been issued by President Lincoln in 1862, but "the Negro is still not free." He observed, "...the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land." In other words, the night is still upon us. We are still in the darkness. To emphasize that point King declared that the promise of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness had been denied to people of color. "It is obvious, today," he said, "that America has defaulted on this promissory note, insofar as her citizen of color are concerned."

"But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt." With the hope of Paul, the sun is going to rise out of the bleak morning. A new day is coming. The

¹ "Oh, Mary Don't You Weep," *Traditional Folk Songs with Chords*, <http://www.traditionalmusic.co.uk/folk-songs-with-chords/Oh,%20Mary%20Dont%20You%20Weep.html>, downloaded 11/27/10.

² Excerpts from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have a Dream," downloaded from *American Rhetoric. Com*, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihaveadream.html>, downloaded 11/27/10.

Kingdom is closer than we ever imagined. Watch for the promise to meet the day. Or in his own words:

“I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.”

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of this skin but the content of their character.”³

Isaiah and Paul had a dream of a boy who would become the Wonderful Counselor and the Prince of Peace. Like Dr. King they had a dream of human beings in right relationship with one another, a day when righteousness was the plumb line of our every word and deed. They had a dream that the reign of God would rule the day, the lion would lie down with the lamb, swords would be beaten into plowshares, the harvest would be bountiful, and people would live out their lives with dignity.

Does the future look much different from the vision of Isaiah or the dream of Dr. King? What is the vision of the 21st century Christian? For many Christians it is a vision of heaven or hell. But I don't think it is that easy. Consider this story.

Recently a teacher, a garbage collector, and a lawyer wound up together at the Pearly Gates. St. Peter informed them that in order to get into Heaven, they would each have to answer one question.

³ Ibid.

St. Peter addressed the teacher and asked, "What was the name of the ship that crashed into the iceberg? They just made a movie about it."

The teacher answered quickly, "That would be the Titanic." St. Peter let him through the gate.

St. Peter turned to the garbage man and, figuring Heaven didn't really need all the odors that this guy would bring with him, decided to make the question a little harder: "How many people died on the ship?"

Fortunately for him, the trash man had just seen the movie. "1,228," he answered.

"That's right! You may enter."

St. Peter turned to the lawyer. "Name them."⁴

No, I think there must be more profound questions about the bright day that the gospel promises. I think it must look a lot like justice and peace, forgiveness and compassion, kindness and mercy. The real question for each of you this morning is, "What does that day look like to you?" What is your vision of God's future? What prize do your eyes rest upon? What are you holding on to?

I think that too often we settle for the lowest common denominator. We have not raised the bar of God's promise. I think we are a lot like the person who prayed, "Oh, Lord, I give you thanks for this day. I have not taken your name in vain. I have not spoken ill of any soul. I have not mistreated any other human being or animal. Of

⁴ "Qualifying for Heaven," at *Ahajokes.com*, <http://www.ahajokes.com/hea15.html>, downloaded 11/27/10.

course, I am still in bed and all of this could change as soon as I get up.” (Source unknown) Is that the best of our hope in God’s future, to do no harm? To skate by?

I sure hope not. I, for one, still wait for the promise of wisdom, a just and kind society, and the reign of peace. My friend, Ron Hatchett has his own vision of God’s kingdom. Ron borrows from Pete Seeger and Lee Hays, “it’s all about the love between the brothers and the sisters.” In three and a half years I do not recall having a conversation with Ron where he did not repeat this mantra. The daily discipline of Christian discipleship is to get out of bed in the morning and affirm the dream of God’s future that has been given to you. If you have not thought about that in a while, heed Paul’s words, “wake out of sleep,” that day is closer than you think.

Full disclosure requires me to also tell you this:

- I. Keep the vision of God’s reign alive.
- II. Live like the dream.

As Gandhi put it, “You must be the change you wish to see in the world.” Paul wrote that the day of God’s light is emerging and we are called to live like the sons and daughters of light, not darkness. Dr. King urged his followers:

“But there is something that I must say to my people, who stand on the warm threshold which leads into the palace of justice: In the process of gaining our rightful place, we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence.”⁵

The lesson for us is wake out of bed, rekindle the light of God’s hope, and be in

⁵ King, “I Have a Dream,” *op. cit.*

relationship with other people as if that relationship might fully reveal the kingdom of God. In his book *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis put it this way:

"Do not waste your time bothering whether you 'love' your neighbor, act as if you did. As soon as we do this, we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking him more. If you do him a good turn, you will find yourself disliking him less."⁶

Let me offer you an example told by J. Allen Peterson.

Newspaper columnist and minister George Crane tells of a woman who came into his office full of hatred toward her husband. "I do not only want to get rid of him, I want to get even. Before I divorce him, I want to hurt him as much as he has me."

Rev. Crane suggested an ingenious plan "Go home and act as if you really love your husband. Tell him how much he means to you. Praise him for every decent trait. Go out of your way to be as kind, considerate, and generous as possible. Spare no efforts to please him, to enjoy him. Make him believe you love him. After you've convinced him of your undying love and that you cannot live without him, then drop the bomb. Tell him that you're getting a divorce. That will really hurt him." With revenge in her eyes, she smiled and exclaimed, "Beautiful, beautiful. Will he ever be surprised!"

She did it with enthusiasm. Acting "as if." For two months she showed love, kindness, and listened intently. She worked at sharing and praising her husband's best qualities.

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity – The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2002), pp. 73-74.

When she didn't return, Crane called her, "Are you ready to go through with the divorce?"

"Divorce?" she exclaimed. "Never! I discovered I really do love him." Her actions had changed her feelings. Motion resulted in emotion. The ability to love is established not so much by fervent promise but by living as people of promise.⁷

In Paul's words we are called to put on the light of the new day. Dress yourselves with decency, clothed in the right mind of God's grace. Live like the Kingdom of God is upon us. You will be surprised how close it really is.

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⁷ J. Allen Peterson, SermonIllustrations.com, <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/l/love.html>, downloaded 11/27/10.