

Title: *Love Is Our Calling: The Time Is Now*
11/30 Sermon – 1st Sunday of Advent
Rev. Lindsey Odom
Reading from the Old Testament: Isaiah 2:1-5
Reading from the New Testament: Romans 13:8-14

Grace and peace to you in the name of the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Today is the First Sunday of Advent—a season of holy longing, watchfulness, repentance, and hope. Advent prepares us to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, focusing on themes of hope, peace, joy and love. Advent is the beginning of the church's year, the turning of our Christian calendar toward the horizon of God's promised future.

And yet, for many of us, this day is a threshold of another kind.

This morning, getting ready for church felt different. As I woke up, got dressed, and put on my robe, I found myself pausing and praying for the moment I would walk into worship and for all of you. For the first time since I arrived at South Meck, the awareness that Dr. Matt Brown would not be with us in worship sat heavier on my chest. It is our first Sunday after saying farewell to our faithful leader and pastor, Rev. Dr. Matt Brown and Donna Brown, who are two beloved saints who shaped this church with faithfulness, tenderness, compassion, care, and an abundant love for the people of South Meck for more than twenty-one years.

It was harder to get ready today, harder to step into the morning, and harder to put on what I needed to wear, both physically and emotionally.

I imagine many of you felt the same way, with feelings of:

Sadness

Uneasiness.

Tenderness.

Gratitude.

Loss

Hope

All these feelings find their way into this day, as we cross the threshold into a new season – not only a new liturgical season, but a new chapter in the life and story of our congregation as we get ready to welcome and embrace our new transitional pastor, Dr. Sandy Hull and his wife, Belinda.

In moments like these, we become profoundly aware of what it means to rise into a new day, to wake up, and to put on the garments needed for the journey ahead.

And into this very feeling, this combination of grief and hope, Paul writes in Romans 13: “You know what time it is... Now is the moment for you to wake from sleep.”

Paul’s words to the Romans and to us land very differently today. We know what time it is. It is a tender time, a transitional time, and a threshold time for us as a church. But Paul says it is also God’s time — what biblical scholar Beverly Gaventa calls “the now time of God,” the time opened by Christ’s death and resurrection, when God’s future breaks in and leans close enough to touch the present moment of time. For Paul, “now” does not refer to this particular minute or a certain date on our calendars; rather, “now” means...

“Now” means the light of Christ is already breaking into the world.

“Now” means God’s reign is already on the move.

“Now” means salvation is nearer than when we first believed.

Advent, then, becomes an invitation to awareness—an opportunity to live as though God’s promised future is already pressing into the present. So, Paul continues, urging us in verse 11 of Romans 13 to “wake up.”

He says, “wake up from sleep because salvation is near,” not because God is commanding us, but because God is inviting us—inviting us to open our hearts, to reawaken ourselves to God’s future, and to begin living as people of the dawn. For Paul, God’s nearness always leads to altered behavior. Salvation drawing near is inseparable from lives being reshaped, transformed, or changed.

And then Paul gives us one of the most beautiful images in all of Scripture: “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” in verse 14. It is a vivid picture of awakening from the darkness of sin and stepping into the light of God’s new day. We are to peel off the night clothes of selfishness, ignorance, and injustice, and clothe ourselves in Christ—what Paul elsewhere calls the “armor of light.” And that armor, Paul insists, is love.

The clothing Paul calls us to put on is nothing less than Jesus Christ himself— his life, his manner of love, his way of being, and his compassion and courage. This is how we meet the future God is bringing toward us.

- Love is what we owe one another.
- Love is the debt that never ends.
- Love is the garment we are called to put on.
- Love is the way we step into God’s dawning world.
- Love Is Our Calling — and the Time Is Now.

Paul’s images are surprisingly simple, rooted in the daily rhythms we all know so well:

Wake up.

Get dressed.

Put on Christ like a garment you carry with you into the world.

And perhaps this is exactly the message we need on this first Sunday without Matt and Donna's presence among us. Because as we step into this new season, we too are waking up to a different morning. We too are being invited to put on something new. And we too feel that familiar ache of grief alongside the quiet pull of hope.

Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us, "Grief and hope are not enemies; they are companion guides. One shows us what we've loved. The other shows us what God is doing next."

This is where we stand today—tenderly balanced between what has been and what will be, between the night that is fading and the dawning of God's new day. And it is here, right in this in-between space, that Paul calls us to recognize that the time for love is now—not when life feels settled, not when our hearts stop aching, not when we have all the answers, but now. The God who has held us in every season will hold us in this one too.

The lectionary places this passage from Romans at the beginning of Advent for a reason. It pushes us beyond simply looking back. It draws us past the familiar story of Jesus' birth and **into** the bold, forward-leaning hope that belongs to the church. It invites us to lift our eyes from the comfort of what we remember and turn toward the hope of what God is doing next. It leads us past the baby in the manger and into the church's great promise, which is:

- Christ will come again.
- The reign of God will be fully manifest.
- The world as we know it will be transformed and made new.

Paul writes with confidence that "the night is far gone, the day is near." When he urges us to "wake from sleep," when he speaks of darkness giving way to light, he is describing not only human experience but the unfolding of God's redemptive timeline. There is an urgency

in Paul's voice. New Testament scholar Beverly Gaventa helps us hear that urgency. The urgency of the "now" is marked by God's rectifying work through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ and God's intervention that has already begun to reshape the world (Gaventa, *Romans*, pp. 476–478).

In other words, Paul is not merely telling us to pay attention; he is telling us that God's future has already broken into the present, and that reality changes everything.

To fully understand Paul's Word, we need to remember the world in which he preached. In the early years of the Christian movement, believers lived with a real and hopeful sense of anticipation. They inherited from the Hebrew Scriptures a hope for a coming Messianic age—a reign of God marked by justice, peace, and cosmic transformation (*Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1*, p. 18). They prayed with full voice and full hope the prayer Jesus taught them: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

Their faith was charged with the conviction that God's promised future was near enough to touch. That the world as it was, a world experiencing violence, oppression, and imperial control due to the power of the Roman Empire, was not the world as it would remain. Christ was coming. The Day was at hand. But two thousand years later, that sharp sense of anticipation had softened. Their urgency had diminished, but their hope had not. Rather, their hope matured into a resilient trust that God's promises unfold according to God's own time, not human timetables.

Because God has acted decisively in Jesus Christ, we are called to wake up to the signs of God's new day unfolding around us and within us. Paul urges us to recognize what time it is, "a time to wake up and look forward to what God will do in the future and what God is beginning to do in your life and mine (*Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1*, p.

18).” Beverly Gaventa challenges us who believe to “cast off works of darkness in favor of light’s weapons and put on Christ himself, allowing the love of God that has been poured into ‘our’ hearts due to God sending his own son, Jesus Christ, to remove our sins, to be an authentic love that overflows into human existence” (Gaventa, *Romans*, pp. 476–478).

This passage calls us to recognize that Christ is the turning point in time, and that we are invited to start living now as though this new day has already begun. Yet living into this new reality is not simple, especially in moments like the ones we experienced the last couple of weeks in Charlotte, where increased Border Patrol and ICE activity created fear, disruption, and deep concern within our community. These events are not just political headlines. They are stories about families, children, youth, and the dignity of human beings made in God’s image.

Last week, church member Katherine Martin shared a snapshot of hope with me as we were discerning how our church, youth, and families at our church might respond. She sent me a picture of students, including her own children, at Collinswood Elementary, standing together as little justice advocates. Their playful, familiar chant, “I scream, you scream, we all scream for ice cream,” had been transformed into a chorus for justice and advocacy chanting, “I scream, you scream, we all scream for ICE to leave.” Young voices insisted that every child deserves safety, dignity, value, and belonging. In their chant, the ordinary turned prophetic and it became a glimpse of the new world God promises that Paul writes about in Romans 13.

In their chant we see more than clever wordplay. Rather, we see a community of young people who trust that the world can be made new, that injustice can be named and acted upon, and that love can be lived out loud. Their voices echo the very hope Paul insists

upon in Romans 13: that the night is far gone, that the day is drawing near, and that God's promised future is already breaking in, even through the courage and words of children.

This is also what Advent teaches us. Advent is not sentimental nostalgia about a quiet night in Bethlehem; rather, it is the church standing in the tension between the world as it is, marked by division, fear, injustice, and unmet longings, and the world as God has promised it will be when Christ's reign and kingdom is fully revealed. It is the church courageously standing in the tension between our present reality and God's promised future, holding both sorrow and hope as we wait for the world to be made whole.

According to Paul's writing in Romans 13, it is also the church daring to wait, to hope, and to live now as though God's future is already unfolding in our midst. And in our Reformed tradition, Advent waiting is not passive. It is active, participatory, and deeply embodied.

So how do we live into this new reality that Paul describes—a reality where the night is far gone, the day is near, and love is the shape of God's new age?

- By accepting God's invitation to dream with God of a new heaven, a new earth, and a new way of being human.
- By remembering that our baptisms draw us into this dream, marking us as participants in God's redemption rather than spectators to it. As *Feasting on the Word* reminds us, "we who have been baptized into the promises of God ought to have a different outlook, as citizens of a new age."

And if we ever doubt that we are capable of living this way, Dr. Matt Brown's words offer both wisdom and grace: "Sometimes, the Spirit of God will not be contained within the lines we draw for it. Sometimes our best intentions and ordered plans are eclipsed by the

movement of God in the moment. Sometimes, the best we can do, though never perfect, is enough, trusting that the Spirit can fill in the gaps of our efforts.”

Baptism, in other words, asks for us to be Spirit led in a spirit of openness, trust, courage, commitment, and recognition that God is still shaping us and forming us.

We lean into this shaping as we allow the Spirit to remake us, day by day, into the people we were created to be from the beginning, people who reflect God’s character, God’s compassion, grace, and justice, and God’s holy love in the world.

And finally, we live into this new reality by clothing ourselves each morning in God’s light and love, letting that love guide our choices to choose compassion, justice, and neighborly love as our daily garments.

Paul imagines this clothing as our daily uniform of discipleship: choosing compassion when indifference would be easier; choosing justice when silence would be safer; choosing neighborly love as the garment we wear into every conversation, every decision, and every ordinary moment of our lives.

This is how we live as Advent people, as those who dare to believe that God’s promised future presses close to the present, that Christ’s light is already rising, and that love, God’s abundant and unconditional love, overflowing into our lives, is our calling. And the time to live it out is now.

So, beloved, as we stand in this tender place between what has been and what will be, may we cast off the shadows that cling to us, may we put on Christ with boldness, and may we step into the dawning light of God’s new day. And as we do, may our lives, like the voices of those beloved children who became little justice advocates, become a living, loving testimony that the time for love is now. May we go forth in hope and courage, as people who

believe that love is our calling, and the time is now—now to bear Christ’s light, now to embody God’s compassion, and now to live the future God has promised through committing to act, to serve, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Amen.