

Awakened and Dressed
A Sermon for November 27, 2016
Matthew 24:36-44 and Romans 13:11-14
[Lansdowne UMC](#)

Happy New Year! Like we talked about last week, today begins a new year of the church and a new season. We're hitting the reset button. We're going to begin again-- this time with the Gospel of Matthew. But before we consider the star that announced Christ's first arrival, we first lift our eyes to the clouds on which he will come again.¹ That is, before we look again to Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, we begin our new Christian year by considering Christ's second coming.

Why is that? Well, at its core, purpose of Advent is not to prepare us to have a Merry Christmas. It's to get us ready for the return of Christ. Christ will come as judge to set the world right. But the message of the gospel is clear: "Don't be afraid. Be prepared."²

Both of our New Testament passages for today are about getting ready for Christ's second coming. In our reading from Matthew, Jesus doesn't mince words. He paints vivid picture. On the one hand, it's mundane: people just going about their business as usual. On the other hand, it's shocking: "For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away"

¹ A turn of phrase inspired by/borrow from J. D. Walt, *Not Yet Christmas*, page ix.

² Ibid.

The timing of Jesus coming is as unexpected as that flash flood that happened in Ellicott City a few months ago. It is as unexpected as a thief in the night. The timing is uncertain, but the event is certain. It could happen any time, Jesus is saying. You can't wait to get ready.

This is a hard word. Again, the goal is not "Be afraid," but "Be prepared." We want things to be on our schedule. We want to sleep in. But that option is not given to us. Jesus is sounding the alarm. We have to wake up and get ready now. We've got to shake off our sleepy complacency and get real. We need to be about living our lives in the world, but we also need to be ready. You don't want to be swept away.

C. S. Lewis, one of my favorite authors, has this wonderful little book called the Screwtape Letters. It allegedly records letters written to a junior demon by his uncle, a more seasoned tempter named Screwtape. In one letter, Screwtape provides some practical advice to his nephew demon as he goes about doing his business of tempting a Christian away from taking faith seriously. He says, "It does not matter how small the sins are provided that their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the Light and out into the Nothing. Murder is no better than cards if cards can do the trick. Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one-- the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts."³

For Screwtape, it's much safer to keep a Christian content with complacency rather than risk the possibility that some spectacular sin would wake him up to how far he has come from earnest, watchful faith. Just keep them sleepwalking.

³ C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 60-61.

What antidote does Jesus offer for this spell of complacency? “Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.” “You... must be ready.”

Our other New Testament reading, from Romans 13, talks about Christ’s second coming as well. It uses this same imagery of sleep and wakefulness. “...you know what time it is. The hour has already come for you to wake up from your sleep” (Ro 13:11, CEB).

Salvation is dawning. The night of sin and death are nearly over. If that’s the case, then of all people Christians shouldn’t do things that belong in darkness-- things that you don’t want other people to see. The new day is coming and you should be awake already! It’s time to get up and get dressed. The time will come when you can no longer hide in the darkness, so get up and “put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.”

(Quick time out: Paul tells Christians “to make no provision for the flesh....” In other words, don’t make any plans to indulge in sinful desires. That’s actually a really honest, helpful piece of advice. When sin corrupts our desires, it’s always more more more. If we aim for moderation in sin, we end up getting more than we bargain for. And as soon as we start plotting, “when I’m alone I’ll do this...” or thinking to ourselves “no one will know if I just do this....,” watch out-- you’re not in control.)

Ok, my point and Paul’s point here isn’t to verbally beat us into good behavior. Paul’s message is so much more than him wagging his finger and saying “don’t do bad things.”

Paul says “put on the Lord Jesus.” It’s as if Jesus is a set of clothes. In another place, he says “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” And in another place, “clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” So what is he talking about?

In the early church, when Christians were baptized, they would disrobe completely and go completely naked into the water for baptism-- don’t worry, I’m not planning to recover the practice! But after being baptized, they’d come out of the water and put on a new white robe. When they did this, they weren’t just leaving their old clothes at the other side of baptism. They were portraying the reality that their old life was gone and that they had entered into a new life. They had put on Christ.

But baptism and putting on new clothing are just the outward signs of the inward act of God. Christians put on Christ so that we can look like Christ to the world-- as we should. But we don’t just want to be playing a game of dress-up. We want the way that we display ourselves to the world to be an expression of an inward act of God. We want the transforming power of Holy Spirit.

We can’t sleep through the night wearing the clothes for the day. In order to get dressed, we have to get up. If we want to be clothed in Christ, we have to be awakened by Christ.

Here’s a thought that hit me hard: when Paul writes that it’s time to wake up, Paul is writing to *the church*. These are people that are Christians! And yet Paul recognizes the reality that many fall easily into

complacency. What if we need to wake up? What if we're asleep? How can God wake us up?

It makes me think about a period in history that came to be known as "the Great Awakening." This was a period in the 1700s when God woke a lot of people up in England and America.

These were people who made the humble and realistic assessment that they could not be the people that God made them to be unless it was by the power of God. They didn't want to just be playing dress up. They didn't want to just be playing church. But despite their best efforts, they came to realize that that's all they were doing. They wanted something real. They wanted something genuine. They wanted to be like the church of old-- not the church of their parents or grandparents, but the church of the New Testament. They wanted God.

They didn't just want Christ on the outside, so they could do the actions of religious people. They wanted God to change them on the inside. And so in desperation, some of them started meeting together for prayer and mutual accountability. And one person at a time, they began to experience something-- or rather someone unexplainable. They began to experience God.

These were Methodists. They weren't just people who had learned to suspend their disbelief more than others. They weren't just people who had done a really good job training themselves to stop doing those acts that belong to darkness. They weren't people who had found a new innovative way to "be church" better. They were simply a small group of people desperate for God to do a new thing in their lives.

And through that yearning in prayer-- in a posture of absolute desperation-- the Spirit of God breathed new life into them. The Spirit of Christ came to them in the inside so that they could truly put on Christ on the outside. And having been awakened to the reality that Christ continues to come into the lives of those who seek him, they began to long and pray for others to experience this life-giving faith as well.

And you won't believe what happened next. God sneezed. It was quite spectacular actually. The whole thing went viral. In an age of incredible skepticism, where Christianity was more of a culture than a faith, against all odds, there was a Great Awakening in the church.

And the Awakening was broad. This was clergy and laity. Rich and poor. Educated and uneducated. Male and female. And person by person, they began to experience the power of God in their own lives.

Those early Methodists weren't aiming for church growth. They weren't aiming for a broader financial base. The goal was simply and undeniably Jesus.

Let's get real. Is that ok? This is the desperate situation that we're in. Many remember the former days of the church and mourn the decline of the institution. As we know, the times have changed. The pews aren't as full as they used to be. We're competing against things that we don't want to have to compete against: school and sports and smart phones. "People just don't come out for church activities like they used to," we note. And sometimes I think we wonder to ourselves, "why would they?"

Our church is doing a lot better than many, but let's face reality: church apart from the power of God is just another volunteer organization with a lot of wishful thinking. We desperately need God to act. Let's not get scared, let's just wake up. We don't need to look like the church of fifty years ago. We need to look like the church of *nineteen hundred* and fifty years ago-- the New Testament church.

But we live at a time of incredible skepticism. We live in a time where an awakening seems impossible. And that means we live in a time where we can shed our pretenses. We have fewer and fewer laurels to rest on! We live in an age that looks a lot like that age that preceded the Great Awakening!

And this is where I have good news, my brothers and sisters: it would appear that God specializes in such situations. God *only* works miracles in desperate situations.

I love the stories of the old Great Awakenings. But I want us to have our own stories. We need God to wake us up.

So how is that going to happen? Hopefully it's clear to you that if this happens, it will be because of God. Sure, we can be wise about how we spend our time and our resources as a church. Sure, we can have helpful programs for discipleship and for welcoming new people. By all means, let's do those things! But we've got to break down our pride-- our reliance on ourselves. We cannot bring about the revival of the church by working harder with fewer people. If we're going to be more than just another volunteer organization after a time, we need a fresh

movement of the Spirit in our time. We need God to act. And we need to tell God that we need God to act.

And so the first and most important act is prayer. We don't want to just be dreaming. We want to be awakened. You know that every awakening of the church at least in the past 500 years has emerged out the desperate, persistent prayers of God's people?

Here's the real problem as I see it. We're pretty bad at praying. God's teaching me, but I'm still pretty bad at it myself compared to where I know I need to be. I imagine that many of you identify with that. We want to pray more but we have trouble. We get distracted. We literally fall asleep rather than staying awake.

And so I want us to learn together how to pray. I'm not talking about being able to give a majestic grace before a meal. I'm talking about learning how to pray like Jesus taught us to-- needy and expectant.

When Jesus' disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, Jesus gave them a prayer-- because ultimately we learn to pray by praying. And it just so happens that the Lord's prayer is the perfect prayer to teach us to pray.

I want to invite you to come to the sanctuary on Tuesday nights during Advent at 7pm for what we're calling "Kingdom Come Prayer Space." When you come, you'll find around the room at least 6 stations that will help you to pray the Lord's prayer in a fresh way. At each station, there will be an opportunity for you to create something to help you talk to God. If these creative exercises help you, wonderful! If not, you'll still find plenty of suggestions for prayer. I'll be there for at least an hour praying and helping others to pray. You can come any time between 7

and 8 and leave any time. If people want to stay past 8-- we'll cross that bridge when we come to it.

But this is the point: to invite Christ to come-- to us individually, to Lansdowne United Methodist Church, to the whole universal church, and to the world.