

"TIME TO WAKE UP"

A Sermon By

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### INTRODUCTION

There are not many Advent hymns in our hymn books and there's probably a good reason for it, a reason why there is a dearth of good Advent hymns. For Advent, you see, is a season with two moods, almost contradictory moods - somberness and joy. And it's not easy to write music that captures a "somber joy". That's what Advent is about and it's communicated to us in these two scripture lessons for the First Sunday in Advent.

### DEVELOPMENT

Hear again the Old Testament lesson, the prophecy of the Messiah from the Book of Zechariah:

"Rejoice greatly, O daughters of Zion. Behold your God cometh unto you, lowly and riding upon an ass, on a colt, the foal of an ass."

We recognize that lesson as the one that is occasionally read on Palm Sunday as well. And there's a reason for it. We read it on the First Sunday in Advent as we approach Bethlehem and on Palm Sunday as Jesus approached Jerusalem, to be reminded that this babe grew to become a man and was rejected. His kingdom came, but only for a moment. There is joy, but it is a somber joy. The kingdom is here, but it is not here in its fullness. Christ is Lord, but He's not Lord everywhere, not yet.

Advent is a difficult season. It's not that popular. We keep hedging on it. We keep wanting to celebrate Christmas before the 25th of December. Advent, however, is four weeks long. Around here we're lucky if we can get two weeks in before the calls start coming into the office and the voices are lifted asking when we're going to do something "Christmasy" around here...start singing the carols and getting up the decorations. It's a difficult time, not very popular, perhaps because it brings a note of realism into our celebration. It says He has come. That He is Lord. But as yet we don't see everything in subjection to Him - not yet. The Kingdom has come, but not in its fullness. We celebrate. There is joy, but it's a somber joy.

### TWO MOODS IN OUR LIVES

If you and I are honest we will admit that our lives have the same two moods of somberness and joy. We have highs and lows in our life; we have times when things are good and times when things aren't so good. We have our seasons of happiness and seasons with pain and sadness. We long to be men and women of nobility and strength and of character, but there is all that evidence that we are not there yet. We've arrived and then we leave again. We have it made and then we lose it. We can rejoice in our lives - but it's a somber joy.

Advent reminds us that we are still waiting - you and I. The whole world is still waiting "in lonely exile here until the Son of God appears". So rejoice, yes--because there are times when He comes. There are times when victory is ours, times when the battle's won, times when the siege that surrounds our life is lifted - so rejoice. But soberly, because sometimes we lose. We are still in bondage to many things. And neither we nor the world are yet the way Christ wants us to be. That's the realism, if you will, of the Season of Advent.

I confess to you that at an early age I closed my ears to all that talk about the Second Coming of Jesus. I didn't like the way it was being said and I didn't

particularly warm up to those people who were saying it. They always seemed to shout it and always looked so stern. Anger seemed to show through in what they said. They made it sound like Jesus was going to "get us". They used the language of the Book of Revelation - war language, with body counts and negative statistics. It's called apocalyptic language and it didn't jibe with my understanding of Jesus who came to us gently and lovingly as a baby in a manger. So I tended to close my ears to all that talk about the Second Coming of Jesus.

But the older I get the more I see that He has to come again. And the more I read of the New Testament, the more I understand that the whole language of the New Testament leans toward His coming again. It speaks of that in many ways and only sometimes in apocalyptic or war language. The rest of the time the language is consistent with the style of His first coming - gently and humbly and without much notice and fanfare. But the entire New Testament, no matter what language it uses, expects Him to come again. It leans to the future. It's watching the horizon like a watchman on the wall.

HE WILL COME AGAIN I remember a television commercial a few years ago which showed a small boy waiting on the corner for his parents to pick him up. It's raining. They were delayed for some reason and he doesn't know why. His gaze is fixed up the street in the direction from which he knows they will come. He doesn't know why they're delayed. He's a little anxious. You can see that on his face. But he knows that they will come. He knows them, so he is confident they will come.

The New Testament is like that. There are different versions of what happened and why he's been delayed. There are different visions of what it will look like when He finally comes, some of them contradictory. But none of that really matters. The only thing that matters is that they know He will come. They just know it. They knew Him when He was here, among them. His presence had such an impact that they know now He will not leave undone what He started. And that's why we sing:

"Jesus shall reign where'er the sun  
Does his successive journeys run;  
His Kingdom spread from shore to shore,  
Till moons shall wax and wane no more."

That will happen. Jesus shall reign. They're convinced of it, but it hasn't happened yet, so He will come again! That's part of the message of Advent.

LIVES OUR LIVES In the meantime, in between the time of His first coming and the time of His second coming, we are to live our lives. And it's to instruct us to live them faithfully that Paul wrote his Letter to the Romans. He described that period in which we live as the dawn. He said the light has come into the darkness and the darkness has not been able to overcome it. The new day has already begun, the dawn is here. It's not here in its fullness yet; it's only the dawn, but it will come. Nothing can stop it now. That's the way he describes this age, the one in which you and I must live our lives. So he says to the Romans and to us:

"You know what hour it is. How it is full time now for you  
to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer now than when  
we first believed. The night is far gone, the day is at hand."

They are both here - both the darkness and the light. Therefore we must choose whether we're going to pay attention to the darkness in the world or to the light that's come into our world. Whether we're going to pay attention to the rising sun in the East or to the lingering shadows of darkness behind us in the West. We have to choose. We have to choose in this life whether we're going to be pessimistic or optimistic. You can choose either one. The evidence is there for either position. We have to choose.

You can say that the darkness in the world is going to take over some day. You can say that the darkness has always been here and it always will be. You can say the world is going to hell. There's plenty of evidence to support that. You can say about your own personal life - my life is ruined. It's never going to be any different. I'll never be able to overcome my recalcitrant nature. You have a choice. And if you choose that pessimistic stance, friend, then you'll have plenty of company in this world.

Or, you can say that the darkness is far gone and the light that has come into our world is stronger than the darkness. The darkness couldn't put it out. Therefore, the future belongs to the light. So I will not despair of this world nor will I stop trying to make it a better place, nor will I stop hoping that my life is going to be better someday, or working to make it so. You've got that choice. You can go either way. It's that kind of time. There is both darkness and the light that has come into our world.

I suppose this is why you and I have moods. We can go either way, too. There are times when we are hopeful and optimistic and there are times when we're down - sad and depressed. You can't help it, living in this kind of a world. You're going to have faith and then sometimes you're going to have doubts. You're going to be sure and then you're not going to be sure. You're going to try and be a better person and discover how hard it is to be a better person. You're going to try and be strong and discover the weakness in you. I don't think you'll ever escape that, none of us will, considering the time in which we live.

Oh, there are those who claim otherwise, I know that. There are those who say that faith will solve all your problems and you can exist on a perpetual high the rest of your life. But I think they get a little depressed, too. And the word has sneaked out from their camp that they struggle just the way you and I do, as human beings. Jesus didn't promise that we wouldn't struggle or suffer or carry a cross. On the contrary, He said we would. What He promised was they won't defeat us, if we remember that He has come, so the night is far gone and the day is at hand.

PAUL SAYS THAT A CHRISTIAN IS

The Christian, Paul says, is a person who pays more attention to the light that has come into our world than he does to the darkness. And then he continues his advice to the Romans:

"Therefore, cast off the works of darkness. Put on the armor of light. Let us act becomingly, as according to the day."

In other words - live courageously, triumphantly, faithfully, in spite of all the evidence that it doesn't pay to do so, because you know what's coming. Don't ever say "everybody's doing it." Don't ever say, "But it won't work". Don't ever

say, "It doesn't pay to be a Christian!" In this time, a life that is patterned after the example of our Lord is probably going to be received the same way He was received. It will be ridiculed, ignored and it might even be crucified. For the Christian that doesn't matter. All that matters is that we give testimony to the light that has come into the darkness. That's why we are here, in this time between the times - to give testimony to the light!

CLOSING I understand that the Anglican Church in Leicestershire in England is a beautiful, magnificent, gothic church. There's an interesting story behind it. When Cromwell came to power in England it was a chaotic time. That militant Puritan came down with a vengeance upon all those people who worshipped in the old way. He destroyed the Churches; he smashed the stained glass windows; he demolished the altars and prohibited anybody from worshipping in an "old way".

In the midst of this a man named Sir Robert Shirley built a Church in Leicestershire on the old gothic pattern. Cromwell called Shirley to London, threw him in the tower and there he died. If you visit that Church today, you will see that there is an inscription over the front door and it reads like this:

"In the year 1653 when all things sacred throughout the nation were either demolished or profaned, Sir Robert Shirley, Baronet, founded this Church whose singular praise it is to have done the best things in the worst time and hoped them in the most calamitous".

This is Advent. This is the time when we pause to remember the light that came into the darkness of this world. It came so that we would always do the best things in the worst time and hope them in the most calamitous. For the night is far gone and the day is at hand.

PRAYER Let us be still and remember Jesus as He was then - powerful to heal, to speak, to save. Think of Him as He is now - powerful as the Spirit of God at work among us....to lift us up out of the low places and set our feet once again on the high way.

O God, draw us to Him who is the perfect incarnation of Thyself, that our power may more and more be tamed by the power of His love. We ask this in the name of Jesus, our Lord, our Judge and our Friend. Amen