

Romans 13:11-14 Expectancy
December 1, 2019

I have come to the point in my life at which I no longer have many, “can’t wait,” things. I remember the feeling of not being able to wait for my birthdays, especially when I turned 16 and could drive, or during the summer after high school graduation waiting to leave for college. I suppose there have been some vacation trips I anticipated for a long time and couldn’t wait until the time came to leave. I remember not being able to wait for Christmas.

Nowadays, everything for which I am waiting seems to come along with getting older, and I am happy just waiting. I am ready to wait a long time for the next exciting phase of life. And things like summer and Christmas roll by so quickly that it is like a dam broke and I can’t keep up.

Like many other Christians with whom I have discussed the matter, I believe in heaven and that it is a paradise, but have no desire to get there directly, and I am like the people in the country music song, “Everybody wants to go to heaven . . . but nobody wants to go now!” Like that is how I feel.

On the one hand, the willingness to remain in the moment may be seen as a healthy thing because “in the moment” is where we live and is the only time we can experience life and be alive totally. On the other hand one must acknowledge, and not just as a matter of fidelity to scripture, but also of present experience,

that there are things about the present we would do well to go past, to grow up out of, both individually and a part of our groups. I confess my sense of urgency is a bit lacking. That sense of urgency is what Advent is all about. It is not just about waiting, but expecting, and having some energy about getting ready.

Warning

The message of the coming of Christ comes to us as a warning. “Wake up and make preparations, the Day is near.”

When I lived in Staunton in Illinois, we lived about a block or so away from the schools, pre-k through 12 all in one building. Children often cut through the church yard on their way back and forth to school. Since fighting and smoking were not tolerated at school, sometimes they would visit the church grounds as a substitute place for those activities.

I always told them that if they wanted to fight they should at least have enough courage to go do it in front of their principal and sent them back over to the school. I am not sure what they thought about that, but they gave me some strange looks.

When it comes to smoking, I would ask them, “have you not read the label, the Surgeon General’s warning, that using this product will destroy your health and slowly kill you? They always responded that they didn’t care, everyone has to die of sometime of

something. Then I would tell them that people in their generation are going to live to be 100 (maybe an exaggeration) and that by the time they were 50 they wouldn't be able to chase their grandchildren up the stairs, and that they would regret starting the habit because of how difficult it is to quit.

Obviously, it is a characteristic of youth not to be concerned about the future, and they certainly weren't. Part of being in the present moment is thinking about the future enough to plan for it. Part of what the kids were telling me is that they were not optimistic about the future and did not it was worth planning to be around for, or to be healthy to live it to the fullest when it came. That is a little sad.

The warning part of Advent means that we should not take their approach to life. The future *is* worth being around for. Now I realize that we celebrate the birth of Christ, every year and that Jesus was born more than 2000 years ago, but the point is the same. If we really believe in Christ's return and the universal reign of God, if we really believe in heaven, then we must see the present as a time of preparation.

We prepare for the Lord's coming by nurturing goodness and justice in our lives and in the world, and we do this because we *are* hopeful about it, we believe it is a good thing. We are warned not to neglect that preparation.

That is the meaning of Paul's exhortation after saying, "Wake up from your slumber, set aside the deeds of

darkness and put on the armor of light, to behave decently, like it is daytime," and then he mentions a few things about abstaining from sexual immorality and drunkenness; ask he also mentions dissensions (who is not guilty of that nowadays) and jealousy.

Encouraged to Joy

The message of Christ's coming also involves an encouragement to joy. Rather than the deeds of darkness, we are to clothes ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ. There is more to this than what meets the eye. It is easy to understand the austerity of this message as a burden, and many take the religious life that way. Christians are supposed to abstain from the pleasures of life that many others enjoy. But the spiritual life *as a burden* is not the spirit of Paul's message.

To lead a life of selfish indulgence is cynical, and turns out to be a larger burden. It is a way of saying that one does not believe there is anything better in life than the gratification of the desires of the flesh. Like the teenage smokers, there is no future for which to prepare, no reason to nurture health and goodness.

But Paul's message, and that of the bible itself, the whole gospel, is the opposite of all that, it is so filled with hope that it calls us to rejoice even in the worst of times, in our suffering, precisely because the future is so good that it is worth every sacrifice necessary to prepare for it.

Pardon me for saying so, but I detect a persistent and overwhelming joy lurking behind these exhortations. We are being asked to nurture and practice goodness and health and justice, and to seek knowledge and to live lives of service and sacrifice *because* Christmas is coming, and if we are angry or jealous or afraid or cynical or greedy or any of those other things, we will surely miss it, or mess it up.

Christmas

And what is this Christmas like? Well, it is only hinted at in our best efforts to celebrate it and is corrupted by our excesses and distortions. When we give sacrificial offerings and thoughtfully give and receive gifts and share the music and glory of the season, we can perhaps catch a glimpse of the majesty that the promised arrival of the Lord represents.

One echo of it is expressed in the text from Isaiah;

“God will teach us his ways,
so that we may walk in his paths.
God will judge between the nations,
and settle disputes for many peoples.

They will beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not take up sword against nation,
nor will they train for war anymore.

Come . . . Let us walk in the light of the Lord.”

Now I want to be a part of that, but it takes a transformation of my life, or else, given who I am, and given who we are, the self-pre-occupation and anger and fear will just go on.

We are called in this season to *joyful expectation* of the coming true of this promise: be sure that it is on the way, and like the prophet Habakkuk taught, if it lingers, wait for it, allow it to become that one thing that you simply can't wait for until it comes.

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