

Advent 1 (HC-Epistle) (2019)

What makes you get up out of bed in the morning?

A good question to ask others, and yourself.

Advent, the season we begin today, calls us to get serious about God and those things that are really important in life . . . to awake to love and work . . . to hear once again God's call.

If you want a scripture text that speaks of this renewed awareness of vocation, well there it is in verse 11 of today's Epistle:

“And that, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed.”

To whom is this summons given? To the non-believer? The person who makes no pretence of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ?

No, it is to the person who does. Paul is addressing believers here.

With that said, of course, non-believers need to wake up. They need to wake up and hear the call of the Gospel and believe and be saved.

After all, one of the focuses of Advent is our Lord's Second Coming. A day of reckoning is coming. Grace spurned will be grace lost. What we do now counts in eternity. There is a heaven to be gained and hell to be avoided.

Just by chance if this describes you . . . if you are here this morning without God and without hope in the world . . . for goodness sakes, don't leave here without Jesus. Today can be the most important day of your life.

But, again, unbelievers are not the ones Paul is addressing directly in this passage.

No, it is people who have already ‘sign on the dotted line’ and said “I believe.”

His words, I want to suggest, remain relevant today, first, to nominal Christians.

By nominal-Christians, I am thinking of people who identify themselves as Christians but who have yet to discover experientially the power and presence of Christ in their lives.

This past week I listened to a young man describe his journey from being a nominal Christian to a faith-filled, enthusiastic one.

He said he had grown up in a Presbyterian household. His mother had seen to it that he was in church every Sunday.

In Sunday school and Vacation Bible School, he had learned some of the stories of the Bible and most importantly he had learned that

God loved him and that Jesus had died for him. He had accepted premises as true.

Yet, none of this had made any great difference in his life. The message had not ‘entered his soul’.

His approach to God could be summarized as: Go to church, get your card punched, and you will be alright.

By the time he went off to study at Florida State, that continued to be the extent of his religious understanding.

If he thought about God at all, he pictured him as a distant, tame, benevolent grandfather . . . someone you might go to for help if you got really desperate.

Even so, the first week he arrived in Tallahassee his parental upbringing kicked in. On Sunday morning, he rolled out of bed,

gritted his teeth, and determined to go to the nearest church. It didn't matter what denomination.

As it turned out, just down from his dorm was a massive Methodist Church.

He didn't know how Methodists differed from Presbyterians in terms of beliefs and practices. It didn't matter. What mattered was it was close.

So, to the Methodist Church he went for about two years. Each Sunday, he would slip in for service – punch his card – and leave.

From time to time people would buttonhole him and invite him to Bible studies and other meetings. He would thank them and make the excuse that he was too busy with homework.

But finally, he relented and went to a men's Bible study. What immediately impressed him

and kept him coming back was that prayer was real to these men. So, was Jesus.

More than that, he found the Bible fascinating.

He had never actually read it for himself. In fact, he had not even brought one with him from home and had to go out and buy one.

Well, to make a long story short. It was not long before his nominal Christianity gave way to a heart-felt, glad, enthusiastic, doing Christianity.

He was captivated by the person of Jesus.

He heard the Master's call to love both God and neighbour . . . to seek justice . . . to care for the less fortunate . . . to be His hands and feet and voice in the world.

This young college student now had a purpose bigger than himself and his future. He had a purpose that propelled him out of bed each morning.

To finish the story . . . he did not stay with the Methodists, though he remains deeply appreciative of them.

In the end, he joined the church of his girlfriend, now wife . . . a church in the liturgical tradition.

Regardless, he remains excited and about His Master's business.

This is, of course, what we pray will happened with all nominal believers . . . that their embryonic faith will come alive and grow.

But, it is not just nominal Christians who need to wake up.

It's all of us . . . including those who serve on guilds and committees and who lead worship.

Why? How so?

Well, because it is very easy to go 'to sleep' while doing our various jobs.

That reminds me of a story. It is of a preacher who dreamed he went to sleep while preaching, only to wake up and find it wasn't a dream!

Well it can happen . . . in all sorts of ways.

It is easy for clergy, church leaders, indeed Christians of all sorts, to grow lethargic, to find themselves just going through the motions. . . doing what they do, but without any real joy.

Many lose the enthusiasm they felt when they first received the call to follow Jesus.

What about you?

Has your faith grown stale? If so, Paul's word in today's Epistle is for you: **Awake!**

He who came, comes. Our salvation is nearer than when we believed. It is high time to cast off anything that is getting in the way of loving God and neighbour as we ought.

You too have a calling from the Lord. It came at your baptism, your confirmation, and no doubt at other pivotal moments in your life when you heard the Spirit speaking.

Remember when that call first came. Go back to that moment and reengage with it. Ask God to rekindle the flame.

You too have a purpose for which to get up.

“The lark in the sky sweetly singing.” Don't roll over and go back to sleep!