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First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC
First Sunday of Advent
December 2, 2007

Romans 13.11-14
Matthew 24.36-44

Are We There Yet?

“For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers...
—Romans 13.11

Let us pray: In all that we say and do, may the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen. (Congregation is seated.)

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. Advent isn't the most popular of the church seasons. Let's face it, waiting isn't an easy thing to do and Advent is, in part, about waiting. We want to sing the carols...now. We want to open the presents...soon. Often we sound like grumpy kids on a long car ride: Are we there yet?!

But Advent is about more than just waiting. It is about new beginnings. That's what the word “advent” means—“coming into being.” (As in “the advent of the internet age.”) Today begins something new, completely new. “Advent is an abrupt disruption in our ‘ordinary time.’ It is not only a new season in the church year; it is an utterly new year, new time, new life. Everything begins again....In

this season we are at the brink of something utterly new, long yearned for but beyond our capacity to enact. Advent invites us to awaken from our numbed endurance and our domesticated expectations, to consider our life afresh in the light of new gifts that God is about to give.” (Brueggemann *et al*)

The Bible helps us to see the world through new eyes. The Prophet Isaiah reminds us of long-cherished hopes: “...they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” (Isaiah 2.4) Matthew warns us to be ready for unexpected events: “Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.” (Matthew 24.42) “These Advent texts of promise and expectation make a claim on us that violates our rationality and jeopardizes our current patterns of security” (Brueggemann *et al*) The themes of our readings, the themes of Advent, impose a new sense of urgency on our lives. Something important is happening. We need to wake up and take notice.

The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Romans, takes up these same themes. But, as usual, he stamps them with his own unique and creative meaning. For Paul, this time of anticipation is about more than just passive watching and waiting. It is also about reordering our lives, as we discussed last Sunday, to make them congruent with the newly dawning reality of God’s kingdom. Paul draws a

connection between what theologians call “eschatology” (the study of “last things”) and ethics (the study of correct behavior).

Paul is acutely aware of God’s plans for the complete redemption of the world. Most scholars believe that Paul expected the second coming to occur within his own lifetime. That assumption certainly helps us to explain and understand this verse: “For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near.” (Romans 13.11-12) Though Paul’s exact expectations were disappointed, the following generation of Christians found it totally appropriate to include his words in the Christian canon of the New Testament. Though later Christians have adjusted the timeline of hope, we have not abandoned the urgency expressed in Paul’s words.

We get impatient. We call out like backseat drivers to God, “Are we there yet?” No, we *aren’t* there yet. But we are closer. It is a fundamental tenet of our faith that there is *movement* in the Christian life. Our position before God is not fixed. Our faith development does not stagnate after baptism or confirmation or when we join the church. Things are moving. The plot of the story is developing. Indeed, “salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers.” Paul’s words capture this sense of movement with wonderful poetic force.

Paul then connects up this sense of urgent expectation with a call for changed and improved behavior. This connection is made by the conditional word, “then:”

Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. –Romans 13.12-14

In effect, Paul is saying, “*Because* God is doing this new thing, *then* you must make changes in your life.

Now, one must be careful not to misinterpret Paul on this point. Paul is connecting eschatology and ethics, by drawing a line between our hope of redemption and our current behavior. In tracing that line, it is just as important to understand what Paul is *not* doing as it is to understand what he *is* doing.

Paul is not, in the strictest sense, giving a warning. He is not saying, “Christ is returning soon. There will be a day of judgment. If you don’t shape up, you will be punished. For Paul, the joyful anticipation of Christ’s return is not a threat to employ in order to manipulate behavior. Neither is it an offered reward. Paul is not making a promise of salvation in return for improved comportment. The point that Paul makes is more subtle. We need to change our behavior so that our lives reflect our loyalties. We aren’t there yet, but we need to start waking up in the back seat. We need to put on our shoes, because we are closer. We are God’s

people. God is preparing to do a new thing. When that new thing happens, we earnestly want to live lives that mirror the reality of God's kingdom.

And so, if we take our faith seriously, salvation *is* nearer now than when we first became believers. It is nearer, not only because of what God is doing, but also because of what we are doing. By seeking to modify our lives, we are embodying the very salvation for which we hope. Our efforts alone will not be enough, of course. But our efforts are one more sign of hope to a hurting world.

Let us pray. Come, Lord Jesus. Hasten our arrival to a new and better world. And help us to see our progress along the way. Amen.