

1st Sunday in Advent November 27, 2022

THE GIFTS OF CHRISTMAS—SALVATION

Romans 13:11-14

Scripture Readings

Psalm 98

Matthew 24:37-44

Hymns: **55, 73 (2nd Tune), 60, 62**

Hymns from The Lutheran Hymnal (1941) unless otherwise noted

Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. (ESV)

Let's be honest, one of the first things (if not the first thing) that comes to mind when we think about Christmas is presents! Believe it or not, during this Advent season I'm going to encourage all of you to do just that: Think about presents! No, not the shiny packaged ones you find under the tree, even better gifts than that. In our sermons during the Advent season, which begins today, we are going to focus our hearts and minds on the greatest gifts—spiritual, eternal gifts—God has given us through His Son Jesus whose birth we celebrate on Christmas Day. But let's also not forget the original reason gifts were given at Christmas—to remind us of the greatest gift God gave mankind: the Son of God in human flesh, Jesus Christ. We pray that the Holy Spirit would bless our meditations on the Savior who came and is coming again.

So, have you started counting down the days yet? How many days (or should I say, “shopping days?”) are left before Christmas Day. Some stores start keeping track after Halloween. A house down the road from me has a digital countdown clock in their front yard. If you have an Advent calendar at home then you've already started the “count down” by opening up the windows for each day until Christmas Day. Especially for children, Christmas Day can seem like it takes forever to come. In fact, isn't that an expression, “Slower than Christmas”? (I remember hearing that somewhere.) It can be difficult for us to wait in anticipation for the joyful, blessed day of Christmas; the day we celebrate our dear Savior's birth (and yes, the day we get to open presents!).

Well, if the anticipation for Christmas Day makes it hard for us to wait, that's nothing compared to the anticipation we feel for the first of our “**Gifts of Christmas**”—the gift of **Salvation**. Now technically, and this is a very key thought for us to keep in mind all our lives, as believers in Christ we are living in that gift of **salvation** right now! From the moment of our conversion, the **salvation** Jesus won for us on the cross is forever made our own by His gift of faith. Let me give you a Biblical example. When Zacchaeus the tax collector met Jesus and was brought to faith in Him, Jesus declared, “**Today salvation has come to this house.**” (Luke 19:9)

What Paul is talking about in our text, however, and what we look forward to with such eager anticipation, is the day we will finally enjoy our eternal **salvation** in heaven. Paul writes in the first two verses of our text, **“For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand.”**

The **“night”** which Paul is speaking of here refers to this life with all its darkness, uncertainty, sin, and death. **“The day”** refers to our final deliverance. That could be either the Last Day, when Jesus comes again, or our last day of life on this earth, whichever comes first. Like Christmas—the celebration of Jesus’ first coming—our anticipation and excitement as we look forward to His second coming is sky high! Unlike Christmas, however, we don’t know when that **“day”** of our **salvation**—our last day, or the Last Day—is going to be. However, Paul has some very encouraging words for us in our text. He reminds us, **“Salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed.”** (v.11)

You can think of your life as one giant “Advent calendar.” Remember, Advent means *“coming,”* so during this season when we count off the days until we celebrate Christ’s first coming at Christmas, we should also be looking forward to His second coming. Each day that goes by brings us one day closer to the day of our **salvation**. For some of us the day of our **salvation** is much nearer than **“when we first believed”**—that is, the day when we were brought to faith. For many of us that was the day of our baptism as infants. For some of us that means there are a lot of squares in our “Advent calendar” of life! And each one, as one hymn writer put it, brings us *“a day’s march nearer home”* (Hymn 616 v.2 TLH).

What makes the **“day”** of our **salvation** such a great gift? Why is it that we look forward to this gift with such anticipation and joy? First of all, just think of what’s going to be in heaven, the **“New Jerusalem,”** as John puts it in Revelation: **“Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God.”** (Revelation 21:3) The gift of **salvation** that God has given us through Jesus is everlasting peace and joy in the presence of God Himself and all the believers who have gone before us! Sometimes we can see the great value in this gift of **salvation** when we think about what’s NOT going to be there in heaven. The very next verse in Revelation tells us, **“And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.”** (Revelation 21:4) No more **“tears,”** no more **“sorrow,”** no more **“pain,”** no more **“death”**?

I can’t wait!

But like an excited child on Christmas Eve night we must wait. Wait for the Advent—the *“coming”*—of our Lord. And what are we to do while we wait for this gift of our **salvation**? Paul tells us in our text to stay alert: **“...you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep.”** (v.11) Paul is referring here to spiritual **“sleep”**— the carelessness and indifference in matters of faith and Godly living. One Lutheran commentator writes, “A sleeper does not know where he is or what he is or what hour has struck; he is dead to his duties and his opportunities. He may dream, but does not know and he cannot act. The Christian life is a constant awaking and waiting life.” (Franzmann) The Christian life is a life of activity and action, one of doing the works

of God. Besides, when you are excited and anticipating a big day to come you simply can't sleep! Paul reminds us that **“the day is at hand.”** (v.12)

“Therefore”—since we know that the **“day”** of our **salvation** is at hand, what should we do while we watch and wait? Paul says, **“let us cast off the works of darkness.”** (v.12) He lists some of those works of darkness in verse 13, **“orgies and drunkenness...sexual immorality and sensuality...quarreling and jealousy”** and the list could go on and on. All these **“works of darkness”** take away our focus on the coming of Christ and fix it on the sinful pleasures of this world and our own flesh. They drive us away from Christ and can cause us to give up God's gift of **salvation** altogether!

Those are the things we are to take off like old, dirty clothes. On the other hand, Paul says, **“Let us...put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly as in the daytime.”** (v. 12-13) In Christ, we are no longer slaves to the **“works of darkness;”** we are no longer children of the **“night”** of unbelief and condemnation. No, in Christ we are children of the **“day;”** children of the **“light!”** We have been robed in Christ's righteousness, we have **“put on the armor of light.”** (v.12) Paul explains a few pieces of this armor in his first letter to the Thessalonians, **“But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation.”** (1 Thessalonians 5:8)

Finally, Paul encourages us in the last verse of our text to, **“put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.”** (v.14) We **“put on the Lord Jesus Christ”** when we were clothed with Him at our baptism. **Galatians 3:27**, **“For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.”** But we also daily need to **“put on the Lord Jesus Christ”** through repentance, by immersing ourselves in the Word of God, by calling out to Him in prayer, and doing the works of righteousness that Christ has called us to do, works that He empowers us to do and has shown us by His perfect example. When our lives are filled with **“the Lord Jesus Christ”**—when we are clothed with Him—there will be no room left for our sinful flesh to gain a foothold.

Yes, the **“day”** of our **salvation** is at hand! It is a gift that Jesus brought us by His first coming at Christmas and bought us by His sacrifice on the cross. It is a gift He will bring us for all eternity when He comes again. Are you counting down the days? Amen.

—Pastor Luke Bernthal

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